

DIRTY JUSTICE

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Chris Seely
Vigilante Justice Book 3

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Chapter One

“It took me a couple years not using my noggin,” the guy in front of Chris was saying, “but I finally found the right combination.”

“What is it?” Chris said.

“What you have ‘em do,” the guy said, “give you three shots of espresso, then top it off with a touch of fresh cream, and make sure they steam it in, not add it cold.”

“You mean do this in an *existing* cup of coffee?” Chris said. “Or there is no other coffee?”

“Bud, I feel like I explained it real simple . . . You have a nice day now.”

“You too,” Chris said, “thanks.”

This stop may have been a mistake, Chris was thinking, nothing you could have anticipated but awful crowded in here for a Wednesday morning in an ordinary-enough Starbucks off Highway 5 in Willows, a couple hours into the trip.

It didn’t help that a girls high school team of some sort was in here too, Chris guessing soccer, and apparently that’s how it worked these days, they let you miss school for a laundry list of stuff, and so what.

Meanwhile Miranda was patiently waiting to get in the ladies’ room, and Chris’s turn came at the counter and he ordered the iced frappuccino she wanted and just a small black coffee for himself, hoping the guy who recommended the espresso concoction wouldn’t notice and get mad.

Miranda he’d met at Gloria’s Sunday night and they’d kind of hit it off, and they spent the last couple days roaming around the city . . . nice and simple and platonic.

The subject of Chico came up.

Chris answered her question of when he’d be going back to L.A. by saying he was thinking of stopping in Chico first . . . and wouldn’t you know, one of her old roommates lives there too.

Miranda said, “Do you have business there then, I take it?”

That was the problem with opening your big mouth, you start off with the truth but then you invariably have to work something else into the equation.

No official business, Chris told her, he wanted to check out the real estate market was all, see what that was about.

“What for?” she asked.

And this was the thing, now you have to come up with more, and on top of it, you probably *do* have to look at some houses up there to back it up.

Chris said some guy in a bar in Manhattan Beach told him Chico was a decent place to own rental property, when you factored in the reasonable prices and eager student population.

And did she want to come along, since that's what she was implying.

"Sure," Miranda said. "For how long?"

That was a fair question, Chris never knew the answer to these things.

All he wanted to do was drop her at her friend's, and then hopefully kill Mason McCall, and then get back on the road by a reasonable hour.

Which was probably going to be too much to ask.

At any rate . . .

Miranda sat down with her iced frappuccino and said, "This is a lot of fun. Thank you for including me."

"My pleasure," Chris said, not necessarily meaning it.

He liked bringing females with him on road trips, even if it make the task more difficult, and he supposed a psychologist would have fun dissecting what that was about.

"I'm thinking I should have *gone* to Chico State," Miranda said. "I got in, back then."

"Yeah, well. We all should have done a lot of things, . . . What was wrong with City?"

"I don't know . . . When my friends who went away came back on breaks, I felt out of the loop . . . Plus that thing I told you about wouldn't have happened."

The way she told it, she was visiting a boyfriend on Joost Avenue, and when she left some guy robbed her at gunpoint.

She didn't get hurt thankfully, and all she lost was her purse, but it screwed her up, not feeling safe anymore at night.

Chris said, "Like I said, the boyfriend should have walked you to your car. That's basic."

"Fine, whatever."

"Okay forgetting that . . . I feel like the city's safer now," he said. "Every time you turn around a couple Millennials are walking toward you."

"You're probably right," Miranda said. "Statistically."

"San Francisco's more like New York now. Back there you can ride the subway at 3 in the morning and you're fine, most cases."

Miranda said, "My therapist says the same thing. That one needs to exercise common sense, but in that context the Bay Area is quite safe."

Oh Jesus. *Therapy* now.

"But you don't take his or her word for it?"

"It's a she. I'm trying."

"It's not like you get flashbacks or anything, right?"

"Not often any more, no."

Which meant still once in a while. God *dang* it.

Chris hated to ask but he had to. "They ever find that guy?"

"No. I didn't report it, which was negligent on my part. The man had said, before he left, that he knew where I lived if I made trouble . . . Which, I assumed, meant my driver's license information."

"Also maybe your friend's place, where you came out of, if the scum had watched you."

"Yes, that as well."

"Unfortunately," Chris said, "unlikely the cops would have worked it hard . . . Unless of course it was Gloria's neighborhood."

Chris was relieved there were no further unpleasant details, such as the guy getting apprehended and Miranda having to confront the a-hole in a courtroom, and then the guy getting off on a technicality.

That would have been hard to ignore, and Chris didn't need another item on his plate.

Miranda said, "Over at Cal though. These things keep happening. I saw another one, the last few days."

Chris knew what she was talking about, and it was increasingly bugging the shit out of *him* too.

The latest, over the weekend, some harmless student on the way to the library and getting a semi-automatic stuck in their face.

Chris had read about it at Gloria's kitchen table Monday morning.

Gloria still got the physical *Chronicle* delivered and it was nice to spread it out, you didn't have to scroll down to read the article like you did on the internet, and you took your time.

Of course what Chris was looking for in the newspaper was anything about the day before, the gravel parking area up north with the construction trailer and the porta potty that Jerry Smith needed to use.

There was nothing, and he took a quick look at the online edition as well--zip there either, and nothing on the morning TV news.

Though Chris was thinking, something like that, it might not make the San Francisco news . . . He remembered back to Donny . . . you better check the Santa Rosa and Marin County papers.

It did feel good sitting there in Gloria's kitchen, the sunlight flooding in, Chris pretty darn refreshed after another night's sleep in the guest room on that amazing mattress.

There'd been no disturbing dreams, only a couple light ones, and one involved Emma but he couldn't remember what happened.

Sunday night had been enjoyable. He was glad he made the trip down. There were a dozen people there, Steve included. Chris didn't bring up the poker game, but they ended it that Steve might come out and visit him in MB. Steve also invited Chris to Atlanta--which wasn't going to happen, you didn't want to get carried away here--but it was a nice gesture.

Meanwhile Steve's and Gloria's reunion-weekend relationship seemed to fizzle out, since they were being extremely polite to each other now, never a great sign.

The rest of them were high school alums milking the occasion one last time, except for Miranda.

Monday morning Gloria hinted to Chris he should give Miranda a call, that she works at home and is flexible and you never know.

So . . . Here you were now, farm country, headed toward Chico, looking across at someone you barely knew, and Chris supposed that's how you scripted these things, wasn't it . . . meaning there *was* no script.



Chapter Two

Chico had a decent vibe, Chris felt.

It was just inconvenient enough to get to--you had to swing off the Interstate in Orland and deal with a slightly hairy two-lane--that it kept its freshness as a college town.

The streets were wide and you could park, and they got out and took a walk on campus. It was around one, a Wednesday, the first day of November, smack dab in the middle of the semester.

"Not bad," he said to Miranda. "You know it?"

"This is my point," she said, "I missed out on this experience."

"Well . . . you can always move here *now*. What's keeping you in the Bay Area?"

"It would be different. You're not part of the university."

"So take a couple classes," he said.

"Very funny."

"I'm serious . . . Okay, hypothetically, if you *were* going to enroll some place, what would you take?"

They were at the bell tower, the center of campus, Chris impressed how the buildings matched each other, all deep red brick.

Miranda said, "You mean, starting from scratch?"

"Yeah. Having lived a little. Gained some perspective."

"Fine, you'll laugh at me, but I always wanted to go to law school."

"Oh no," Chris said.

"Well you're a party pooper. You asked, and I gave you an honest answer."

"You didn't think about it, you just blurted it out . . . Bottom line, we have too many lawyers."

Miranda smiled and took his arm.

Chris said, "Jeez, I thought that would backfire on me, but the opposite, apparently."

"I like it that you're direct," she said. "And you have a good heart, I can tell . . . What would *you* do?"

"Me? Turning back the clock? . . . I might coach something, I guess."

Chris had no interest in coaching, or the question, but a building that looked like a gym or rec center came into view as they crossed a footbridge, the sign telling you this was one of seven of them on campus that crossed Big Chico Creek.

“Really . . . What sport?” Miranda said.

Chris was wondering, did a maintenance guy like McCall work at the gym? And did he work late?

Not a guy *like* McCall obviously. The guy himself . . . Didn’t those guys typically start in about four or five though, less chance people would get in their way?

“What’s that?” he said.

“I was asking, what would you be interested in coaching,” Miranda said. “But you seem kind of preoccupied . . . I guess I should check in though.”

“Ah yeah, your roommate. Where *was* that anyway, you lived with her?”

“It’s a guy, actually . . . Sam. We lived together on the Panhandle for a while.”

This redirected Chris a bit.

He was thinking three things.

First, the Panhandle was--at least before all the gentrification--a raunchy area sandwiched between Golden Gate Park and the Haight-Ashbury.

Second, she was *making* it with the guy? . . . Or it was one of those benign female/male roommate deals?

Third, but if she was . . . they’re still on good terms?

“Hmm,” Chris said.

Miranda was off the phone. “Is now a good time to bring me over there?” she said. “I guess they’re expecting me, and apparently they’re making dinner as well, and hopefully you can join us.”

“They?” Chris said.

“Sammy and his wife. Plus two adorable kids.”

Might as well leave the past relationship-level questions alone, even though he was curious, since he’d figure it out soon enough.

“Well that’s darn nice of them,” Chris said. “What I’ll do, I’ll run you over there and then take a little time, do my thing.”

“So you’ve made contact with a broker?” Miranda said.

“Not yet. I’ve got some neighborhoods I want to cruise around first. Get the overall feel.”

“Chris I’m not trying to butt into your business . . . but have you owned property before?”

“Somewhat, yeah.”

“What does *that* mean?”

She meant well and was on the right track, of course, trying to caution him from plunging in.

Yep, he'd owned a few pieces. Starting off those couple years he lived in New Jersey, some guy in a diner eating a bran muffin next to him telling him Yonkers was a good value, the city still recovering from having to go bankrupt.

Chris explored it and the guy was right, you could buy multi-family houses cheap, and the rents were strong, since you were right on top of the *real* city, New York,

So he learned the market and was able to pick up a few properties, and there were issues occasionally where you needed a little outside-the-box assistance . . . and that's where he started to run into guys like Ned Mancuso.

Chris wondered if Rory had said anything to the guy yet, him asking those questions about what Ned thought of Chip.

"It *means*," Chris said, back to reality, Miranda's question of whether he'd ever owned rental property, "you're not a bad person. You're looking out for me."

She smiled and shook her head.

"It would be an understatement," she said, "to say you're leaving things out."

"I am. A bunch of boring details. Not worth wasting time on."

"I don't mean just the real estate . . . Everything."

"Well if you feel that way . . . you can add them back in."

"I'd like to try," she said.

And they were on Broadway Street now, which felt like the main drag, on their way back to the car, and Chris looked at her still holding his arm and he *sort* of knew what she meant but not exactly.



Chapter Three

The Sam person and his wife lived a couple miles from campus down a leafy dead end lane at the base of Bidwell Park.

“Something like this for instance,” Chris said as they pulled up, “what do you think it would run me?”

Miranda said, “I’m not sure. We can ask *them*. I know Sam got in at the right time.”

“Before we say hello and all . . . you guys were going to town on each other at one point? Or it wasn’t like that.”

“Goodness, do you have to be so crude . . . It *was* essentially, what you said. Yes.”

“Because I was going to wait,” Chris said, “let that part clarify itself on its own.”

“But you lack discipline,” she said, playful.

“That’s for sure . . . That’s why I like to binge-watch stuff on Netflix. I can jump ahead, eliminate the suspense, then go back and fill in the blanks, but only if I need to.”

“I hate jumping ahead,” she said. “It ruins the experience.”

“Did you ever watch *The Affair*? Or *do* you? It’s still on.”

“No, sorry.”

“That show, you had a good premise in the beginning. It had potential. A guy on summer vacation with his family, out at Montauk, the end of Long Island . . . He hooks up with a married local gal who’s suffered an awful tragedy.”

“I think I read about that show. They’re both British right? The actors? But playing Americans.”

“Yeah but that’s not important. The affair part is credible. You can understand both their motivations, even though you might not approve . . . The other way they hook you, there’s a backstory where you don’t know who it was that hit-and-ran someone, killed them off.”

“It sounds interesting. I’ll have to check it out.”

“Nah don’t bother. By about the fifth episode I stopped watching. It was like they thought the set-up wasn’t enough, so they screwed around with it, had the simple wide-eyed local gal running drugs off fishing boats, making deliveries on her bicycle, la-di-da, and the whole town oblivious.”

“Why do they do that? I know what you mean.”

“I jumped ahead, took a look. Now the whole gang lives in Brooklyn and it’s a veritable Millennial soap opera. Same tropes as your daytime productions.”

“So . . . what are you saying?”

“I’m *saying*, all that *time* I saved.”

“Hmm . . . which applies how?”

“Just jump me to the bottom line on you and Sam, and whoever else. Like I say, we can go back and fill in the blanks if necessary.”

“I feel like you’re ticked off . . . I heard what happened, your lady friend from your high school reunion, but I didn’t think it was appropriate to bring up.”

She *would* have known about that, wouldn’t she, probably right away from Gloria. What was hitting a bit of a nerve was how come *he* couldn’t stay on great terms with people, like Miranda evidently had with this Sam guy.

“You’re right,” Chris said, “I’m sorry about that . . . and the other point you made, that was a logical one too, no reason to jump ahead.”

“For heaven’s sakes, you don’t have to *apologize* . . . but what point was that?”

“The rental house business. You’re right, too deep a dive, too quick. Forget that for the time being.”

Which worked out nicely, a convenient spin, you could address your main deal now without having to spend time faking being up here for some *other* reason.

But Miranda said, “Oh, don’t be silly. I’m looking forward to it, exploring some properties. I mean you don’t have to *buy* anything this trip, is all I was getting at.”

So you were back to square one, and they got out and rang the bell.

The wife, Laurel, answered the door, and she seemed genuinely happy to see Miranda and gave Chris a big hug as well, though unfortunately she weighed about 250 pounds.

Sam came around the corner out of the kitchen, a normal skinny guy, a chef’s apron on, and something did smell pretty good, and he was equally effusive in his hellos.

Right away he said to Chris, “Hey, I really appreciate you bringing Mandy. It’s just too few and far between, these days.” Shaking Chris’s hand, and the normal way fortunately, not trying to make a point by squeezing hard like some guys in this situation might.

Entirely none of his business, but Chris couldn’t help wondering with these things, was Laurel huge when they met and got married, or did that element surface later on.

At any rate, they all sat in the living room, and Jeez, Chris was already being handed a cocktail, a Bloody Mary, and when he hesitated a second Sam cheerfully reminded him it was a *food*, and that hopefully it would hold him for a couple hours until the real McCoy was ready.

The small talk was pleasant enough . . . the kids, the pros and cons of the Bay Area versus Butte County, and what was wrong with the 49ers, which Chris kept out of but surprisingly all three had an opinion on.

Laurel and Sam butted heads, Laurel supporting the view that you need to be patient, and Sam countering with, “Babe, we *have* been patient, they need to show us something *now*.”

This of course led to a discussion of concussions, and the ongoing findings that seemed to be popping out every couple months, each one more grim than the last.

Sam capped it by saying he was going to have a tough time if Hardy--that was his 9-year-old--wanted to play high school football when the time came.

"Is he big?" Chris said, a normal-enough question, but also curious which side of the family the kid took after.

"He's average for his class, but that might come later," Sam said. "He's strong, likes to wrestle you. He's a great kid."

"Well it'll work itself out, these things do," Chris said, knowing it might not though, and Sam said hopefully you're right and he got up and told Miranda to come on and take a look at what he'd done in the garden since last time.

They disappeared out the side door and Laurel said, "I'm sure you can tell, it's pretty darn obvious, he still has a thing for her."

Chris looked at her, not exactly what he expected her to be dropping on him.

He hoped that meant she was amused by it, nothing deeper, but her voice cracked slightly when she said, "They talk to each other online sometimes too."

And she went in the kitchen and fixed him another Bloody Mary, which he really didn't want because he still intended to do a little preliminary scouting-out of the maintenance asshole, at least try to find out what buildings he handled, and when . . . and at the *very* least, make sure the guy actually was *here* . . . and even then you'd have to somehow confirm it was the *right* guy.

But you didn't want to be impolite, so he thanked Laurel for the refill, and she sat back down and was quiet, and Chris felt like he should at least react to what she said.

He said, "My general opinion on the subject? Good to give 'em a little rope. You're not interfering with human nature."

"Well you put it so eloquently," she said. "And I know, intellectually, you are correct."

"So . . . that should be good *enough* then, to do the trick."

Sam and Miranda stuck their heads back in the side door, and Sam announced they were going to take a little walk down the street, and they'd be back.

Chris sipped his drink, trying to minimize the alcohol intake and keep the mood casual, and Laurel said, "There are other women too. I know it's my fault."

What Chris wanted to say--but he knew you never *could* because that was the *worst* thing for their psyche--was *Dang It*, go with soup for a year . . . close the fridge at 5pm . . . *something*.

What he said was, "Fine, you're overweight. But you're a beautiful woman."

Which she was, or at least could be. She had a classically beautiful face.

Other aspects of her too, becoming more attractive than Miranda at this point.

"Thank you," Laurel said. "I really needed to hear that . . . Even though I know you're pulling my leg."

Chris said, "I'll hit you with one quick story, and then I gotta get going."

“What do you mean get going? You’re not staying for dinner?”

“No, I’ll be back . . . This one I read in the *New Yorker*, not something I’d pay for but people leave them lying around, coffee places where I live.”

“This is true, or no?”

“Fiction. But it could be, I guess . . . What happens, a guy responds to an internet dating thing, connects with a woman, then travels all the way out to meet her, someplace like Missoula, Montana.”

“I can feel where you’re going with this.”

“She used a phony picture of herself. He’s mad, but has the decency to finish the meal with her, pay the check, walk her to her car . . . Then he dumps her.”

“He did the right thing then.”

“The way he sees it, since he wasted a trip out there, he might as well stick around a few days, explore the bar scene and so forth. He meets a woman, goes home with her, but her thing is she wants him to do repairs on her apartment, right then that night, since she’s found out he’s a plumber.”

“What a bitch. He didn’t deserve that.”

“There’s a final scene though, they’re watching a local baseball game together. The guy and the *original* woman, who falsified the internet dating picture.”

“Wow . . . So they come full circle?”

“Sort of. You get the impression there may not be romance there, but at least they’re friends.”

The detail Chris skipped, which let’s face it Laurel probably figured out, was the fictitious woman was 250 pounds too.

“I like that story,” she said.

“But let me ask you this,” Chris said. “When someone takes a *little walk down the street* around here, where do they go?”

“See? You’re jumpy now too.”

“I mean . . . they couldn’t be *doing* something, could they? . . . Somehow? That’d be too far-fetched . . . right?”

“They could,” she said.

“Well,” he said, “this has been . . . I’m not sure the best word is *interesting*, but we can leave it at that.”

“But you need to go, you’re saying . . . So can I drop you someplace? I have to pick up the kids anyway. No problem at all to swing back and get you later.”

Chris said he appreciated her hospitality, that it was off the charts and borderline embarrassing considering they’d just met--but he should be fine.



Chapter Four

It seemed the simplest way to start off, get a handle on it, was find some master directory, and see if the fuckhead was listed.

The time at the MB library when he'd intended to take a look at Ned Mancuso, but instead couldn't control himself and checked on Jerry Smith and also this guy McCall--that was what, two weeks ago? That was it? . . . Sheesh, that was when he met Emma as well, that little computer session.

It sure felt a lot further back, several things not having come into the picture yet . . . but what difference did it make?

What he'd determined that day was McCall was one of the two guys who assaulted Leslie and Kim's parents. The other guy was missing in action so far, but May McCall--as his Facebook buddies were fond of calling him--Chris did have this much of a handle on.

Nothing specific on any Chico State web page that actually named the guy--there was a section for maintenance, but that told students or faculty what to do if they *needed* some, and didn't get into the names of who handled it.

But the kicker, which is why he was reasonably confident dragging his rear end up here, was McCall himself, boasting on his Facebook page, in that column on the left, that he was gainfully employed here, and clearly proud of it.

This was above a picture of himself bass fishing on Lake Shasta, holding up a fish the way they do, looking sunburned under a backwards baseball cap, flashing a cockeyed sideways grin.

So . . . you may as well hit the student union, try that, hope you pick up some lead. Otherwise you might have to ask someone a question or two, not naming the actual guy of course, but about general campus maintenance or whatever, and that's never the best way to approach this stuff.

The student union wasn't much--nothing like Cal's for instance that was a multi-story job that took up about a whole square block--but this one was tidy and organized and had a study area tucked away behind an activity room, and there was a lounge with comfy chairs.

There was a computer directory outside the student bookstore. At first it tied you into the Chico State web stuff he'd already seen, but then he noticed an in-house option.

You could hover over a letter and a sub-screen would appear, listing all staff under that last name letter, but unfortunately there was no *McCall* and Chris figured Jesus he was out of luck . . . except at the bottom, pretty inconspicuous, there was a link: **Subordination**.

This turned out to be the *other* staffers, the non-academic and non-administrative ones.

Which actually irritated Chris--since if *he* was in charge of setting this directory up, no way you'd diminish a guy like McCall . . . scum that he was. The maintenance guys were as important to the operation as the PhDs

Meanwhile . . . a little clicking around . . . and *boom* . . . there he was.

Chris's heart was beating quick there for a moment, until he found the guy . . . and it was *real* . . . and it was on.

The notation next to McCall's name said **Institutional Engineering**.

Now this was going a little too far the *other* way, if that's what they were calling janitors and clean-up guys these days. But fine.

The key thing was not only did they list a direct campus phone number for the guy--which doubtful you'd be using--but his 'office' as well, in a building called Lassen Annex.

So what do you know . . . *And what time did we have now, quarter to 5?*

Might as well at least take a look, get the lay of the land.

Laurel said be back for dinner by 6, and Chris wondered if that aromatic roast Sam had working was going to be okay, if the walk they were taking extended itself too long, and something might end up burning.

When he came out of the student union there were a couple kids playing music for tips, and they weren't bad, and Chris debated screw it, forget McCall right now--but not quite, and he threw 20 bucks in their tip jar and pulled out the campus map he picked up.

It was getting dark and it was hard to read and he stood under a light and made out Lassen Hall, which looked pretty big, it might have even been a dorm . . . and then a surprising distance away--three, four inches on the map--you had Lassen Annex, not nearly as big.

He had the general direction, north, toward the top of the campus, and he started that way, and first you had what looked like a football stadium, except he knew that Chico didn't play football anymore.

In fact he remembered growing up, the state schools playing each other in football. Not the way you followed Cal and Stanford and USC, but it was reasonable quality ball, and then 20 years ago most of them dropped it.

Chris could see that, fielding a football team was too expensive . . . meanwhile, as he got closer to what used to be the stadium, you had one lone guy out there, riding around on a big machine cutting the grass.

Chris supposed you still had to keep the field nice for other sports, such as soccer, maybe lacrosse, women's field hockey.

But in the heyday, 5:30, middle of the week in early November, this place would be hopping, players colliding and cutting it loose, coaches running around barking orders as you

got into the final stretch of the season, a couple of showdown games looming before you hopefully made the playoffs.

There was a small hut at the entrance to the field, not right in the middle where you would buy a ticket, off to the left of that.

Chris pulled the map out again. *Jeez, could this be it? Lassen Annex?*

The map was confusing because they printed names of everything and then drew long arrows to where the physical places were supposed to be, but the arrows got interfered with and you weren't sure where they wanted you to be looking.

But . . . there was nothing else around, the immediate vicinity, that could have been Lassen Annex . . . and Chris felt like they were insulting your intelligence, and again, not treating the custodial and groundskeeping and whatever-else staff with much respect.

Though if they *were* calling these guys **Institutional Engineers** it would fit unfortunately that the building might *be* the rickety hut up ahead with the old tarp covering half the roof.

Chris had his gloves in his pocket, thinking ahead, why leave your mark if you didn't have to--*scouting operation or not*--and he put them on.

The door was partly open, a light was on, a single bulb hanging from the ceiling, and a radio blasting, sportstalk.

Chris knocked and pushed at the same time.

There was one guy sitting in there, his feet up on a stack of fertilizer bags, leaning back, holding a beer bottle with two hands.

It wasn't a home run, the guy didn't match the Facebook bass fisherman beyond all doubt . . . but Chris was pretty certain this was McCall.

One thing for sure, if there was an option, McCall *wouldn't* be the guy out there cutting the grass on the machine, he'd be the one in here nursing the early cocktail.

"Can I help you?" the guy said, pretty darn friendly actually.

"I'm a little lost," Chris said. "But before I get into that, this reminds me of the playground I used to go to as a kid. You could check out balls and bats and even skates, though for those, the sizes were limited."

"Where was that?" the guy said.

"Down in the Bay Area, the city. Every park had a Director, and you looked up to that guy."

"So they rented the stuff to you out of a little operation like this, then."

"Not *rented*, it was free. You had to leave your watch, or *something*, for a deposit . . . Then the Director, a lot of times he'd organize games. He was cool, normally some guy about 20 years old and a good athlete. We wanted to *be* him when we grew up."

"Sounds pretty sweet," the guy said. "We didn't have nothing like that up north."

The guy enjoying shooting the breeze, in no rush to get rid of Chris.

And Chris had to admit, he was kind of liking the guy, not exactly what he expected . . . if it *was* him . . .

He knew it was the exact wrong approach, definitely not how you would have scripted it, this harmless preliminary encounter . . . But he couldn't resist sticking in: "The *other* thing it reminds me of . . . not the inside obviously, but the structure . . . you know those roadside deals? *Whaddayamacall* . . . You *know* . . . where the truckers can take a load off and unwind, and the regular drivers can stretch their legs . . . *Rest Areas*, is what I'm thinking off."

The guy took a moment, put the beer bottle to the side, and more serious, said yeah, he knew those places, but this didn't remind him of one.

"What I like about *those*, typically," Chris said, "is you don't have the complications of your *Pilots* and other service plazas. I'm trying to remember the names of the others . . . *Flying J* I think, in Nevada, and there's another one you see all over too."

"*Love's*," the guy said.

"Oh yeah, of course . . . What was I saying though?"

"You don't like 'em as much as rest stops." The guy talking through clenched teeth now.

"Right. The *on and off*, a world of difference . . . And if you rob a couple people, or something, beat 'em up, it makes it a lot easier. The easy on and off."

Then the guy did something Chris *really* didn't expect, which was open the metal lunchbox that was on the floor and pull out a small pistol and point it at him.

"Easy there friend, *please*," Chris said.

"You tell *me*," McCall said.

"Not what you think," Chris said. "If you can just put that thing down, for a moment . . . then *I* can think clearly, and . . . again . . . *nothing* like what *you're* thinking."

He felt strangely like he was watching a movie, a western, where a similar scenario was always coming up, and it never seemed realistic until now.

But that's exactly what you needed . . . the guy to ease up on the threat . . . because until then you really *couldn't* think straight--and then you could hopefully jump-start your brain and somehow explain your way out of it.

The guy didn't do anything different, just kept the thing facing him steady.

Chris said, "Okay . . . we're talking about another guy here . . . that's who I'm looking for . . . I mean, that's why they had me stop by. See *you*."

McCall said, "Fuck ya talking about there boy?"

Chris was perspiring heavily from the forehead, like a faucet in fact, to where he was having a little trouble seeing and his eyes stung.

He said, "I mean I don't *care*, personally . . . who might have done what . . . and when, where, how . . . *Who gives a hoot?*"

"Who's *they*, that you say had you *stop by*?"

"*They*? . . . The lawyer, is who it was. What it is . . . what we're dealing with."

It really *was* getting tough to formulate many words.

"Un-huh." McCall waiting.

"Yep. They got me investigating. That's what I do."

Chris was seriously hoping the guy out on the field, riding around on the tractor, would get the hell off it and need to come back to the hut . . . How *short* did you need to cut the grass, for God sakes? . . . But you could hear the steady hum of the machine out there, loud and clear, not letting up.

McCall said, "What you just said. That's a crock."

"No I'm dead serious," Chris said, latching on to a tiny bit of momentum, trying to formulate an angle. "They're filing a lawsuit against you guys . . . The family I mean . . . of the people you messed up . . . at least that's what I'm told."

"Yeah? . . . So where your papers then? Fuck you need to investigate, just hand 'em to me. Otherwise I'll have to shoot you for lying."

This upped the urgency factor just a notch, Chris figuring the guy was joking--*wouldn't he be?*--but still.

He said, "Okay cutting right to the chase? . . . My job . . . I mean pretty much all they got me doing at this point . . . is find the other guy. Your buddy . . . So we can serve him."

McCall thought about that for a second.

"Yeah well?" he said. "Y'all are barking up the wrong tree there too. Seeing as how the statute of limitations been run out by now . . . Which . . . only backs it up, that you're feeding a crock of shit there son."

The guy had a point, he wasn't stupid . . . How could you *work* this?

"They have," Chris said. "In California. Other states though . . . it can vary."

"Yeah?" McCall said, processing it. "What makes you think my old buddy you're looking for is in another state?"

"We don't *know* . . . *Dude*, that's what I'm telling you, why I'm back to square one here . . . *All* they got me doing, is I'm trying to find *out* . . . I don't know what else I can give you, it's nothing personal."

Chris hated *Dude*, tried to never to use it, cringed if someone ever used it on him . . . But he brought it out now as his hole card, praying the guy might relate just a little.

McCall narrowed his eyes and stared at him, and then thankfully, he put the gun in his lap and picked up his beer again and took a swig.

And when he put *that* down, Chris had *his* gun out and one eye closed, and the thing pointing directly at the open space between the guy's eyebrows.

"First," Chris said, "you make a move, go for something, you'll regret it and I *will* shoot you . . . But second, just tell me *where* we can find your friend, it's not complicated, and we can shut down this party and both go home . . . no hard feelings."

"Me and him," McCall said, talking faster now, "we had a falling out. Been a while, but the asshole was dealing cards in Reno, was the last I heard."

"Mike Brown, you mean," Chris said, luckily remembering the guy's name from the library, nice and common, which of course was part of the reason he'd been hard to track.

“Yep, the one and only,” McCall said. “Lemme ask you something though . . . Why’d you need to go through all the smokescreen bullshit? Why not just knock on the door and say *excuse me*, do you know the whereabouts of this particular *guy*?”

“I don’t know,” Chris said, admitting that was a logical question. “Except unlikely you would have told me . . . I figured, if I aggravate you, maybe more chance you’ll give me what I need.”

Which made entirely *no* sense, and of course none of the rest of his story did either, but that part even less.

But McCall didn’t over-think it.

He said, “So we’re good?”

“We are,” Chris said, and he shot McCall in the middle of the chest.

The sports-talk station was pretty loud, but you didn’t want to depend on it to muffle out another gunshot, so hopefully he didn’t have to deliver one and Chris watched McCall for a moment.

Fortunately--not *before*, when he might have needed that guy to walk in, but *now*, when he could use the noise--the guy was still going at it out there, mowing the heck out of the grass.

The other fortunate part was Chris had been far enough away, or maybe there were other factors too, but the blood hadn’t splattered back on him.

Meanwhile McCall looked in bad shape, his eyes and mouth open, and that situation unlikely to change, and Chris was pretty confident you could *call it*, the way they did on the ER TV shows when they were convinced the person was un-savable.

The thing to do now was hightail it on out of here, carefully, and he wondered if using his shoe to push the door open a little wider would somehow leave something of him at the scene, though he realized that was stupid to worry about since his shoes were already all over the place . . . and he nudged open the door and luckily, even though you were technically on a college campus, it was pretty dang dark out and there was a footpath angling to the right toward the lower campus, and one to the left toward West Sacramento Street and points beyond . . . And that sure seemed like the way to go, get off the campus and onto the city streets, and he pulled up his collar and put his head down and began plowing along that direction . . . and it wasn’t until the top of campus, near what looked like a seasonal outdoor theater, that he encountered anyone . . . and this was two kids, a guy and a girl, engaged in deep conversation and laughing as well, and honestly it felt like he was the last thing on their radar as they buzzed past him going the other direction.

You could go left or right on West Sacramento, and if you went left for only a block you’d run into a shopping center with a Safeway and you should be able to blend in from there, but the idea of being visible, lit up, didn’t appeal to Chris right now so he went right and took the long way around.

A half mile, it felt like, to Warner Street, the eastern edge of the college, then Jeez, south at least a mile to the West 1st Street neighborhood where he’d parked, specifically on a weird-

named side street called Normal Avenue, also real dark, which the whole walk had been, Chico apparently not getting around to upgrading its dingy old-fashioned street lamps, which was fine.

Chris had a tendency, these situations, to flash on factual trivia, nothing to do with the current circumstance . . . and this time as he was driving out of the neighborhood, kind of herky-jerk--since every block had a stop sign and you couldn't always see them that great in the dark--he decided he must be in the tree section, since the cross streets had tree names.

Chestnut, Hazel, Ivy, Cherry, Orange, Cedar, Walnut and Oak. It was also clear that the tree section was the Greek part of town, meaning the fraternity and sorority section, nice old mansions that had been converted for social frivolity and more, though Chris wondered if frat life was diminished in a college town when you didn't have any football team.

At any rate . . . better forget all that and check the time . . . and whoa, it was 7:20 . . . Dang it . . . Not good at all.

Should you call? Or would that be *worse*, whatever lame excuse you'd come up with only making you look *more* irresponsible?

So no. Just get your butt over there.

Obviously not *so* quick that you got stopped for speeding or something, but reasonable . . . and as Chris pulled back up at Sam and Laurel's he knew it didn't work this way, but you still might as well *hope* the Stemphills had a little peace now.



Chapter Five

Sam opened the door and there was more action in there than just the three of them, and salsa music was playing.

Sam seemed plenty happy to see Chris again, and he shut the music for a minute, and introduced him to Shelly and Lee, who lived down the block, and Shelly explained there was a babysitter at their house tonight for their kids plus Sam and Laurel's, so reduced stress all around.

Everyone had eaten, and things were casual, not all the plates had been cleaned up, and most importantly no one seemed bothered that Chris showed up late, though Miranda told him privately that she took care of it.

"Well that was nice of you," Chris said. "I was afraid I was the bad guy, there. What'd you say?"

"The truth. You're looking around at real estate and you lose track of time because you're not very responsible."

"Ah. Concluding with a *So let's eat*, then."

"You're pretty amusing," she said.

"And you're . . . interesting as well, I'm learning . . . It doesn't matter to me--and I'm serious, it doesn't--but are you still banging Sam?"

Without missing much of a beat, Miranda said, "*He* wanted to today. But we didn't."

In a ridiculously crazy way, it was good to hear, because it backed up Laurel's version of things, and on the way over to meet McCall Chris had been tossing it around, was this lady for *real*, telling him all this, or a wack-job?

Which he hoped she wouldn't turn out to be, because he liked Laurel, and felt bad for her.

In fact he connected better with Laurel than with a *lot* of people, such as Emma, if you wanted to bring *her* into it, and even Laurel's girth wasn't that big a deal.

He was thinking, in a fictitious world, such as in the story with the internet dating session gone wrong, he could be *with* Laurel. Maybe not intimately, fine, but certainly someone you could talk honestly too, and who'd give you plenty of wholehearted cuddling-up on those occasions you might require it.

There was some commotion in the kitchen, and then it was over, and you heard a door close and Chris and Miranda stayed where they were, until Lee poked his head out in the yard a minute later and said that Laurel had hit Sam in the head with a pan.

Miranda rushed back inside and Chris thought *maybe not*, actually, on the Laurel deal, his earlier impressions.

At any rate, he figured there was nothing he could help out with, he'd just be in the way, so he sat down for a while, and then you heard voices outside and a car start up, and then another, and it seemed pretty quiet in the house by then so he went back in and turned on the TV and started flipping around.

College basketball season was underway and you had about 5 games a night, and Chris kept trying to get into it but the same thing happened every year, it was all pretty boring until the playoffs.

The exception tonight being, there was a tournament in Hawaii, Maui, and they kept showing you outside shots of palm trees swaying and people surfing and bikini-ing and stand-up paddleboarding, and you could stay with the game for those visuals alone.

Though it did hit home that Manhattan Beach had those same elements, maybe not quite as tropical and idyllic but in the ballpark for sure, and part of him wanted to simply get in the car right now, as good a time as any, why not?, and point it in the direction and go.

There was the issue of Miranda, how she'd get back to San Francisco, although she was proving herself pretty all-around adept, and he suspected she'd be fine with it.

Taking it leisurely, you'd be pulling in, what, 8, 9 in the morning? See if Kenny was still around--obviously he was *around*, because he'd checked in a couple times, but was he still in the apartment and so forth--and then you'd have the day ahead of you, wide open, nothing much to worry about except getting back into the routine.

Ah Christ, the storage guy thing though.

He'd conveniently blocked that out for a few days. When did that cop give him to again? The Redondo one? . . . Tuesday, the 7th, if he had it right, to turn that report in . . . which was this coming Tuesday . . . and not just any report, but an *AXY-certified* one of course.

God damn it.

The TV game was sloppy, both teams fast-breaking up and down the floor, no one playing any defense, and by the middle of the second half they weren't showing enough atmospheric shots of the beach anymore so Chris changed the channel.

Son . . . of a . . . bitch. It was the news, a reporter, night time, live, her back to what looked like a structure in the distance . . . which didn't necessarily look like *his*, but Chris knew how that went, that TV distorted everything . . . and she was telling you about something bad that had just happened . . . and Chris's heart started pounding and his palms were sweating and he turned it up, and the gal reporter now was going into detail, how police fear this is another in a developing string of serial murders in Louisville.

It took a moment to register that he was watching the national news, CNN, which they let you know right in your face, the emblem at the bottom left corner of the screen the whole time, but he'd been too numb to notice it.

Right about then there was some rustling outside and people were coming back, and Chris switched channels, and he had to run through a few of them to get to something harmless, as the news shows were bunched together, and he'd settled on the *Diners and Drive-Ins* food guy when Sam walked in and said, "Chris I'm sorry about that. Did you find everything you need?"

Sam had a prominent white bandage high on his forehead, with tape wrapping around the sides and going back behind his ears.

Chris said, "Don't even think about it. Y'all *right* though?"

"Oh absolutely," Sam said, waving his hand, not all that convincingly, and he lowered his voice a notch. "Every two, three years--sometimes more often--there's a little blow up . . . Sounds a lot worse than it is."

"Part of the routine, then," Chris said.

"You *got* it. Listen, can I fix you another drink?"

Chris said that sounded pretty good, and Sam disappeared into the kitchen and so far that was it, no one else back in the picture, though Chris figured that would resolve itself pretty quick, and maybe watch out.

Soon Sam was handing him something, and they clinked glasses, and then there was an awkward silence and Sam picked up on it and said, "They're on their way. Then hopefully we'll be all set, starting it up where we left off."

"You and Miranda shtupp each other today?" Chris said.

Sam was in the middle of a big gulp, and his eyes got bigger and he cleared his throat and said, "Now something like *that*, with all due respect . . . you *couldn't* be more off-target."

Chris nodded and kept his mouth shut, and Sam said, "Not sure I asked you before, but did you actually *eat*? I know you had errands to run, did anyone take care of you when you got here?"

"You're a good host," Chris said. "What about the emergency room though, they didn't ask questions, who might have assaulted whom?"

"Ah . . . Well you *are* correct there, I'm afraid. No point getting into the system, even on the periphery."

"Databases and such," Chris said.

"Exactly."

"In case it might ever happen again, or some variation. Connecting you back. And on top it, you might have a *he-said she-said* thing going." Chris pushing him a little.

"Yes. So, being prudent . . . we went the alternate route. Shelly knows someone, an athletic trainer at the university."

"Huh . . . they took care of it, unofficially then . . . Not a bad idea actually. You needed a couple stitches? They could handle that?"

“Oh Gosh yes, it took 12, I’m told, to close it up.”

“Whoa. She hit you with . . . like a frying pan?”

“Yep, you got it.”

Chris took a moment. “Don’t screw around on her anymore. She doesn’t deserve it.”

“Chris . . . for Heaven’s sakes . . . if you’re still dwelling on Miranda, I can assure you, you’re barking up entirely the wrong tree . . . Laurel and I, we’ve been at odds for some time, it ebbs and flows, it’s complicated. We’re in counseling.”

“Fine. So ebb and flow your way into keeping your hands off other people.”

“Chris, you’re not hearing me.”

“Your *thoughts* too, I forgot to add. Keep *those* off other people too.”

Sam studied him for a second and picked up both drinks and went back in the kitchen, Chris figuring either he’s getting rid of me, the most likely, or bringing me a refill, which he gave 10 percent, but you could hear the microwave going and the fridge opening and Sam came back with fresh drinks and plate of bite-sized triangular things that you’d see at those sample stands in Costco.

“Let’s back it up, if we might,” Sam said, but right about then the others came trudging in.

Laurel . . . and then the neighbors again, Lee and Shelly, the three of them laughing about something, and then Miranda bringing up the rear, carrying a bag from the store and pulling out a couple half gallons of ice cream.

Chris wondered Jeez, what about the kids, wasn’t it past their bedtime, and a school night too, but Shelly filled in the blanks, that because of this ‘event’ that happened they were all four of them sleeping at *their* house tonight, and the babysitter was gone but her older daughter was home and had it under control.

And sure enough, pretty quickly everyone was squared away, and the music was back on, though more mellow this time, piano jazz, and they were combining after-dinner beverages with ice cream, and Chris thought he caught one or two subtle looks back and forth between Sam and Shelly, indicating *they* maybe had something going, past or present, as well.

Though admittedly he could have been confused on all of it at this point, whatever the histories were and who had an ax to grind, and maybe nobody was screwing *anybody* and Sam and Laurel simply had a legitimate beef, unrelated, and for an instant there, she saw red and lost it.

He did know one thing. *He* was hitting the wall big-time.

It crept up on you, all that adrenaline carrying you for a while . . . plus the shock factor, you couldn’t deny that either.

But at this moment he could lay down, even a chair outside in the yard would work, his feet up one of the planter boxes, and he’d guarantee he’d be out cold for 10 hours . . . no dreams getting in the way, he was pretty sure, since he had nothing to apologize for.

Except now someone was fooling with the channels again, back to the news, and it was local, the 11 o’clock one, and there *was* a story this time.

No reporter at a crime scene, just the studio anchorwoman telling you what happened, a giant photo of the Chico State football field projected behind her.

They were all still talking, except Lee, who was honing in on it and told everyone to shut up for a minute, and the anchorwoman continued telling you they had breaking news tonight, a man found allegedly shot to death on campus in an athletics maintenance facility known as Lassen Annex.

There were no other details, no live cam on site or anything, and the report concluded with a couple students being interviewed outside a lively downtown hangout and shaking their heads and expressing their concerns about campus safety.

“Now that’s bad,” Shelly said when it ended.

“It is,” Lee said, “but let’s don’t jump the gun.”

“Because?” Miranda said. “It may not have been random, is that what you mean?”

“Has this even *happened* before?” Sam said. “Since we’ve *lived* here? Someone getting smoked like that, right on campus?”

“I’m just saying,” Lee said. “Let’s get the facts. Then we can make a determination.”

“You sound like a policeman,” Laurel said, pretty tipsy at this point, and still giddy too from when they’d been laughing, and not quite as into the news item as the others.

“Well you’re kind of an idiot,” Shelly said to Lee.

“I would tend to agree,” Miranda said. “My guess is you didn’t settle down here, to raise your wonderful children, and have people running around with guns. Whether someone knew someone else or not, it seems to me, is irrelevant.”

Chris figured he better say something, so he chimed in, “That’s a fair point.”

At the same time thinking . . . the police probably know a lot already and wouldn’t be saying anything yet to the media, that’s for sure.

He was wondering who found McCall. Hopefully it was the tractor guy, nice and clean . . . and with no else having entered the picture, who might have got an innocent look at Chris walking away from the situation.

Not something he’d factored into the equation--but it would sure be nice if Chico fell into Ray’s category of the ‘white suburbs’.

The theory being the cops working the suburbs, period, weren’t as honed at solving homicides as big-city ones, since they didn’t get the practice, and in the ‘white suburbs’ their proficiency level was even worse.

Whatever . . . at this point, how it might or might not play out was *less* important than laying his ass down somewhere, and he wondered if it would be too forward to ask if he could use one of the bedrooms.

Someone brought out a deck of cards and they gravitated to the dining room table, Sam and Miranda and Shelly and Lee, and while they played card their conversation turned to gun control, Sam throwing in that a state like Utah for example, loose with the regulations, has very few murders.

“It’s the *people*, not the weapons,” he said.

“That’s the same argument you hear about pit bulls, the *owners* not the dogs,” Lee said.

“In Utah,” Shelly said, “more people get killed from guns than car crashes. You need to inform yourself.”

“I knew a married Mormon couple once,” Miranda said. “Slightly off-topic, but their thing was they swung.”

“*Wow*,” Shelly said, “you mean . . . they traded partners, is that part of it?”

“That’s *all* of it,” Sam said, “in a nutshell. I can see it, they’re repressed and after a while they can’t take it and they react the *other* direction.”

“Well how does it work though?” Shelly said.

“The way I understood it,” Miranda said, “on the weekends they went to Las Vegas, and there was an organization they were a part of.”

“Yeah right,” Lee said, “more like a glorified whore house is more accurate.”

“But what would the *justification* be?” Shelly said. “I mean wouldn’t that ruin their marriage, effectively?”

Lee was laughing. “I was going to comment on the justification requirement, but I won’t . . . Bad taste.”

“To the contrary,” Sam said, “something like that, it may serve to *strengthen* their marriage. Who knows?”

Miranda said, “Yes, that was my impression, these folks, that they saw it as a positive.”

“What happened to them?” Sam said.

“They left the church two years ago, and moved out here, to the Bay Area. It’s been a bit of rollercoaster, as most of their old friends disowned them.”

“Not the Vegas ones though,” Lee said.

“Well are they attractive?” Shelly said. “Do they still participate?”

“Okay I’m joking around,” Lee said, “but I think that’s about enough, we should change the subject.”

“Or not,” Sam said, “this is all pretty interesting . . . the precarious nature of the human condition.”

Meanwhile Laurel, over on the couch next to Chris, said, “Can you believe this *bullshit*?”

Chris tried to open an eye and said he heard some of it but wasn’t paying great attention.

Laurel said, “You poor thing, I’m forgetting what a long day it’s been for you. Come on, I’m going to set you up.”

He followed her into a small room off the garage, that was packed with all manner of crafty stuff.

“It’s my workroom,” Laurel explained. “But right in the middle, just give me a moment, I’ll clear some things, and we’re going to put a Japanese futon down, and I have a comfy quilt for you, and you’ll see, it’ll work really nicely.”

She left to get the supplies and Chris checked his messages, nothing there, and improbable as it was, he was nevertheless relieved that the *nothing* included no past law enforcement people just happening to send him a text.

He supposed he should have contacted a real estate broker today, so *they* would have texted him back about something, and there'd be not exactly an alibi but at least a record on his phone that backed up what he was *doing* here . . . but you couldn't think of everything.

Laurel returned with her arms full and organized it all and she was right, it didn't matter that the pad was on the floor, it was thick and plush and plenty wide, and she told him to get down there and try it and see what he thinks.

So he did, slipping off his shoes, and she reached down to cover him up with the comfy quilt, and Chris looked up and saw coming toward him one of the more monstrous units of cleavage you might encounter.

Laurel had changed to something a lot looser, and this is what you were down to, her continuing to dangle above him, asking if he was comfortable down there, and would there be something else she could get him.

Chris turned sideways, not wanting to embarrass her, but to look like he was trying out the other sleeping positions . . . and he wasn't sure if Laurel was still hovering, but then he felt a kiss on his cheek and her telling him not to hesitate, if he needed anything at all in the middle of the night.

Wow-eee.

This had been some day.

He thought of a movie scene, where one guy says to the other: "I don't mean to say nothing, but you are one weird freaking individual."

Not applying to Laurel specifically--necessarily--but to the whole Twilight Zone of events and personalities and surprises today.

It would have been impolite to try to escape, but that window across the room sure had potential.

Not realistic though . . . plus you were lying there all warm. . . except he couldn't sleep.

Maybe it *was* Laurel jumpstarting him, and we're all human here . . . but Chris suspected there was more, him not coming to grips yet with Lassen Annex.

It was supposed to be a pre-lim, a little scouting job.

The revolver, Ray's supposedly untraceable off-brand one, the *Czechpoint*, he stuck it in his jacket pocket on a whim, thinking you never know, in case I get in a situation where I have to flash a little something . . . though that wasn't clear thinking, was it, because if you got to *that* stage, you were at the point of no return.

So once he opened his big mouth too deep, you couldn't show something and just walk away.

It was going fine, the feeling-out process . . . and what motivated him to suddenly intensify matters by bringing the concept of *rest stops* into it, and then adding the strategy of *using* them to *rob people* . . . Chris wasn't sure.

You developed a feel sometimes, you threw away the outline and went with your gut.

The point of no return meant he was going to shoot McCall anyway by then, it had nothing to do with the guy surprising him with his *own* weapon.

Though that part did reinforce McCall being a bad guy, since why would you need to pull a gun on someone who was merely asking questions you didn't like?

The one other positive that came out of it--he may have a lead on Dickhead Number 2 who beat up Mr. and Mrs. Stemphill, the Mike Brown person, last heard from in the vicinity Reno, Nevada.

Though that could be a dead end for sure.

In any case . . .

Jeez, it was loud out there, not clear if they were playing cards anymore but they were carrying on, weren't they, and he could hear Laurel's voice in the mix, and every once in a while they'd all roar with laughter and then it would go back to being toned down but you were on edge not knowing when another outburst might erupt.

There was some arguing out there too, blended in, and bottom line it was going to be a mess to try to actually sleep, and Chris sat up on an elbow and found his phone and without thinking too hard went to the *Chronicle*.

This time there *was* something, not all that prominent, halfway down the left column, but it *had* made the San Francisco news now, which was never great.

He debated clicking on it at all, since what was the point, you wouldn't learn anything new, and you'd get more bent out of shape.

This was Wednesday night, so it had been three days, and Chris figured the story'd been picked up by the *Santa Rosa PE* and *Marin IE*, and in the past he would have been all over those, but with more experience now you waited for the big picture.

The reason it was bad when it got in the *Chronicle*, the big city paper, was it put local Sonoma law enforcement in the spotlight, put 'em under more pressure--and maybe they worked it harder.

The *Chronicle* story had been time-stamped just an hour ago:

Sonoma County Civic Leader Fatally Assaulted by David E. Murphy

Longtime Sebastopol civic figure and philanthropist Gerald Rae Smith was found stabbed to death Monday at a remote construction site north of Petaluma, authorities said.

Smith's body was discovered shortly before 2pm by a sanitation worker on the grounds of Fenwyche Vineyards on West Sierra Avenue, according to the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department.

Smith, 59, was active in multiple business enterprises and charitable causes, including coordination of ongoing relief efforts for the October Tubbs Fire.

Since 1998 he had been the CEO of Megatron Enterprises, currently located on Morris Street in Sebastopol.

Police ask anyone with information to call (707) 555-0101.

Okay.

The article itself pretty mild, short and to the point . . . the normal police pattern of giving you enough so they don't look like they're hiding any of the basics, but meanwhile they can be hiding a ton.

The multiple business mention was always a welcome one, since that could keep the detectives busy for a while, having to make sure none of the guy's present or past business associates had a problem with him.

The other thing--the ballistics. Ray's gun, would they connect it to the Idaho dealings?

And no, for Criminy sake . . . Chris realized he had to keep his wits about him and keep everything straight . . . since *Smith*, that had been the *hammer* . . . tonight's guy, *McCall*, that one had been the weapon.

Man.

Except while you *were* on the subject . . . McCall . . . *Is* it possible they link the ballistics to the Idaho activity?

Was there another master database that could come into play?

And if so, how did that work, across state lines? Were there regulations, how information could be shared--or was it a big free-for-all?

Chris had to admit, this raised some interesting possibilities, including the suggestion there was a serial killer roaming around the western states, doing his thing.

Obviously the procedure and proctol of ballistics-sharing between interstate law enforcement--that wasn't something you were going to pick up the phone and call Chandler about . . .

Anyhow, that was enough . . . and the noise from the other room was going to be unstoppable--and you'd assume Lee and Shelly had to get up for work tomorrow but they sure didn't seem worried about it--so Chris got dressed again, splashed some water on his face, and staggered back out there.

"Chris!" Sam said. "We were just talking about you!"

Chris didn't say anything, not liking the sound of this development.

"We were," Shelly said. "You poor thing, you shouldn't have had to go through that."

He couldn't help noticing, that was two people calling him *poor thing* tonight.

"What happened?" Laurel said.

"What happened, *what?*" Chris said cautiously.

"The *sleeping* situation," Laurel said. "You looked so nice and . . . tucked in."

She had a big baggy sweatshirt on now, confirming the fact that the much more minimal garment from the other room had been for his benefit.

"It was fine," Chris said. "You guys sounded like you're having too much fun, is all."

A weak attempt at a joke, still bracing for the *we were just talking about you* part.

"Well we've been a little aggravated, to tell the truth," Lee said.

"As though we're vicariously involved *ourselves*," Miranda said.

Okay, this was insane. “Come again?” Chris said, feeling his diaphragm tighten up substantially.

“Your *issue*,” Miranda said, “with that art buyer.”

When it registered, Chris was hugely relieved of course that that’s all it was . . . though at the same time he wondered *am I losing my mind?* . . . Because hadn’t he blocked the whole works out for a couple of days?

He must have mentioned it to Miranda, casually, walking around San Francisco Monday or Tuesday in his own mental fog, still picturing the hammer sticking out of Smith . . . that was all he could think of.

Probably when she was questioning him on his travel timetable.

“Aaah,” Chris said. “*That* business. Don’t worry about it too much honestly, it’ll resolve itself.”

“Well one thing for sure,” Shelly said, “there’s no way I’d sell it to that man for 50 dollars.”

“It *would* kill you to have to do,” Sam said. “You got yourself a definite pickle there.”

“But sometimes,” Lee said, “shouldn’t you swallow your pride and take the easy route? And then your decks are cleared.”

“Why do there have to be people like that, out there?” Laurel said.

Chris said, getting into it slightly: “What do *you* think, Miranda?”

“If it were me?” she said. “I’d pay the money for the professional report.”

“That’s *it*?” Sam said.

Miranda said, “I think so . . . If I structured it the other way, it’s conceivable I could lose my temper.”

“Selling it to him for peanuts,” Sam said.

“And him getting the last *word*,” Shelly said.

“Okay admittedly, you’d be getting burned,” Lee said, “but then you’re free to enjoy life . . . Chris, what’s your inclination?”

“It could change,” he said, “but I was leaning towards doing nothing.”

“But hold on a second,” Sam said, “that’s not one of the options, is it? Do nothing?”

“I guess not,” Chris said.



Chapter Six

The problem this morning, Thursday, was you had to go through with it, the house hunting, and at least pretend you were interested.

Chris told Miranda and Sam and Laurel at breakfast that he had a few leads and he was going to run around a little bit and take some notes . . . and telling Miranda, if it sounded good to her, that he was hoping they'd be on the road back to the Bay Area by 3.

That would at least convey the effect that you'd put in an honest day. Following up on what you claimed brought you to Chico.

But the layers of complication jumped on quick.

Shelly had a friend, Miranda was saying, who was a top broker in the area, and she would *love* to show him properties today, something that Shelly had already arranged, and they were all going to meet up at *Burgers and Brew* and take it from there.

"*Burgers and Brew*, that's downtown and all?" Chris said.

"Smack dab in the middle," Laurel said. "Is it strictly rental property you're exploring Chris? . . . Or were you thinking of maybe moving here?"

"Not sure . . . I mean at this point."

"I see," Laurel said. "So you're open minded. If you'd like my two cents, Chico is a wonderful place to settle."

"And you know how it is these days," Sam said, "one can earn a living from almost anywhere."

"Except that's why he just moved to southern California," Miranda said, "right Chris?"

"In theory, I guess," Chris said.

"The beaches, though, the weather, the lifestyle," Sam said, "do you find that works against you? Productivity-wise?"

"For me it would have the opposite effect," Miranda said. "I'd be inspired, and could accomplish *more*."

"That true with you too Chris?" Laurel said. "And we never asked you: Do you live alone, or what?"

"I got a guy with me," Chris said. "Kind of a two bachelors deal." Thinking about Ken, and missing the kid a little.

What was bothering Chris a lot more than whether he was inspired in southern California, was having to make a public appearance downtown to meet Shelly's real estate person.

What was the point of *that*? Didn't you just meet *at* the properties and start right in?

You weren't going to wriggle out of it, they were all dialed in, everyone meeting at 11 for a quick bite and an overview, and then the afternoon checking out houses.

One thing Chris had in his overnight bag, he remembered, was a Boston Red Sox baseball cap. His nephew Bert brought it to him when he and Chris's sister Bonnie came out to visit in July.

Chris didn't care for the Red Sox or any Boston teams, but you didn't tell Bert that, he gave the kid a big hug, and now the cap was hopefully a good luck charm.

Shelly showed up and they piled into Sam's car and Chris did his best with the hat, pulling the brim down without looking ridiculous, and he thought about adding sunglasses, except it wasn't sunny yet today and that might single you out as being some doofus in witness protection, and you didn't need people wondering.

The burgers weren't bad, he had to admit, and they had about 25 microbrews on tap that he'd never heard of, which reminded him of that place near the railroad yard in Pocatello. Shelly's broker friend Ruthanne was loud and gregarious and she had some stories of growing up in Milwaukee, which Chris would have been happy to hear more of, but after twenty minutes it was like a switch went off and the woman was all business and the rest of the meal became an interview on his real estate wants, needs and goals.

The best properties, Ruthanne insisted, were your more modern single-family homes, 1980's variety--not so new to be priced through the roof, but new enough that you wouldn't have major maintenance headaches.

Chris did learn something, that in a college town with a hungry student population, the rents in the brand new *snazzy* places weren't much higher than in the 30-year-old ones, which Ruthanne said would bring you roughly 600 per bedroom. So \$1800 for a 3-bedroom, \$2400 for a 4, and so forth. They key was did those numbers work.

"So give it to me bottom line," Chris said, thinking he should fake enthusiasm, but also keep his voice down in case someone heard him in that hut with McCall, though that was getting paranoid.

"Well, you take your listing on Hampshire Drive, for example," Ruthanne said, showing him her iPad. "\$369. Now if you put down 25 percent . . ."

And she droned on about PITI and vacancy rates and appreciation and ROI. She said ROI a bunch of times before Chris assumed that must mean *return on investment*, but he didn't dare side-track her with questions, he simply wanted to enjoy his second pint of local Deschutes Black Butte Porter--pretty dang tasty actually, going down easier by the minute--and then do his duty and look at the houses Ruthanne picked out and nod his head and thank her . . . And then get the *hell* out of here.

Of course there was a curve ball, Shelly suggested they walk, claiming the weather was unseasonably warm for November 2nd, and Sam and Miranda and Ruthanne seconding the idea, since the earmarked houses were in adjacent neighborhoods, within striking distance of downtown.

Laurel wasn't as enthusiastic and said wouldn't that slow down the process, but Sam said, "Babe, it'll be good for you," and Miranda said, "Laurie, we'll get into it."

Calling her *Laurie* when you've been making eyes--at the minimum--at her husband . . .

Ruthanne shuttled them through house number one, a no-frills tract with freshly-shampooed 10-year-old carpeting and the smell of someone's cologne in there.

Ruthanne pointed out that the master bedroom had extra potential, that you could get your tenants to double up, and boom, more rental income.

They were in the garage, Ruthanne addressing the cabinet potential, that you could add *more* of them, and Chris was starting to feel nauseous.

Sam announced he was going to excuse himself but he'd catch up with them at one of the next houses, and Miranda said, you know what, I'm going to do likewise, and that she'd circle back shortly.

And just like that, both gone, out of the garage and out the front door.

Which left Shelly, Ruthanne and Laurel standing there, plus Chris.

"They're old friends," Shelly explained to Ruthanne, though she herself didn't look too happy about the development.

"What do you folks think of that expression?" Laurel said.

"Beg your pardon?" Ruthanne said.

"She means *circle back*, I think," Chris said, not sure if that was it, but he couldn't help cringing when Miranda said it.

"You've got it," Laurel said. She was smiling, and once again Chris felt a weird bond with the woman.

Ruthanne said, "Well . . . everyone's slightly on edge, I suspect."

"I didn't see that, honestly," Shelly said. "It struck me they were perhaps bored, since it is Chris who's the investor."

"On edge," Laurel said. "You're referring to the shooting, I take it."

"Yes," Ruthanne said, "Now we have the *attempted*. It's not what we're used to, our community, not what we're about I'm afraid."

Chris felt himself start to sweat. *What?*

McCall . . . she's saying, he *survived* now?

Fortunately Shelly interjected and Chris realized he was being delusional, not paying attention to reason, since they'd all seen on the late news last night that the guy expired.

Shelly said, "I was a bit alarmed by that as well this morning. Hold-ups now too."

"A hold-up," Laurel said. "Maybe . . . Hon' I'll be honest, you do tend to get melodramatic."

"Please don't call me *hon'* Laurel, you know I hate that."

“How about this then,” Laurel said. “Please don’t think about fucking my husband . . . How’s that?”

Shelly’s face contorted and she moved in a step. “You witch. How dare you.”

“Ladies!” Ruthanne said. “Please!”

“I don’t have a smoking gun, and I don’t care to look for one,” Laurel said. “But frankly *hon’*, you don’t disguise it very well.”

Shelly dropped her purse and charged at Laurel, wide-eyed, her fingers splayed out in front of her like claws, and Chris woke up enough from this bizarre dream he was watching play out to get between them in time.

They both stormed out. First Shelly in a huff, a theatrical look over her shoulder at Laurel as she left the garage. Then Laurel departing, telling Chris she was sorry, but this had been building up and needed to be aired, and she was frankly *damn* glad she did.

Ruthanne was staring down at the piece of real estate paper she had clipped to a metal binder, obviously uncomfortable.

Chris said, “You didn’t sign up for *this*. Right?”

“Not specifically, no,” she said.

“But you know what it got me thinking? Totally out of left field.”

“What?”

“Did you ever watch wrestling as a kid? *All-star* type wrestling I mean, not the Olympic version.”

“Oh, absolutely, we love it. We still watch it.”

“It’s still on?”

“You bet. It’s evolved--which my husband enjoys pointing out--not quite the same animal as 20 years ago. Which is good and bad. But yeah, we’re *big* fans.”

“Jeez, I didn’t realize . . . Well, maybe this part has evolved too . . . but remember how the good guy and bad guy, they almost come to blows during the interview, and the guy with the mic is standing there all flustered, and he announces if you want to see more--watch them *really* get it on--then buy your tickets for Saturday night.”

“I know where you’re going,” Ruthanne said. “After all that, the two wrestlers who hate each other so much go back into the same dressing room.”

“Exactly,” Chris said. “I’m impressed you picked that up. Most people, it never occurs to.”

She shrugged her shoulders, but you could see it made her feel good. “Well, shall we?” she said. Meaning continue on to another house . . . and what could you do?

By the third one, 4 more to go apparently, Ruthanne had names for them, which she told Chris would help keep them straight. The first was ‘Vista Point’, the second was ‘Gardner’s Paradise’ and the third, that they were in the kitchen of now, was ‘Prairie Companion’.

They were all three tract houses slapped up by the same developer 30 years ago, and as far as Chris could tell, none of them had any distinguishing characteristics whatsoever.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, not to mention you’re creative,” Chris said. “But I’m going to stop you in a minute.” He thought for a second, what kind of cash did he have him on him, and decided he was good.

“Uh-oh,” Ruthanne said.

“The first thing, I tend to ramble, but I wouldn’t mind a woman who *gets* me. That hasn’t worked out great, but, out of left field--if your marriage ever goes south, please let me know.”

Ruthanne’s mouth froze half-open, and Chris said, “I’m *joking* . . . But here’s what I’m thinking.” Pulling out his money clip and peeling off six 50’s and extending them to Ruthanne. “For your time and trouble.”

“What on earth . . . ?” she said.

“What it is,” he said, “I’m thinking the stars may not be aligned right. This time up. I’m going to suspend the looking. But what you’ve given me, it’s a great overview, something I can build on for sure.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t take your money. It’s all in a day’s work, and I do understand what you said, there’s been quite an excess of drama.”

Ruthanne had a small zippered bag with her, sitting on the kitchen counter, her company’s name on it, and she used it for keys. Chris casually zipped it open and stuck the 300 bucks inside.

Ruthanne didn’t say anything, and Chris said, “So . . . jumping around, what *attempted* business were you talking about earlier, I must have missed it.”

“Only that someone got stuck up last night, on the campus, near the rose garden. In conjunction with the massacre by the stadium, everyone’s kind of high strung.”

Jeez, *massacre* . . . That was laying it on a little strong.

Chris said, “I’m not a big news person. I guess I missed that one.”

“Overshadowed obviously. My husband says there may be a connection.”

“So your husband’s a wrestling fan, *and* an armchair detective both.”

“I did notice something a moment ago,” she said, “you keep your money in your front pocket. My husband does that too.”

Chris said, “Well that, that was on account of living back east. Northern New Jersey . . . They get you conditioned to two things. The front pocket for the wallet, and the line of defense in the vehicle.”

“You *carried*, you mean?”

“No, no. But you needed something, they warned you, in case. A lot of times the traffic on the thruways got so bad you couldn’t take it and you’d get off at the next exit no matter what, and be on the streets for a while . . . Sometimes that put you in sketchy neighborhood.”

“Unh-huh?” she said, waiting for him to finish.

“So some guy gave me a metal bar, which I stuck under the seat. Thank God I never needed it, but honestly? It did provide you some mental security.” He almost said baseball bat, which was the truth, but why do that.

Ruthanne said, “What was it like, living on the east coast?”

He could have bought her a cup of coffee and given her a long, complex answer, which was right up his alley, but not now.

He said, "Interesting your husband goes with the front pocket too. Anything ever happen to *him*, where he made that adjustment?"

"He's a cop," she said.

Ayyyy-yah.

"Oh," Chris said.

"What? You seem surprised."

"Not really actually . . . it kind of . . . adds up. The theory on the . . . connection . . . between the two events . . . Is he basing that on inside information, do you think? Or just making an educated guess, like we laymen do?"

Ruthanne said, "That I don't know, but between you and me? They're not very efficient."

"You lost me there. *Who* aren't?"

"Our PD. My husband complains about it all the time, they can't even stop the low-lives who are stealing bicycles by the dozen, like candy. He blames himself too, of course . . . But, everything I'm hearing, I feel like there's breaks in the chain of command, priorities out of whack."

Someone had mentioned, when they were driving downtown today, that the bike thefts *are* out of control, and no one seems to care.

Chris said, "You mean the upper brass, they're happy letting the little stuff go, so they can focus on the bigger ones?"

Ruthanne nodded. "Well, they got two of 'em now. What they wanted, I suppose. Let's see what they come up with."

"Not sure if I heard you mention though . . . they *did* catch the guy?"

"Which one?"

"Well, hopefully just the *one* guy, right?"

"My understanding is there's no person of interest yet."

Chris would have loved to fire off a final question or two, but he looked at his watch and figured that better be enough, before he wears out his welcome and she goes home and mentions to the cop husband, while they're watching a wrestling re-run, that she had an amusing client today who was into hearing all about current local police work.

"Can I call you an Uber?" he said, since unfortunately they parked downtown and walked.

"Thank you, actually I just texted my husband. He's on his way. Can we give *you* a lift?"

Chris said that was very generous, but being on foot was agreeing with him today, and he'd soon enough hook back up with Miranda or Sam or someone, and once again it was great meeting her and he'd be back in touch for sure when he narrowed down his real estate priorities.

And without looking like anything was wrong, but definitely not screwing around either, he made a left turn off the front lawn of the 'Prairie Companion' and then another left at the corner, no idea where he was going, except somewhere else.



Chapter Seven

Later that afternoon, driving back to the city, an hour into it, Miranda insisted Chris look off to the side.

“See those?” she said.

“What,” he said, “the hay bales? Or you mean those hills in the distance?”

“The hills . . . did you know that’s the smallest mountain range in the world?”

“Get out of here.”

“I’m serious. The *Sutter Buttes*. Pretty amazing to think, they’re right in our own backyard.”

“Hold on, *those* things? They’re like little foothills.”

“You can think that,” she said, “but they top out at just over 2000 feet. That qualifies them to be mountains.”

“Jeez. You took a field trip there or something? Back in the day?”

“Nope. I was just curious, so one time I decided to look it up.”

Chris gave this a moment. “*One time*, being one of your trips up to see Sam and Laurel, then?”

“Exactly,” she said. “Something else I’m thinking as well, I can visit you in Manhattan Beach.”

“Dang,” Chris said, “you got ex-boyfriends all over the place, it sounds like . . . Down there too?”

Miranda said, “I’m not crazy about your tone, frankly.”

“Sorry about that, I couldn’t resist . . . But the Sam and *Laurel* visitations you mention-- she part of the equation too?”

“Of course . . . where are you *going* with this, Chris?”

“I have no idea, would be the correct answer . . . since trying to figure it out isn’t worth it.”

Either this lady *was* slightly off her rocker, or it was his fault for jumping to conclusions .

..

One thing for sure, once he got her dropped off in a couple hours that was going to be it.

And then, like clockwork . . . she reaches over and starts playing with the back of his neck.

“That was nice,” she said. “And you’re a good host. Thank you for putting up with me.”

What could you say?

They drove a few minutes in silence, the *smallest mountain range in the world* almost disappearing but not quite.

Miranda said, “Laurel says you’re cute, by the way. Shelly too.”

“Well I appreciate you informing me of that,” he said. “A couple of happily married women, not my style, but good for the ego I guess.”

“I’m not sure about Shelly,” she said, “but I feel like Laurel is going through a mid-life crisis.”

“Is that right. I wonder what her issues might be.”

Miranda took her hand off his neck.

Chris was starting to feel bad, obnoxious, laying it on too thick. The woman meant well. Probably.

He said, “Anyhow . . . Switching subjects, didn’t know they had so much violence going on up there.”

“I know. In fact I believe some years ago, *Good Morning America* featured Chico of all places, as representing a typical all-American town, where people could confidently leave their door unlocked.”

“Small-town living at its best,” Chris said. “The TV gig though, I know what you’re talking about, and that was Petaluma.”

“I think you’re wrong.”

“Same difference . . . Did you know that real estate gal from today, Ruthanne, her husband’s a cop? He thinks the two assaults are connected.”

“Yes, *Donnie*, I did know that, he’s a nice man.”

“Hmm . . . good-looking guy and all, would you say?” Chris knew he was being a jerk but couldn’t resist sticking the needle in one more time.

“You know what?” Miranda said. “Why don’t we pull over.”

This is what happens when you went too far.

Now you’re going to get the big lecture, with the index finger wagging in your face for emphasis.

It *might* even be, she’s going to get out and call someone to pick her up, which would be awful embarrassing.

Jeez, okay fine, the lady wasn’t what you expected, she has a mind of her own . . . but you couldn’t deal with that long enough to at least get her home and then forget about it?

Miranda said, “Let’s do it. I want to.”

Chris misunderstood her for a second, assuming the *let’s do it* meant *let’s get your ass in gear and get off the freeway and let me out of this car, I’m not kidding*.

But when he glanced over there she looked . . . different. She was composed, but working her lips around, and he was leaning toward taking the *let's do it* more literally.

Sheez.

Chris had a crazy thought that maybe it was something about the passenger seat in the Camry?

Mechanics kept telling him the shocks were shot but he was too cheap to spend the money . . . but maybe that meant an extra vibration, depending on what road surface you were dealing with?

A woman confided to him one time back in New Jersey, that going across the Brooklyn Bridge in *any* car did things for her . . . which Chris found out later, since he was curious to check it out, that the bridge roadway was this old-fashioned inter-woven steel instead of the traditional asphalt, and that might have been it.

No matter, there'd been Emma, when he picked her up from the airport--and that seemed so far back but *dang*, it wasn't even a week ago--but she'd arrived with an urgency, or at least developed one after settling into the passenger seat in question . . .

This though, was a whole different ball game, you were out in the country for Gosh sakes . . . if that was indeed what Miranda might be referencing . . .

You had an exit coming up, but it was one of those one-gas-station jobs, not the greatest, though Chris figured he better take it in case she really *was* desperate to get out of the car, so he got in the right lane, but before he needed to put the blinker on Miranda said, "Maybe wait a little longer. I saw a *Rest Area 40 Miles* sign, and that was a half hour ago."

Chris shrugged his shoulders and kept going.

The options were kind of screwy. Either she was angry, which seemed a bit less likely now, or she really *did* want him to help her unwind.

That presented its own set of problems, not just where would that occur, and more importantly would you be able to *make* it occur?

Meaning him. His mixed emotions, based on her curious behavior at Chico--those could play a part for sure--and if you managed to get past those you had the limitations of the vehicle and the darn stick shift.

The rest stop was quiet, zippo activity, except for one guy sleeping in his big rig way in the back, the sightline blocked by the outbuildings.

Miranda took off her seatbelt and slid onto his lap, so at least that part was clarified.

Pretty ironic, Chris was thinking, you're in a rest stop . . . but then a car pulled up and people got out, and before that one could leave, another one.

Miranda moved back into her seat and said, "Hurry, please," and Chris assumed that meant *figure something the hell out*, and he exited the rest area and got on the service road that paralleled the freeway.

There were these flooded farm fields all over the place, which Chris thought were from rain, except there had barely been any of that in weeks, and he figured out from a sign on a huge holding tank that they must be rice paddies.

He said, "I didn't know we had any of those around here, honestly. Did you?"

Miranda didn't answer and another mile down the road you could see a stand of trees at the edge of one of the paddies, and that looked promising as anywhere, and hopefully no laborers would come out of nowhere and surprise you in the time you needed, and there was about an hour of daylight left and Chris headed over there.

It was a dirt road you had to turn off on, unfortunately, likely set up for tractors and work trucks and the last 50 yards were bad and he worried about his transmission, but they made it in there, the stand of trees, and it worked out okay.

And upon further review, as they straightened things up and he started the car again, Chris was thinking *okay* might be an understatement.

This gal--whoever she was--had put on some moves he didn't anticipate . . . or for that matter wasn't aware existed.

Along the way she'd called out a couple times, "I've been so stressed, you don't know."

Which of course triggered him wanting to answer back, "Lady, you don't *know* stress," but he'd kept his mouth shut and gone about his business.

In the merge lane entering back onto Highway 5 Miranda said to no one in particular, "*Fuck* yes", which Chris found peculiar and only bolstered his conclusion that this gal was a piece of work . . . but really, what option did you have, except roll with it.

She was dozing and Chris got real hungry and wondered could he hold out all the way to the city until he dropped her, and he decided no, that'd be risking it, so when one of your more major exits came up he stopped and parked at Big Bear Diner.

He made a little noise but Miranda still didn't wake up so he had to tap her a couple times.

"You're coming around slow," he said. "I never asked you how, and where, you slept last night."

"We kind of didn't," she said.

No need to follow up on that, but he asked her if she was hungry, and she saw where they were and said she didn't eat meat but she could sure go for cup of coffee. The place was quiet and they set them up with a nice cozy booth, and Chris remembered Miranda wolfing down a good-sized burger no problem earlier today, even though *now* she wasn't a meat-eater.

Chris could think clearer once he'd righted the ship with something in his stomach, and he said, "What we were talking about earlier . . . so you weren't scared or anything, being in Chico? You feel like they were one-shot deals?"

He was thinking about her earlier issue, the lingering effect from getting held-up by her car that one time, and apparently still requiring therapy to deal with the city at night.

She said, "Yes, one would hope, but what do *you* think?"

"Well, yeah . . . no point going widespread panic mode, would be my guess."

"I *meant* that, when I said I can visit you in Manhattan Beach," she said.

"Jeez."

"What . . . *Jeez* because you're not sure, or because I changed the subject?"

“No, none of that,” Chris lied. “You jogged my thoughts, is all, I’m looking forward to getting back down there.”

“It sounds nice, kind of idyllic. Have you heard from that Emma person?”

Chris said, “You know something? You’re all over the place . . . No.”

“Will you be looking her up again when you get back home?”

It wasn’t at the top of his priority list, but he supposed there was a chance, curiosity liable to get the better of him, so he answered honestly, “It’s possible.”

“Okay, backpeddling?” Miranda said. “It is somewhat intriguing--I mean morbidly, from a totally armchair perspective--but that we could we have a serial killer in our midst.”

“What are you *talking* about?” Chris said.

“Well it was something they referenced on the morning news. Evidently two others might fit the mold.”

Holy Toledo.

This got Chris’s mind racing and jolted his heartbeat as well. The two in *Idaho*, she meant? They’d pinned them all together this fast? On Ray’s same weapon? . . . *Whoa . . .*

What he was wondering about before then, whether an interstate ballistics database existed and how user-friendly it was . . . Well there’s your answer, isn’t it . . . The thing now, was this a *good* or bad development, bringing the other two back on the radar?

Chris said, “Oh. So *three* now?”

“Yes, but who knows. It was simply the reporter posing a question, to a police spokesman.”

“In Chico, you mean?”

“No Sacramento.”

“Hunh . . . I’m not quite following you then.”

“What the reporter was asking about, they have two unsolved murders, one in Redding a month ago, and one in Sacramento not long after--and did the Chico campus one fit the pattern?”

Chris was digesting this new twist. “Wait a second--they’re saying there’s already a pattern to the first two?”

“Not officially it sounds like, no.”

“So the reporter’s speculating . . . Or maybe they actually did some investigative digging, and they got someone speaking off the record?”

“That could be.”

“Either way, I get your point, there’s a possibility the third one’s linked then . . . Hard to figure why a serial killer would pick some poor guy working on campus, but I guess he had his reasons.”

He could throw in the *working on campus part*, because there’d been a news update today telling you that, though not naming McCall yet.

But this was becoming quite a rollercoaster, first assuming the *other two* meant his Idaho efforts, but then a different monkey wrench thrown.

Hard to see McCall tied to either of those two local situations of course, but it would at least keep them busy clearing it. And maybe after that, the Idaho stuff *would* connect the dots, who knows.

Miranda asked for some more coffee and excused herself and went to the ladies' room, and Chris continued pondering the possibilities.

Well . . . one way to find out, the ballistics stuff . . . meaning *who* knew *what*, and did Pocatello really interact with Chico on this . . . **would be to shoot someone else.**

The logical choice would be the Mike Brown dickhead, McCall's partner during the brave act of bashing in the faces of Mr. and Mrs. Stemphill at that rest stop in Oregon.

He may or may not be in Reno, as McCall indicated, but you had a lead.

You gun *him* down . . . then that's *four* now with the Czechpoint, possibly across three states, and you've provided a real test to the system.

That wouldn't be the worst thing.

Yes, they might dig in deeper and scrutinize Thad and the redneck pickup truck guy more closely, but the upside is they really *could* pin it all on some random serial lunatic.

If that happened, you might even be able to continue your efforts, same gun, same essential modus operandi--depending.

Kind of funny to think, that when he was kicking it around with Chandler--*how a bad guy would get away with something these days*--and Chandler said if the guy takes care of it and lays low out of state they lose focus on him. And that made some sense.

But neither of them considered a pretty obvious one, which is establish that you're a serial killer, and then you have room for add-ons, under the same umbrella.

Getting back to Mike Brown . . . Chris realized unfortunately that the mutant probably had a pass now, that it wasn't going to work.

If you wasted *him*, good chance the connection to McCall and the Stemphill incident from 13 years ago would surface.

Then you'd have Leslie and Kim tied into it and questioned. You couldn't put them through that.

So forget Mike Brown, cross him off, even though it killed Chris to have to.

It would be interesting if you could randomly shoot one of the tough guys who were having so much fun sticking guns in the faces of innocent students in Berkeley and robbing them--make *that* look like a serial job--but that was maybe getting way too far fetched.

Miranda came back, doctored up her second cup of coffee with cream and sugar, took a sip and told Chris this was a good idea to stop at the Big Bear Diner, that he was a first rate navigator, and she herself rarely makes road stops, and it's refreshing to take your time and smell the roses.

Then she dropped a curveball on him that might outrank anything these last few weeks.

"Speaking of serial killers," she said, "did Gloria tell you her neighbor saw The Zodiac?"

Chris got caught in between swallows.

These days if someone said they saw *The Zodiac* you assumed they meant the movie.

This though, the context was wrong, since why would anyone mention their neighbor seeing a movie?

But the kicker was that one of the Zodiac murders took place in Gloria's neighborhood, all those years ago . . . and *what the heck?*

"No," Chris said. "I haven't heard that one."

"I'm sure it's nothing. A million people could say they saw him, right?"

"Thousands of leads, that's for sure . . . Probably more than a few detectives by now, who've passed away, the thing eating at 'em to the end."

"I know it started in the East Bay."

"Around Vallejo, yeah. My parents were in the middle of it. Even years later, when it got brought up, them and their friends too, you could tell it had an effect on 'em."

"Mine too. My dad's big moment, I think was President Kennedy being assassinated in 1963? He remembers exactly where he was, all the details . . . the Zodiac killer was right up there with that."

Chris said, "I'm going to redirect you. Who's the neighbor?"

"I'm not sure. Gloria's referenced it a few times, but only after a couple of drinks. She jokes about it, essentially."

"Well good then," Chris said. "Hey would you mind driving for a while, like an hour? We can switch it again at Fairfield."

"*What,*" she said. "You're preoccupied about something."

"Nah . . . Just thinking ahead, laying out next week and all."

When they were back in the car, her behind the wheel, Miranda said, "The itinerary you've working out . . . Is surfing part of it too?"

"I haven't been in the water yet. But surfing, that's dubious, likely not going to happen at this point."

"You feel you're not flexible enough?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact. The standing up part. I watch people give lessons, they keep the student on dry land, make them stand up correctly a hundred times before they let them near the water. It's tough."

"Well personally . . . I think you're underestimating your flexibility."

Hard to know what to make of that, so you might as well accept the compliment at face value and move on.

Although, and this was a scary thought . . . *God forbid* if she was building up to another announcement that they needed to stop.

Chris glanced over there and she was poker-faced in the driver's seat. Hopefully his mind was running away on him.

And when they'd get to her place, he'd maintain the same resolve he decided on earlier--help her with her suitcase and move on. *Wouldn't he?*

His phone buzzed, and he always ignored it in the car, but he was a passenger right now which was rare, so he checked it.

This was a blast from the past, for sure. *Allison*, it said.

That whole thing, with her and Monica, had fizzled out last spring. He *had* struck up that conversation with her, all those months ago in Mill Valley.

He'd been in the process of re-working his list, the first revision:

1 Ray

2 ✓

3 'Chip'

4 Birgitte problem

5 Ike's guy

6 Simmons

7 Eric Mossman's

Things would change of course with Ray, and the Stemphills' people being added, that came later.

Separately . . . maybe Shep, in Weatherby's, *was* right . . . perhaps you *had* done enough. But how would you know what *constituted* enough?

Anyhow . . . Chris ignored Allison's call, and they were on 505 now, the scenery still pretty empty, though in 20 minutes they'd connect up with 80 and you'd have wall-to-wall cement all the way to the Bay Bridge.

Miranda was doing a good job driving and Chris thought why rock the boat, let her finish it off unless she says something, and his dang phone buzzed again.

Admittedly Allison didn't have a lot of patience and she'd bug people until she got what she wanted and it often was insignificant . . . but after not hearing from either of them for a while, could this be bad news?

So against his better instincts Chris picked up.

"Well hiya," Allison said. "Chris we miss you. Where've you been?"

He said, "Uh . . . I feel like you're building up to something here. Better give me the punch line."

"You're silly . . . hang on, here comes Monica."

"Hey stranger," Monica said.

"Oh boy," Chris said.

Miranda looked over and raised an eyebrow, and Chris waved it off.

Allison was back on. "And we're hurt," she said. "You didn't tell us you moved."

Chris didn't see that as a requirement, but he said, "That's my fault then . . . But what's happening otherwise? Anything? Henry still around?"

Henry was their stable mate over there in the San Pablo Avenue flatlands. Who knows what the real story was, the three of them, but Chris had met Henry and enjoyed him. A black guy who had a proper British thing going.

“Yes, he’s fine,” she said. “Listen Chris, the reason we’re calling, Floyd wants to get together with you.”

Chris took his time with this one. “Oh yeah?”

“Okay now come on, you need to hear us out. He feels bad.”

Chris was lighting on another image, one that he tried to block out, but couldn’t help it.

Through that crack in the door in Mesa, Allison riding Floyd loud and clear.

Now he said to her, “Fine. If he feels so bad, he can tell me himself.”

Monica came back on. “Chris I heard part of that. *You* know Floyd . . . Right or wrong, that’s not his way . . . Please give him a chance. He’s been pretty torn up. He’s your brother.”

Chris didn’t want to ask, but he felt it coming regardless, an inevitable piece of the puzzle, so he said, “Kim pretty torn up too?”

“We wouldn’t know,” Allison said, taking over again. “Underhanded little *bitch* . . . but you knew that already.”

That wasn’t an answer, and the question was pretty simple . . . were they still an item?

Which Chris suspected they were *not*, if Floyd wanted to re-unify so bad.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll keep that in mind next time I’m passing through the southwest.”

Allison said, “We were thinking more, we’d come out for a visit. The three of us.”

“Oh Jesus, you’re kidding me . . . *Out?*”

“Well over and down, right? Isn’t that the geography to Los Angeles?”

Chris was tempted to ask if Floyd was around right now, and what they might be doing tonight.

This way you’d get it out of the way in the Bay Area, and extinguish the threat of them bothering you in MB.

But that would be impolite to suggest, right in front of Miranda . . . plus Allison added a moment later that Floyd was currently home in Phoenix, so forget that anyway.

“How about this then,” Chris said, “you can pass a message on to my brother, *no hard feelings* . . . Then you don’t have to go *anywhere*.”

“That’s very nice of you, and we will. But we want to take a road trip with Floyd and see you too. Beaches are fun.”

Probably it would never pan out, so why waste time talking them out of it, and Chris said thanks for calling.

“We miss you,” Allison said.

“You already said that.”

“So tell *me*.”

“Ah man . . . I miss you too.”

“Thank you so much Chris. I’m putting Monica on again.”

Chris hung up at that point.

Miranda waited a little while and said, “That was some conversation. Is that your girlfriend or something?”

“No, of *course* not,” he said.

Another few minutes passed, and she said, “There were several names being tossed about, plenty of sub-plots. It sounded interesting.”

“Yeah? Which part was that?”

“Now you’re becoming defensive. There’s no need for this.”

“I’m sorry . . . it’s my little brother. Basically a good guy, he means well.”

“But as you said, no hard feelings.”

“That’s right.”

“And why is Kim torn up, or *should* she be? And who’s Henry?”

“Man, you don’t miss much do you?”

Miranda smiled, but she was waiting for more.

Chris said, “Okay. Since I’ve got *multiple* people I need to get off my back apparently . . . That was a couple females calling up, fine, loosely out of the *old friends* category . . . Henry bangs both of them on a regular basis, would be your likely answer there . . . My brother Floyd landed out of state, and wants to get together more.”

“Hmm.”

“I jumped around a little, didn’t connect all the dots, but you get enough of the idea.”

“But he wants to come *out* now? And see you? Rather than you visiting him in the southwest, like you offered?”

“With the two gals, yeah. Real long shot.”

“When? It sounds interesting, can *I* come?”

Chris watched her, sitting forward in the driver’s seat, both hands on the wheel.

You didn’t need to be a hero, and try to figure everyone out.

Or *anyone*, for that matter.

“At this point,” Chris said, “hey, why not?”



Chapter Eight

“How did it go?” Gloria said, big hug, and typical always-happy-to-see-someone big smile.

Chris wasn’t sure if she was asking about the overall Chico adventure, or specifically if it went okay with Miranda, though both answers were pretty much the same.

“If I said *up and down*,” he said, “would that disappoint you?”

“Don’t be *silly*,” she said, but yes, her tone slightly deflated.

Gloria was an old-fashioned matchmaker type, who drew pleasure from seeing things work out, especially if she had a hand in them.

She’d had her fingers crossed after introducing Chris to Miranda, which was the night he’d stopped in on the way back from Smith.

Gloria’s impromptu final reunion get-together had been Sunday night, and here they were, Thursday.

“Steve get back okay?” he said.

“He did . . . and I know you liked him, I picked up on you two hitting it off . . . but I’m afraid we’ve cooled the jets.”

“Well,” Chris said, “Atlanta and all, I guess.”

“Yes, but it was more than the distance factor. We were trying to force it, and relive the old days. To make it fit.”

“Everyone playing high school student again for a weekend,” Chris said.

“Exactly. You want to improve on the old script, if you can.”

“Yeah, take another shot at it . . . If you’re lucky, it sticks, and replaces part of what *really* happened back then.”

“Unh-huh . . . So you see where I’m coming from?”

“No.”

She laughed. No agenda behind it, not taking herself too seriously, and Chris appreciated that about her.

She was also polite enough not to ask any follow up questions about Miranda, once he’d given her the *up and down* evaluation.

The good thing there, in the end, was Miranda got real tired before they made it to the city, she hit the wall *big* time, and she announced they better switch drivers, though she wasn't speaking that loud and Chris was alarmed for a minute that she might fall asleep at the wheel at 65 miles an hour, and how would you handle that?

He was able to nurse her off Highway 80 at the second Pinole exit, and they switched it up, and she reclined her seat and turned sideways and didn't move a muscle until Chris put on the parking brake in front of her place in Bernal Heights.

Even then she was sleepwalking it as he helped her in with her stuff and she said thanks, and what time is it, but it didn't seem necessary to answer, and he told her be sure and lock the door, and he waited until he heard it click and that was it.

That was how you liked your drop-off to work. Nobody getting deep or philosophical on you, everyone's emotions in check.

No big decisions, and nobody ending up mad.

Gloria made brownies, and she was pulling them out of the oven. She said, "I saw a terrible report today in the paper."

"What?"

"That chocolate might be going extinct."

The mention of something being in the news jolted Chris slightly, since he hadn't looked for any updates this evening, on either of his two topics.

And he didn't feel like it. It was easier this time around to keep it all at arm's length. That left a fuzzy layer in between you and the incidents, and if you tweaked your mind just right you could convince yourself you were *watching* something else play itself out . . . and there was a guy involved who looked like you, fine, but he was an imposter.

At least this worked some of the time . . .

Meanwhile, he said, "*What?* That's crazy."

"Global warming, is what they're pinning it on," she said. "The cacao plants. But before it's too late, genetic engineering can apparently save our Hershey bars."

"In that case," Chris said, "I better load up on these *non*-altered brownies while I can . . . God Dog, these are good."

"So . . ." she said. "Are you concluding your vacation tomorrow?"

"I thought I would, yeah. Couple guys I met down there, they had a point, the paint barely being dry and I'm back spending all this time up *here*."

"Don't listen to that," she said, "it *hasn't* been much time, and you've had a good reason to be here. It's been meaningful for you."

Chris said, "You know something, you're the queen of positive spins. Were you a cheerleader at Lowell ever? I played my one year of freshman football, and then never went to a varsity game, so I wouldn't know."

"I wasn't one. I was behind the scenes, I chaired the rally committee . . . But how come you never attended any games?"

“Because I don’t like watching people do stuff that *I* could be doing . . . when I’m *not*,” he said.

“Gosh . . . One could certainly take that as a ruthlessly self-centered outlook, couldn’t they.”

“That how you interpret it?”

“No. I find it okay, your honesty.”

“You’re something else,” he said. He got up and came around behind her and starting rubbing her shoulders.

He wasn’t putting the moves on her, he had no intention in that department, now or in the future, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

Gloria closed her eyes and said, “That really . . . does . . . nail it. I must be more wound up than I thought.”

“Not easy being a social director,” Chris said.

“Your technique,” she said, “I’m guessing you’ve had some training.”

“And you’re full of shit,” he said. “You can only lay on so much of that before even *I* see through it.”

He gave her a peck on the cheek and sat back down.

“Can I reciprocate?” she said.

“No need, stay right there . . . The main thing, at least you’re not going to sue me for sexual harassment.”

“Oh Gosh. Every day there’s someone new coming forward, isn’t there? Plenty of bad behavior in Hollywood, that’s for sure.”

“Not to mention the US Senate,” Chris said.

“There as well.”

“I used to visit someone in Petaluma,” he said. “There was a neighborhood Starbucks. One day a barista is on the customer side of the counter, adjusting those sandwiches they have, and she’s rolling her neck around like it’s stiff, and this customer walks in, some guy in his fifties.”

“Is this going to upset me?”

“Nah I don’t think so. He sneaks up on her and starts massaging her neck. She recognizes him, he must have been a regular, and she’s okay with it and goes along and thanks him.”

“What you’re getting at, the outcome could have been different, correct?”

“Most definitely. He could have gotten in trouble for sure, and Starbucks could have been gotten sued for not protecting its employees, or fostering an atmosphere where harassment can occur, or whatever other claims some lawyer wanted to make . . . Manhattan Beach too, little watering hole down there near the pier, I’m watching these dudes putting their hands all over the cocktail waitresses. Everyone cool with it. Supposedly.”

“But the barista, her boyfriend could have found out about it and entered the picture too, no?”

“You’re thinking like me,” Chris said. “There’s a lesson there . . . Which I have to remind *myself*, sometimes. Don’t antagonize people.”

Gloria waved at him like *don’t be silly*. “If anyone deserved to get punched in the nose,” she said, “it was Aaron Dreue for stealing Emma at the reunion. Your reaction that night, letting it run off, that demonstrated someone who had their head on straight.”

“Wait a second, he *stole* her?”

“Okay maybe it wasn’t that way, I’m sorry if I’m projecting.”

“Nah, that’s fine,” Chris said, playful, “you’re probably right. I’ll just have to get him at the 50-year.”

“You mean the 30-year.”

“Fraid not. Way too soon. I need to space ‘em out.”

“Well, then I have 5 years to try to turn around your approach,” she said, smiling and shaking her head.

It had been fun catching up and joking around, but Chris wanted to get into the *main* reason he was here, without of course making it look like it was the *only* reason.

He said, keeping it casual, “Something else I was curious about. Miranda said some neighbor of yours dreamed they saw The Zodiac? What was *that* all about?”

Gloria said, “That *is* true, yep. Dirk Ruud. I’ve known him for years.”

“Just like that? . . . You say it so matter-of-fact . . . I mean The Zodiac was no big deal or anything--it’s *only* the most mysterious serial killing spree in California in the last *half century*.”

“One correction though,” she said. “Dirk said he *saw* the person, he didn’t *dream* it.”

“Uh-huh. And . . . how do *you* feel about that?”

“I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t born then.”

Meaning *he* wasn’t either--and he wouldn’t be for another half dozen years, if the guy’s spree was late ‘60s, early ‘70’s.

Chris said, “I’m thinking out loud, trying to do a little simple math . . . How old would your Dirk person be now, do you think?”

“I don’t know . . . I mean he looks fine, I run into him occasionally walking the dog, he keeps a pretty good pace. I’d say mid-70’s? Certainly not older than that.”

Chris was thinking, Jeez, this is 50 years ago, we’re talking. So the guy would have been 25? And affording a house around here, even at back-then prices? And still living in the same place to this day?

And forgetting that for a second . . . how old would the Zodiac be today, if he were miraculously still around?

Chris’s impression was the guy was 35 or 40 back in the heyday.

So if you used the low end, and what, you had 49 years since 1970? . . . That would make the motherfucker 82 today. Give or take.

So . . . unlikely he’s still with us. There was a good chance *something* derailed him between then and now, and there were plenty of possibilities.

You'd think the guilt alone would kill him, but you did hear where they found another Nazi death camp supervisor in Argentina, and the guy was in his 90's and living a seemingly okay life--though he'd spent most of it looking over his shoulder.

Chris said to Gloria, "I'm not sure if the numbers make sense, but it would be interesting to talk to your neighbor. Just for kicks."

"I'm detecting an extra motive, I think," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"You have your newspaper hat on. I know you're retired, but the wheels are turning, I can tell."

Her latching on to an extra motive scared him for a second until he got it clarified, but she made a fair point, this *could* be a good piece to write up. He could probably sell it to a magazine, he still had a few connections, and you could make a few bucks.

The last thing he felt like doing, of course . . . but why not keep her thinking that.

He said, "Well yeah, I wouldn't mind . . . Can you, I don't know, walk me over there and introduce me?"

"Not a problem. I need to exercise Millie anyway." Millie was a little white, shaggy lap-dog, cute. Chris was trying to remember if he'd noticed Gloria walking her before and he couldn't, Millie had seemed to use the bushes in the backyard, but that wasn't important, and Gloria got her coat.

Gloria lived on Jackson, between Cherry and Maple, and they walked east a block and a half, a little further than Chris expected, and it took a few minutes because of Millie. Dirk's place was a couple houses in on the other side of Spruce.

The house was modest by Presidio Heights standards, though it still a nice spread, a three-story squared-off job with weathered-shingles and an old-fashioned lamp post out front, and no doubt a tremendous view on the other side, of the bridge and the bay and the whole shebang.

"When I think of neighbors," Chris said, as they approached the front door, "typically it's the guy next door or across the street."

"I hear you," Gloria said. "Most of *those* I don't know. Dirk's pace is a bit slower, and he's outside a lot."

They rang the bell and a rugged-looking red-faced guy in a torn baggy sweater opened up, and he and Gloria embraced and she said, "Dirk If you have a moment, Chris here, would like some information on The Zodiac Killer."

"Ah of course," Dirk said, "happy to oblige."

Which was pretty weird. Chris thinking it's that simple? *Sure no problem, whatever you need?*

Dirk let them in and asked what they would like to drink, and that was clearly a problem, since Dirk picked back up a large scotch on the rocks type beverage which he must have put down to answer the door, and he was clearly boozed up and stumbling around.

Chris didn't have the energy to work through this tonight and he made a quick decision, and asked Dirk what about 9 in the morning, would that be okay?

Dirk said that would be more than fine and Chris gave Gloria a head signal and started out of there, and she was a bit surprised but thanked Dirk and followed Chris.

They looped a block down to Washington Street to give Millie a full workout and Gloria said, "I understand where you were coming from. He'll be good for it though tomorrow, I'm quite certain."

Chris said, "Drunks can be like that, surprisingly punctual. I'll give it a shot."

"But you're not as optimistic there's a story there?"

"Well, yeah, the *unreliable witness* part may be working against us. We'll see."

They'd reached Washington and Cherry, just a block down from Gloria's, and it looked like any other part of the neighborhood, except this was the intersection where 50 years ago on a moonless night the Zodiac killed the cab driver.

The Zodiac ripped off part of the poor guy's bloody shirt, and then he sent a piece of it to the *Chronicle*, where Chris would go on to work as a reporter himself.

It was part of a warped correspondence the guy would have with a *couple of Chronicle* reporters, and the fucker threatened those guys.

Even when Chris got to the paper, a good 30 years later, it was still an eerie topic that would surface once in a while in the newsroom.

He'd driven through this intersection dozens of times but had never examined it until now, and there was really nothing to figure out.

He said to Gloria, "What I'm wondering, the movie--did they film the actual scene right here, or was that in a Hollywood back lot?"

"The Paul Stine event, you mean? I think so, I didn't watch, but they were in the neighborhood for a few days, the big studio trucks."

"Jeez. I almost wasn't going to bring it up, the intersection, and here you know the *names*, you're more up on it than *I* am."

"Well, I guess you've piqued my interest a bit. I'll wait to hear what you may gather from Dirk."

Chris figured he might as well throw out the main question that was holding him back from taking any of it too seriously, ever since Miranda mentioned Gloria's neighbor saw The Zodiac.

"If Dirk really saw something that night," he said, "what happened when he reported it? . . . Or *did* he?"

"My understanding is he did," Gloria said, "and they dismissed it."

This just got slightly more interesting. The cops weren't idiots and, especially in this case, they'd checked out hundreds if not thousands of tips, and over 50 years probably *tens* of thousands.

And growing up in San Francisco, Chris had a lot of respect for the SFPD, no reason not to.

But hey . . . we were all human here.

So at least commit an hour, talk to Dirk, hope he's not too hung over--or senile *period*, separate from the booze, Chris hadn't even thought of that--and get the curiosity out of your system and hop back on I-5 and hopefully get to MB in time for that evening stroll on The Strand you're starting the miss.

"I don't want any arguing," Gloria said when they'd gotten back to her place, "no one else has moved into the guest room since you were here last."

That was incredibly tempting once again, but Chris couldn't do it this time, from his end he really *had* worn out his welcome, and he thanked her for everything and went back down to Lombard Street to the motel row where he couldn't catch a break before.

This time he put on a sport coat, the one from the reunion, and combed his hair and splashed on a little cologne, and walked in with a smile and politely asked what kind of deal they might be able to work out for him, and by the fourth motel they'd all told him politely there *was* no deal, so he gave up and paid full price, though no way was it worth it because you heard the traffic all night.



Chapter Nine

Chris sensed some scrambling around inside the apartment as he stuck the key in and a moment later there was Ken, who'd popped up off the couch, smiling ear to ear, genuinely happy to see him.

It looked like Ken wanted to give him a hug, but Chris wasn't going to let that happen this time and he kept moving and threw his stuff down and went back and washed up.

Again, he didn't want to get into *Kumbaya* mode with the kid, but it *was* nice to get greeted like that. It was a little like coming home to a faithful dog, the way they're unconditionally there for you . . . not to liken Ken to a *dog* obviously, but he had some of those qualities.

"Well my friend," Chris said, "you look maybe better than when I left. Or at least you don't look worse, so give me the low-down, what's been cookin' the last nine days?"

"First of all Boss, *you* look good. You look rested. I had a *feeling* it would be good for you to attend your thing. I didn't like that you were fighting it so hard."

"Okay now two things, right off the bat . . . Where'd the *Boss* come from? And that'd be off the charts *impossible* that I could come back rested, you have to take my word for it."

"So . . . you don't want me referring to you that way?"

Here again, the puppy-dog effect, the kid just wanting to do the right thing and not offend anyone.

"No go ahead, don't worry about what I just said," Chris said. "What about the job? Anything else? Chandler? . . . I'll take a chance and ask about Emma too . . . and even Stacey, why not?"

"Well one thing, before I answer any of that, Sharif came by."

"Oh no."

"That's what I thought too. I was nervous answering the door, but I did."

"So what'd he want? Hopefully you're not telling me something went haywire with the middle-of-the-night weightlifter arrangement."

"*Damon*, you mean? No, that's held fine, like we worked it out. In fact, a little good news actually, I helped him find an apartment, like I told him I'd try to do. I ended up getting a finder's fee from the broker."

“Jeez . . . how’d you pull *that* off?”

“Craigslist. It wasn’t complicated. I found something over in Torrance that looked like a good fit, and when the deal was done the lady gave me \$350.”

“See now . . . something like that, it wouldn’t happen to me in a million years. Son of a gun.”

“The other things you’re asking about, nothing *too* much to report.”

“Back up a second first. What *did* Sharif want, then?”

“Oh yeah . . . He didn’t spell it out. He just said he needed to ask you something, and when I told him you were out of town he wasn’t real thrilled . . . but this was only a couple days ago and I said you should be back by the weekend and he seemed better with that, and he wished me a good day.”

“Okay well, one thing then, at least you’re convinced--right?--that he doesn’t have it in for you anymore.”

“I was relieved there, I won’t lie . . . That’s another thing, do *you* need me to vacate at this point? Believe me, I understand completely.”

“What I need you to do,” Chris said, pouring himself a shot of tequila, which was a bit out of character but the drive had been pretty dang rough, “is shut up about that.”

“Oh,” Ken said. “Okay then.”

But the Sharif deal, that was the problem with doing someone a favor, that now you might be on the hook for more--not that the person intended it that way, but you were the logical place to turn, since you’d come through once.

Obviously it wasn’t *him* doing the guy the previous favor, it was Ken, but Sharif didn’t know that.

“Anyhow,” Ken said, “the job’s okay, it’s still going. Thanks for helping me get it.”

“Hmm . . . so Emma’s still, kind of your overseer and all?”

“She is. And she keeps putting in a good word for me. They signed me up this week, not as an employee but they call it an independent contractor, they let me know when there’s work.”

“That’s great then. You decide if you want it, you mean? A particular week?”

“Yeah . . . Something I better get out of the way, not looking forward to telling you, but Emma came over a couple of times.”

“Oh . . . but nah, you don’t have to apologize. I told you when I left, or at least I *thought* it, that this could easily happen . . . But what you’re telling me . . . you got *together* with her then--you’re saying?”

“No, no Boss--you’re getting carried away. The first time, the day after you left, she asked if I wanted to go dancing. Salsa dancing, over in Westwood, she was going with a girlfriend and did I want to join them.”

“And you avoided that?”

“Absolutely. The second time was a little more awkward, last Sunday night, I hear this tap on the window and she says you asked her to look in on me, make sure I was holding up okay.”

Wow . . . Sunday would have been when she got back from disappearing at the reunion the night before.

And of course, not surprising she’d drag *him* into it, that he *sent* her.

Why not?

Chris said, “So how’d you handle *that* overture, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I tried to handle it through the glass, that it was all good and I’d see her at the library in the morning, but that didn’t work, so I had to let her in.”

“Unh.”

“Gadalmighty, I *hate* having to tell you this stuff . . . You sure you need the details after that? It’s nothing bad or anything.”

“Oh yeah? Then what’s the problem?”

“Okay, she comes in . . . makes herself comfortable. Fixes herself a *drink*, I forgot that, another big blended concoction, plus she microwaves some of those little finger appetizers you have in the freezer.”

“Yeah well, I like to have that stuff on hand,” Chris said.

“Then she says, she had a great time with you up north. And that you did too . . . *Did* you? I mean overall? You haven’t really gotten into that.”

“Stick to the subject matter, if you *would* please.”

“Well then it was like . . . seeing as how you were staying up there a little longer, did I need any help with anything, or any company?”

“Uh-huh . . . She elaborate on that?”

“Only that she had to fly back here to go to work on Monday, and you, being kind of retired and all, you could take advantage of a little R&R back in your old stomping ground.”

“She used that expression? R&R?”

“Yeah, because I didn’t know what it meant and I had to ask . . . Old military slang, she said, for *rest and recuperation*.”

Chris said, “When I asked if she elaborated, I was thinking more the *do you need company* question.”

“Oh yeah,” Ken said, and he let out a deep exhale. “Basically . . . at that point . . . she more or less asked did I want to . . . engage with her.”

“In those . . . exact type of words, then?”

“Not quite . . . it was more . . .”

The kid was struggling, and this was unfair.

Ken said, “Boss . . . don’t forget, you asked me.”

He was looking off to the side, trying to avoid Chris’s eyes.

Chris said, “Okay, you can stop it right there. Whatever transpired from that point forward is your business . . . Don’t lose any sleep over it.”

“Thank you,” Ken said, “because *nothing* happened from that point forward.”

“I see. Other than you watching a little TV, and then she hit the road?”

“You got it.”

“She say anything about the high school reunion, besides everything was *great*?”

“*Pretty* great, yeah.”

“Except when it *wasn't*?”

“Ooh man . . . well, if you really insist, I guess I can try to remember how she put it. ”

Again, it wasn't right to put the kid in the middle, but Chris couldn't resist hearing this.

“Give me the short version,” he said.

“Okay . . . what she made it sound, was it started off good but after a while she felt like a stranger, and you'd connected with a bunch of old friends.”

“Aah.”

Ken said, “Which is how these things probably work though, right?”

Chris was starting to feel it in the temples, a dull ache. “I suppose they can, yeah,” he said.

What he was also thinking now--forgetting her BS for a moment--was that would have been a 24-hour trifecta for her, if she'd landed Kenny that night . . . *Their* get-together in the airport Marriot before the thing of course, then her almost certain hook-up with Dreue after the thing (and maybe even *during* it), and then the push for Ken, possibly on a direct bee-line from de-planing at LAX.

And that left out the possibility, who knows, of something *else* that may have developed *later* Saturday night, or earlier on Sunday.

Meanwhile though . . . could he have *reversed* it in his mind? That he *did* actually ignore her during the event . . .? And that drove her away?

Sheez.

One thing you had to conclude--as much as you might try to shake off Emma, her insatiability *was* noteworthy.

Chris said, “So anyhow, what time we got?”

“I have 8:42,” Ken said. “Why, what were you thinking, Boss?”

The enthusiasm was back in Ken's voice, and he'd been put through the wringer enough.

“I gotta move around, for starters,” Chris said. “I'm pinned in the car all day which is bad enough . . . but God dang it, 580 past Livermore, that stretch where you pass the old livestock arena? Bumper-to-bumper, and you haven't even made in onto 5 . . . But all week too, *way* too much time on the roadways.”

“So you want to, like walk around the block? Shake out the cobwebs? I'm happy to go with you.”

“I was thinking a little bigger, more like walk into town, eat, then take the Strand down to Hermosa . . . probably not get back here for three, four hours, the whole nine yards.”

“Fine. Let me put on my shoes.”

“You sure? Don't do anything on *my* account.”

“No worries at all, tomorrow’s Saturday. Alls I have, I’m supposed to hit a few balls with Chandler. And not till the afternoon.”

He wasn’t going to tell the kid *not* to come, even though he felt like unwinding on his own, not to mention digesting the conversation he’d had this morning with Gloria’s neighbor Dirk Ruud . . . and trying to figure out what, if anything, you were going to do about that.

Ken was so darn spirited you tended to forget about all the stuff you thought was important and weighing on you, and it sure felt nice to be back in those hills, million dollar houses lining every block, winding your way into town, maybe not the smell exactly but definitely the *feel* of the ocean in the air, mixed with whatever flowering plants were around on November 3rd in southern California . . . which were a lot of them.

The intent was go to *The Kettle*, the old-time diner with the massive menu that pre-dated most if not all the other eating establishments in Manhattan Beach, where you could order anything day or night.

And of course that’s where they’d gone the night Chris semi-apologized for dunking Ken in the toilet at Big Wok and offered him the couch when he found out he was sleeping in his car.

So there was a bit of a sentimental connection to the place, on top of the fact he was starved . . . but . . .

Kitty-corner halfway down the next block toward the pier was *The Crow’s Nest*. Chris had been there twice, one with Ned Mancuso and the other time raising questions *about* Ned Mancuso, not able to contain himself from sticking in the needle after a couple drinks.

It might be interesting to stop in there instead . . . and they did serve basic food, he’d noticed a few plates being walked around, though he’d never tried any of it.

“What we’ll do,” Chris said to Ken, “is drop it down a notch in terms of variety, and most likely quality. Meaning if you don’t mind, let’s try across the street first, and if it doesn’t do it, we’ll finish it off at *The Kettle*.”

“I’m following *you*,” Ken said. “You’re the man. But either way, I’m paying.”

Chris wasn’t going to let that happen, but no point wasting time arguing it before they even sat down.

A Friday night in the place, a definite stepped up vibe, it looked like three, even four waitresses, and they had to wait 10 minutes to get a table, which always drove Chris nuts and he would have left except Rory spotted them standing there as she came flying by and said it was good to see him.

“Who’s that?” Ken said.

“I don’t know much about her, but she’s friendly,” Chris said. “The type of waitress you can *talk* to. At least on a slow night.”

“A lot of action here,” Ken said, having to cup his hand to talk. “Thanks for suggesting it.”

They got seated and Chris scanned the room for any familiar faces. No obvious sign of Mancuso, and he did notice the original waitress, Cindy, hamming it up with a couple guys at the bar.

The fish and chips looked like your best bet but that'd be a tough one after the Bodega Bay joint, Chris thinking a place like this, the food not a priority, it's frozen, and maybe even flown in from some far-off place like Cape Cod.

Ken went with it though and said it was great, and what *didn't* the kid enjoy eating, and Chris went with the hot pastrami sandwich, only fair, though he did feel more like himself after he wolfed it down.

Rory was doing her best to take care of them, not able to stand there and chat like the other night but throwing in a few good-natured words when she could, and smiling at what they said back.

"I think she likes you," Ken said.

"I know, she's that way with everyone, at least once you've established yourself as a return customer. A nice kid . . . but more importantly, what do you think they take in, a night like this?"

"Ooh boy. You figure each one of them's got four, five tables? Plus the clientele, that has to make a difference."

"You're saying, the *quality* of the clientele?"

"Well yeah, that's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"You'd think, yeah," Chris said. "When I was living back east I ended up at a function in Greenwich, Connecticut. These are hedge fund managers, they belong to country clubs. They play polo . . . Maybe it was an isolated experience, this hamburger joint back there, but I pick up the tab for the couple I was with--who could have bought the whole square block no problem--and the guy insists on leaving the tip."

"A little light then?" Ken said.

"Well, when the dust settled we rang up 75, 80 bucks, and the guy drops a 5 spot on the waiter."

"Ah. Well maybe that's all he had on him, so he was doing his best."

"You know something?" Chris said--Rory standing there now, getting ready to ask them if they want any dessert--so he included her in the conversation. "This guy, I keep saying it, you can put his picture in the dictionary next to the definition of *optimist*."

"You're one too," Rory said.

"Now *that*," Chris said, "is so funny I forgot to laugh."

It had slowed down in *The Crow's Nest*, the rush was over, and Rory had time. She said, "The other night, you *weren't* one, no, but I didn't feel like that was your normal character."

"Ah. So you thought I was pulling a fast one on you then?" Chris said, thinking that's what *she's* doing to me *now*, jerking my chain, but he was going with it, hoping to keep it light.

"Is he always this goofy?" Rory said to Ken.

“He’s a solid roommate,” Ken said, getting into it now. “A little grim in the morning, until his caffeine kicks in. Once that happens, yes, pretty goofy from there on, all the way until he falls asleep in the recliner watching *House Hunters*.”

“That’s amusing, that image,” Rory said. “But wait--you two are roommates? Seriously?”

“You got a problem with that?” Chris said. “And more importantly what would *Ned* think?”

Feeling a little goofy himself, now that they’d mentioned that word, but wanting to jumpstart the action here, see where he stood with that guy after last time.

Rory said, more serious now, “I didn’t relay any of what you were asking about to Ned.”

“No?” Chris said.

“No. It was none of his business, I felt.”

“Sheez . . . The way I was running my mouth there, I expected to come back in here for sure and find out someone’s upset.”

“Well,” she said, brighter, giving Ken a little wink, “you had something to get off your chest that night, that was obvious. And that’s what I’m here for . . . So, no dessert?”

Chris said they were good and Rory left.

“If you don’t mind me sticking my two cents in,” Ken said, “that seemed kinda heavy.”

“You thought?”

“Is the Ned . . . is that the guy Chandler says you’re kind of obsessed with?”

“Jesus. He said *that*?”

But who was he kidding. He *did* have this strange obsession with the guy, and stupidly had run his mouth like a sieve to Chandler.

Who knows, maybe it was simply Ned/Lou’s timing back on the pier, Chris already irritated by the bicycle guy, that hit the nerve.

And of course you had the Chip deal, already a sore spot, since it probably didn’t have to happen--Ned reminding Chris of an alive Chip.

Either way, he caught a break tonight, Rory showing some backbone, that’s for sure, and he should take it as good fortune and forget about Mancuso from here forward.

Ken said, “I mean it though, she really likes you.”

Chris wasn’t seeing that, but he was wondering, should he let Ken in on the bigger picture . . . and there were a *few* of those.

Not the *biggest* picture, obviously--the list and the sidebars to that whole business--but the more minor shit.

Once again, you didn’t want to corrupt the kid . . . but it admittedly *would* be nice to have an earnest face you could get a little feedback from.

Chris said, “What that was about, there’s this customer of Rory’s . . . and okay, yeah, the *same* guy Chandler’s pulling out of his rear end . . . Anyhow, something happened to someone in Hermosa Beach, no one’s losing sleep over it, but it’d be nice to establish that the Ned person wasn’t involved.”

Ken scratched his head. He said, “Now you’ve got me *more* confused, than when you were going back and forth with Rory.”

“I see your point,” Chris said, “which is for the best. Shall we hit the road?”

“But the one part of that,” Ken said, “the *no one’s losing sleep over it*. Didn’t you say something similar about what happened up north?”

“I did?” Chris felt panicky for a second--what was *this* now? . . . He’d said *what* . . . about Smith? Or McCall? . . . Could he have been foolish enough to tell something to Emma, did this mean, that she forwarded on?

“Yeah,” Ken said. “You said you were *all* suspects up there for a while, because none of you were upset by the final outcome, I think was how you put it.” .

Chris was more confused for just a moment, and then it made sense. *Of course*. Thank God . . . What that idiot Chandler blabbed to Ken about the Donny deal, was what this was.

Chris said, “Well my wording was off, on the Hermosa thing I brought up . . . which I shouldn’t have. Can we close the door on that?”

“Boss, we 100 percent can.”

“I actually have something else, more interesting, I’m debating bouncing off of you . . . Should I?”

Ken didn’t answer, he had that puppy dog look again, and Chris could see that was a dumb question, that the kid wasn’t going to tell him what to do.

Chris paid the bill at the bar, and came back and Rory was clearing the table and he left the tip, but he felt like he wanted to add on a little extra tonight for various reasons, the main one being she kind of saved his ass, so he fished around and pulled out a 50 and tried to hand it to her.

She wouldn’t take it, and she wished them a good evening and went back in the kitchen, so Chris gave the 50 to Ken and told him to please give it to her and stepped outside and waited, and it took a couple minutes but Ken said he took care of it.



Chapter Ten

Again, you had to give them a fair amount of credit down here.

A Friday night in November, kind of chilly and damp, a lot more pleasant things people could be doing right now than working out, but there they were--biking, jogging, hopping, skateboarding, and some hybrid variations--and The Strand was its usual circus.

Chris said, "Well you joined me at your own risk, which I appreciate, but now I got you pinned so I'll bring it up: Have you ever heard of The Zodiac?"

You could tell Ken reacted strangely for a second.

Ken said, "Well . . . I know the zodiac is an area of the sky, for one . . . Is that what you're asking about?"

Chris realized what the heck was going in here, that now the kid unfortunately might be wondering--not *really*, but *hypothetically*, since he'd been an idiot and brought it up out of the blue--whether he, *Chris*, could be The Damn Zodiac.

"Okay take it easy," Chris said.

"No, I'm fine," Ken said. "The other thing, isn't there a wheel in astrology? Isn't that *the zodiac*, that contains all the signs, when people read their horoscope?"

The kid was disguising it, but he was looking more nervous, at least different, than Chris had seen him.

Which included when Chris stuck his head in that toilet bowl.

Chris said, "That's right, I believe the sky and the astrology are related. Going way back . . . But let's start all over . . . I'm not the *guy*. Okay? Jesus."

Ken took a moment, and said, "Boss, are you crazy? That'd be totally *insane*."

It was clear Ken was still tossing it around.

"All right," Chris said. "This is getting out of hand here. *Only* reason I brought it up, in San Francisco someone said they saw him . . . Like 50 years ago."

Letting the 50 years part sink in for Ken, that no matter what cockemaneyed reason he might have for raising an eyebrow, the numbers didn't work.

Ken said, "I get where you're going, he'd be an old guy now. If he's still around."

“Yeah, but you still . . . you’re not convincing me you’re past wondering *what’s up?* Could this guy you don’t really know, when it comes down to it, who offered you the couch in the apartment, be a zodiac *clone*.”

He felt himself going too far, like he had with Chandler that first day on the court . . . he was doing the same thing now, the two of them heading towards Hermosa, the sound of the night waves crashing off to the right, but what could you do?

Ken said, “Being totally transparent? I was still processing what you said in *The Crow’s Nest*, and then you bring up a serial killer.”

“Not just *any* serial killer,” Chris said, “but maybe the most enigmatic and notorious one in our lifetime, at least in California.”

“Unh-huh.”

“But I hear you. And you can relax. You know me better than you think . . . The stuff about not losing sleep when certain bad things happen to certain people, you mean?”

“Well you explained all that.”

“Not to your satisfaction, obviously, which is understandable . . . I laid two of those comments on you, and that’s my fault. If I come up with a third one, where I insist *No one was particularly upset about it*, I’m going to lose points.”

“You won’t lose points with me,” Ken said, so dang earnest and matter-of-fact, and there was no comeback for that, and it was starting to feel real good to stretch the legs and work up a little sweat, and he appreciated the kid being here even though he didn’t exactly tell him that.

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Dirk Ruud had cheerfully opened the door at 9 in the morning, probably wasted as all heck last night, and *every* night, but functioning nicely to start the day, and Chris had seen a few similar cases and wasn’t surprised.

Chris had twisted Gloria’s arm and brought her along. Despite her interest being perked last night, this morning she said it wasn’t her cup of tea, that she couldn’t relate and didn’t follow it. She conceded she should have asked Dirk questions when he blurted it out several years ago.

Gloria said she saw something on the History Channel she dived back into it, and it was a well put together documentary, like others she’d seen on that network such as an Area 51 one.

Chris was tempted to ask what the Area 51 conclusions were, but some other time. He was interested in the subject after meeting that air ambulance pilot on the trip up here . . . the guy saying he flew over it occasionally during emergencies, they gave him special permission.

Chris told Gloria he’d make it quick with Dirk, and then he might not see her for a while, so where else did she have to be that was so important? So she was a good sport and here they were.

Dirk sat them at a beat-up kitchen table straight out of the 1950’s, with the metal legs and green formica top, and he took a box of powdered donuts out of the fridge and cut them up.

Chris said, "Well needless to say I'm intrigued. My parents reacting over the years to any new development, I could tell it resonated. Plus I worked at the paper myself, 5th and Mission."

"My parents followed the story pretty keenly as well," Dirk said. "But that would include *me*. I'm a good deal older than you folks."

"Well yeah," Chris said, "Gloria and I were playing around with the dates . . . you would have been in your 20's back then?"

"You pegged it, I was 20 years old on the button. I would turn 21 the next March, which was 1970 . . . The reason I was there at all--and I'll get this out of the way--I flunked out of Princeton, had to move back home."

Chris was thinking, not a bad gig, and a rare one these days, to inherit your family's Presidio Heights spread and stay right there your whole life.

"Well that can happen," Gloria said. "Not everyone's meant to fit into a tidy college curriculum."

"I made up for it later," Dirk said, "night classes at USF, but you're correct . . . We had a golden retriever back then, Sadie, what a girl she was, I'm telling you, she never badgered you for it but she loved when you gave her a good long walk up to Arguello and finished it off in the Presidio, where she could run loose."

"I have to tell you," Chris said, the intensity of this little conversation suddenly picking up. "I'd be lying, you don't have me anticipating what's coming next . . ."

"Seriously," Gloria said.

"Which I'll get to it in just one moment," Dirk said. "But Chris, you say you worked at the *Chronicle*, did you know Paul Avery then? Or Duffy Jennings?"

"I remember those names," Gloria said. "They were in the movie too, correct?"

"Yes," Chris said, "Avery was the guy The Zodiac sent letters too."

"And of course threatened," Dirk said, "which was quite ominous . . . He was played by Robert Downey, Jr."

"But no," Chris said, "that crowd was long gone by the time I got to the newsroom . . . Honestly, though? Even in the 90's it was still something in the back of your mind when you had to write a grisly crime story."

"*What* was, the comparison to the Zodiac?" Gloria said.

"Not so much that," Chris said, "but what you carried around was the concern some bad person you wrote about could start writing *you* letters."

"And you were wise to consider that," Dirk said.

Chris was starting to like the guy. If he was 20 back then, the Stine cab driver murder being in '69, that would put him younger than Chris thought, *Jeez*, only 68 or so. He did look older and more worn out, but what difference did it make.

Chris said, "Like I said . . . the suspense is killing me. So you walked the dog, Sadie."

“Yes. About 9:30. We took a different route that night. Usually we’d go Jackson to Laurel to Washington to Arguello, and then up a block and into the Presidio, and we’d come back along Pacific inside the wall.”

“But not that night,” Chris said, trying to keep the guy focused, *Holy Toledo*.

“I reversed it. Went *left* out of our house, tackled the hills and onto upper Broadway . . . and then you know that gate at Lyon?”

“Yeah. Into the Presidio. It used to be open, now it’s locked and you have to go around.”

“Exactly . . . We re-entered there, and my girl’s getting tired, she’s not used to those hills.”

Chris looked over at Gloria who was shifting around, Chris seriously starting to wonder *whether* the old guy was going to be able to snap out of this travelogue.

“Then at first there’s no trail, you have to be careful, especially at night,” Dirk continued. “So we did our best negotiating it, new territory and all.”

“This *was* the night of the murder, though, right?” Chris said, making sure, God forbid. “Washington and Cherry? A block in from Arguello?”

“Oh yeah,” Dirk said. “So . . . it curves around, you cross the main drag that takes you to the central base, which of course it *was* back then, a real army base, and then you can picture it if you know the Presidio, you’re working your way west toward JK.”

Chris would settle for *anything* familiar at this point, and JK was Julius Kahn playground, where he’d spent Saturdays playing football . . . and, not as fond a topic, but where he’d more recently told Maierhaffer to stop cheating on his wife, which was the early trigger in that whole fiasco.

Chris thinking we might be getting somewhere now, because if you made it past JK you were near at the murder scene. *In theory*.

Dirk said, “I can see you’re getting anxious. Suffice it to say that soon thereafter I saw the gentleman pass by.”

“Okay,” Chris said, “now I have to intervene. *Which* gentleman?”

“Mel,” Dirk said. “But let me set the stage.”

This was going to take some patience, and Chris prayed there’d be a punchline.

You had to sit through it though, you were hooked. Even if it turned out to be a B-movie. Just to hear the guy walking around the night of the thing was worth it.

So Chris took the liberty of gobbling up the rest of the powdered donuts, which didn’t go down all that easy but at least brought his blood sugar back up, and he said, “You’re saying you ran into a *Mel* . . . along the Presidio wall, it sounds like.”

“*Normally* that would have been my route, yes,” Dirk said. “But when I crossed the main drive Sadie indicated a footpath to the right, so I let the girl dictate the action.”

“Which went *where*?” Chris said.

“Dirkie, I’m afraid you may be wavering off-topic,” Gloria said. Unusual for her to butt in, so this must have been killing her.

“The long and the short of it,” Dirk said, “was the trail ended at the base Little League field.”

“I remember that,” Chris said. “We envied that field. It was perfectly manicured, and we were stuck playing on the JK one, which was full of rocks.”

“Exactly . . . And if you remember, there was that hole in the fence?”

“Most definitely,” Chris said, getting into it, even though this sidetracked things more. “We played football that direction, and the fence was the back of the endzone . . . That hole in the fence was convenient if you had to use the bushes or something . . . Plus from there, the other side, you could see *way* down to the bay.”

“You could, and the base Little League field, when we were kids--long before *your* time--we’d sneak onto it and play ball.”

“Jeez, *we* should have done that,” Chris said. “It felt like it was off-limits, like you’d be breaking some law.”

“Technically you might have,” Dirk said. “Something federal. As you remember, that field was reserved for the kids of the US Army personnel stationed in the Presidio.”

“But you were okay then? Playing there?”

“The MP’s threw us off a few times, but they were nice enough fellows.”

“Jeez, I was always scared of those guys. Even riding my bike in there, minding my own business.”

“Well in the broader picture, those *were* sobering times,” Dirk said. “The central years of Viet Nam. Letterman being a VA hospital, right there in our midst. Wounded soldiers coming back. It made for a spooky atmosphere . . . But the baseball part, we never got court-martialled or anything.”

Dirk laughed, and Gloria said, “But there was *a supposed Zodiac person on the loose*, once upon a time?”

“Yes, of course,” Dirk said. “When Sadie and I reached the ball field there was no connecting trail toward JK, and we could have followed the road to Arguello. But we were fatigued and it was shorter to cut through that hole.”

“So you winged it,” Chris said. “Cross-country in the dark.”

“That’s correct. I did, and *do* carry a flashlight, so we navigated it. Just after we ducked through the hole, twenty yards away coming toward me I see Mel.”

“All right,” Chris said, “and I apologize in advance for my language, but who the *fuck* is Mel?”

“Mel I met in front of Cala Foods. On a bench they had there.”

At this point, not more than 10:30 in the morning, Dirk gets up and on the the far side of the kitchen opens an antique hutch with leaded glass doors and pours himself what a scotch.

Chris looked over at Gloria. He said, “Meaning the Laurel Village one, right? Not the one down by Fillmore.”

More urgent to keep this moving, wrap it up before Dirk required a refill.

“Yep. On California. In the neighborhood. I’d be hanging around over there, not much to, your basic strip shopping center--and remember I had all day free then because I was a screw-off, trying unsuccessfully to get it back together.”

“Unh-huh.”

“So this guy sits down on the bench, he’s come out of Cala Foods with a small bag, and we shoot the breeze, and he introduces himself as Mel. Nice enough chap. Older than me but we could relate okay, and I said hello to him again on a couple occasions . . . Then I see the same guy heading toward the fence at JK that night, and it raises an eyebrow, but I don’t think much of, and we say hi as we pass each other. He seemed different than I’d known him at Laurel Village though.”

“Agitated?” Chris said.

“Absolutely. But he was cordial.”

Chris was thinking two things, that alcohol behaved unpredictably with people, and maybe it was working positively here, narrowing the guy’s focus . . . the other thing of course, *is he actually building up to announcing Mel is the freaking Zodiac?*

“So,” Chris said “you didn’t think much of it at the time. But then later you *did?*”

“Yeah now don’t forget, back then the newspapers had strict evening deadlines . . . And I realize I’m telling you something you already know, so please forgive me . . . The next morning there was nothing in the paper, and only on KCBS radio did they announce there’d been a murder in the neighborhood, and not until a few days later did they suggest it matched the work of The Zodiac.”

“So that night,” Gloria said, “you never knew there’d even been an event?”

“That’s right. I pass Mel, he looks a bit off and why is he heading to the hole in the fence at this hour, but I guess he could ask the same about me . . . But then when that composite sketch started circulating I felt I’d seen it before and it clicks, that this looks something like Mel . . . Would anyone like some cheese?”

There was a lot to absorb here, and some links in the chain that didn’t connect.

Chris said, “Let me fire a couple things out there . . . You knew Mel on the bench for how long?”

“A few weeks, on and off. Not just on the bench, but once coming out of Young Man’s Fancy--you remember, it was the preppy clothing store for the private school kids like me--and he sees me and he’s shaking his head, joking about the prices . . . Another time, he’s been to See’s Candy. Packs a heart-shaped box under his arm and heads across the street and on the other side of Maple he disappears into an apartment building . . . Always took a second though, the four or five times I saw him, to ask you how your day was going.”

“Hold on,” Chris said. “This Mel *lived* in the *neighborhood?*”

“I never asked him, but either lived or was visiting someone, yes . . . You probably know the apartment building I’m talking about, there’s only a couple on that side of the street, maybe half a block up from what used to be that Copper Penny restaurant? Which is now a real estate office.”

Gloria said, "And you told the police all of this then, Dirk? I know you've mentioned that they dismissed it, correct?"

"I did. I sat on it a while, which was *my* dumb fault, but thinking my mind's running away from me and sooner or later I'd see Mel again at Laurel Village and there'd be an explanation. But I didn't . . . So three weeks, a month go by, I'm over there and there's a squad car parked outside Zim's and I go in and tell my story to the two uniforms eating lunch."

"*Wow*," Chris said. "But that was *it*? They put down their fork and took a few notes and said thanks for the tip?"

"A little more than that. A guy came by the house a few days later, not Dave Toschi or any other detective in a sport coat, but a uniform guy higher up than the Zim's ones. He asked me to repeat myself . . . Here's one thing, full disclosure--I had a drinking problem back then."

Chris tried not to look at Gloria.

"In any case, the officer says they'll check it out, and talks to my parents who are here too of course, asks them if they'd heard or witnessed any of this before--which they hadn't because I never told them--and thanks us and is on his way."

"No follow up then," Chris said.

"None . . . What probably dropped me to the bottom of the barrel, besides maybe the booze issue, was the notion that the Zodiac could have resided, or at least spent regular time in the neighborhood. That was apparently too far fetched . . . And as you know, it's commonly thought he lived in Vallejo."

"Too young too, maybe?" Chris said. "Over the years, haven't they placed the guy about 35 or 40?"

"They have," Dirk said. "But Mel had that look, with the ruddy face and the crewcut, the black glasses, and his voice too, where he could have passed for 10 years older."

Gloria had had enough, and she stood and told them both to please stay seated and not wrap anything up on account of her, but Chris got up too, and he told Dirk this had been eye-opening to say the least.

"Glad you could make it," Dirk said. "I'm sure you could tell, to an old man in my position, I greatly appreciate the stage."

When Chris and Gloria got back to her place, out front, Chris ready to take off for L.A., he said, "So how would you rate that?"

"Entertainment-wise, you mean?" she said, with a playful grin.

"There were highs and lows as far as that," Chris said, "but I was thinking more, was Dirk intentionally putting on a show?"

"Well I guess you wouldn't be alone, there. The police seemed to feel he was making it up, didn't they?"

"Possibly. He mentioned the drinking and the parents and the guy being seen in the neighborhood, as working against him . . . For me, it would be more, why would you wait a *month*?"

"Well, as he said, he assumed he'd run into that Mel again and prove himself wrong."

“Understood, but . . . if you’ve seen the police sketch of the guy, and your guy *resembles* him . . . who at the key moment *just happens* to be hustling across our old football field toward the deep Presidio . . . I don’t know.”

Chris gave her a hug and opened the car door.

“I don’t either,” Gloria said. “But for your article--if you *do* end up writing one--and you need to talk to Dirk further, or look around the neighborhood for any reason . . . you’re staying with me, it remains non-negotiable.

“You’re a piece of work,” Chris said, and he held her gaze for a moment, admiring the lady, and he told her to stay safe and drove off.

One more thing he did do, at a Wendy’s, no idea the location, but about two-thirds of the way to Los Angeles, he asked the kid at the register would they have a piece of paper, and the kid looked at him funny but disappeared for a second and came back with one, and Chris sat down and revised his list, and added *The Zodiac* with a question mark.



Chapter Eleven

Chris decided the jury was still out on whether the ocean air affected your well-being like an article said, or if that was a dumb gimmick, but when you woke up here you *were* more raring to go than other places he'd lived.

Of course it was relative, you still needed an effective shower, plenty of water on your head, and you required that first home brewed cup of coffee, even if your immediate plan was to go out and *get* coffee.

So it wasn't automatic that you had all this energy right out of the chute, but the bottom line was once you got it together down here you were feeling ready to accomplish *something*.

The problem was, it wasn't clear what needed accomplishing.

Kenny was coming around slow this morning. A big week at the library apparently, which no doubt included fending off Emma's alleged good intentions in the *make sure he's okay* department.

It had been interesting bouncing the Zodiac stuff off him last night, the kid being a dedicated listener who'd digest bits and pieces and then chime in with the occasional question or comment, often from an angle Chris hadn't thought of.

One benefit was the walk zipped by pretty quick, the four or five miles you'd covered by the time you turned it around at the Hermosa pier and zig-zagged your way back through the streets to the *Cheater Five Apartments*.

When they got back Chris was sweating like a dog, despite the cool night temperature and fog rolling in, and he told Ken he was taking a dip and how about it, and Ken didn't like that idea, one, because he'd barely gotten a workout, but two, it was after midnight and the pool closed at 10 according to the sign and why upset Sharif if someone complains?

"Speaking of Sharif," Chris said, heading out the apartment door in his suit and flip-flops, "I guess I gotta get back to that guy."

Ken said that was his impression as well, and to have a good swim and he was turning in.

Floating around out there, this time of night, it gave you a chance to think, and gain a little perspective.

Chris hated goals and to-do lists and *tasks* and prioritizing stuff they way they taught people at management seminars, since he thought all that guidance made you a robot.

That was another thing that struck him this trip, the Millennials seemed to divide their life into small, manageable tasks.

Nothing was allowed to go on too long before they switched it up to the next thing. Chris didn't doubt they worked hard.

But you had to think if they were forced to sit for a couple hours and do one thing, like read a paperback novel, with no device to check in with, they'd experience severe withdrawal--maybe only a twitch at first, but soon enough a full-on seizure episode where somebody'd have to call an ambulance.

Where was he though . . . Okay, that said, he *had* felt a need at that Wendy's to update his list.

For better or worse, the list had helped him stay grounded--and most importantly, *distracted*--in dealing with his diagnosis.

Now you were into November, and yeah there were constant concerns that they *didn't* make a mistake after all, meaning the medical people. Even now, sweating ten times more than Kenny coming up those hills, you could inject a red flag if you thought about it too hard and got paranoid.

It was odd though, how the focus had slowly but surely shifted.

From throwing up your hands in the wake of an air-tight death sentence and vowing to make a difference in the months you had left . . .

To thinking, well at least I'm not getting worse *yet*, so I may *have* a bit more time . . .

To feeling--not jumping for joy confident--but *accepting* of the fact that someone might indeed have made a mistake and you're going to stick around.

The list had made its own adjustments, and it wasn't as robust with candidates as before. But what could you say, there *was* a comfort in keeping it alive.

Before Wendy's, the last rendition was following the Damirko San Francisco Bay situation.

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**

The Wendy's version was the following:

1 Ray - no

2 Donny *

3 Thad *

4 Chip *

5 Jerry Smith *

6 Ike's neighbor

7 Damirko ****

8 McCall *

9 Mike Brown - no

10 dog guy?

11 Pocatello driver **

12 Kyle ***

13 Berkeley armed robbers?

14 The Zodiac?

*** Complete**

**** Complete but off-topic**

***** Good enough**

****** Complete (unexpected)**

Speaking of Kyle, Bethany's supposed ex-husband, under ***** Good enough . . .** it would sure be nice to categorize the Craigslist guy that way too . . . and that ridiculous deadline with Redondo PD was coming up Tuesday.

Ken inadvertently reminded him of that last night. Chris had put to bed--he was pretty sure--any silly concern from Ken that *he* could actually be a serial killer, and he told him about meeting Dirk Rudd--though the short version.

Chris said, "It's hard for you to relate, but you have to understand where I'm coming from, growing up in that neighborhood, even though it was before my time."

"No I can see it," Ken said. "Especially since they never caught the guy . . . I saw the movie too. It was good, though it was long. Kind of like a documentary."

"I get your point," Chris said. "They tried to be accurate. They threw in stuff that didn't connect to anything, simply because it happened . . . Shows you what cops have to go through."

"Details are important, either way," Ken said.

"They can be . . . I'll tell you though, the movie couldn't have had more details than this guy Dirk rattled off."

“You seem fired up, Boss,” Ken said. “I’m kind of surprised you didn’t stay up there longer.”

“Ah. You mean track the guy down? What 50 years of dedicated police work hasn’t been able to?”

“Well,” Ken said, “maybe sometimes these things turn out simple. I mean, Jeepers, that’s amazing, you have a person who says they not only *saw* him, but *knew* him.”

That was an obvious point, but a damn good one Chris hadn’t fully embraced. *How many others over the years went to the police and claimed they knew the guy?*

The answer of course was probably dozens. But still . . . if Dirk was telling the truth, you had to question again: What would some person he recognized be doing headed to that *fence hole*?

Chris said, “What, you think I should try to do something about it?”

“I might, yes. Like I say, you’re awful passionate.”

From Ken’s perspective of course, the *doing something about it* meant dig around, have some fun, ask more questions, enjoy another round of donuts with Dirk. Maybe even put your newspaper reporter hat back on like Gloria was saying . . .

As opposed to Chris’s interpretation.

Which was find the guy, and if he’s miraculously still alive, change that.

“Yeah?” Chris said. “What would *you* do then?”

“Okay first thing? I’d look into that apartment building that your friend said he saw him go in.”

“Uh-huh. And *how*, exactly?”

“Well . . . You’d have to see if there were records . . . someone who moved out around that time, when it happened, with the cab driver.”

“Jeez,” Chris said, “that’s not bad.”

“Probably ridiculous,” Ken said, “a needle in a haystack.”

“Yeah . . . but not necessarily. You’re saying . . . first of all it might have been *Mel* moving out . . . but what seems more likely, Mel could have been visiting someone in that building . . . and *they* got spooked after the murder, and they might have moved right out, or at least unofficially vacated.”

“Boss, you’re way ahead of *me* now.”

“That would imply, then, that the person didn’t report it to the police. Which a rational individual would though.”

“You’d think,” Ken said. “Unless as you say, they got freaked out not just by what happened but by the guy maybe coming back and dealing with *them* too. If they report him and he finds out.”

“Interesting.”

“Who knows, pure speculation on my part.”

“No you’re giving me a lot here. *Wow* . . . so you’re saying, the friend of Mel . . . let’s say it’s a girlfriend, or date, if he was buying her See’s candy that time . . . she goes underground right after?”

“Well, I mean serial killers probably aren’t stupid. He would have to know she put 2 and 2 together.”

“It’s the percentage move, I see what you mean,” Chris said.

“But see this is what I’m getting at,” Ken said. “What do you have to do in MB that’s so important? It sounds like talking to the older gentleman, it lit a fire under you.”

“Ah I had to come back anyway, I got a little something on my plate this week.”

“What is it?”

“Nothing you want to hear about. No biggie.”

“Can I help?” Ken said. “I’m working Monday Tuesday, but the rest of the week, it’s up in the air.”

“Very hospitable of you,” Chris said, “but I have to work this one out . . . I’ll get it.”

“Sounds like a problem,” Ken said. “What is it?”

“Jiminy . . . you’re relentless. Honestly, I’m been avoiding it, but I’ll figure it out overnight. I’m good that way.”

“So you can tell me about it in the morning, since you’ll *have* it by then,” Ken said.

Oh boy. Now, Saturday morning, Ken stirring around in the sleeping bag, and Chris was hoping he’d forget about it, since there was no solid answer he could give the kid . . . and he *had* wrestled with the storage idiot deal when was floating around the pool last night, and he couldn’t come up with jack shit.

Fortunately Ken was groggy, and he had a piece of toast and fiddled around with his phone and didn’t bring it up, so that part was good . . . except he brought it up later during tennis.

Chris let himself get talked into playing with them today, Ken and Chandler, disappointed in himself not using better judgment, since he was pretty dang irritated at Chandler. And even if things *hadn’t* gone a little south in that regard, he’d get his rear end handed to him in the tennis department for sure.

But there they were, same park, temperature in the mid-70’s which almost made you feel guilty when they showed other places on the news, like some guy in Michigan just trying to go to his mailbox but stepping on black ice and sliding down the hill and likely into traffic, except he was able to grab the stop sign on the corner.

Chandler had his shirt off today, which was a tough sight and made it worse. Ken was oblivious, complimenting them both when they hit a decent a shot. And whenever *he* cracked a winner, which was whenever he felt like, he’d hold his hand up and apologize.

They played 2-on-1 games, and another thing pissing Chris off was during the two weeks he hadn’t been playing, while Chandler *had* been, because of Ken, Chandler’d gotten better.

When they took a break, Chris said, “I was telling Kenny earlier, he should look for some new guys, more his level. This can’t be helping him, playing with *us*.”

“Speak for yourself,” Chandler said. “I’ve been meaning to ask you, what happened with that art situation?”

“Ah, I think I got it under control now.”

“An answer like that,” Chandler said, perking up, “I know from experience, means you don’t.”

“I do, and it’s one of those unimportant things,” Chris said, “that works its way out with the bath water.”

“Whatever. Did you do what I said, make sure you didn’t admit to ever having the guy’s phone?”

“Excuse me, is this your *issue*?” Ken said. “The one you needed to clear up this week?”

“Oh yeah,” Chandler said smiling, moving his arm like he was elbowing Ken and they were in on a big joke. “I’d be shocked if they tried to charge you with something, but I’m guessing you had to compromise to make it go away.” He winked at Ken. “And past history would tell us you’re not the compromising type . . . which has to sting.”

Chandler was waiting for a reaction, grinning as big as the Grand Canyon.

Chris’s first thought was to put Chandler in a guillotine choke, like’d seen on TV in MMA fights. He wouldn’t get it exactly right, and Ken would break it up, so you’d be wasting the opportunity.

Though Chris made a mental note, *not the worst idea*, play tennis next time with Chandler on your own so you can *try* choking him out and at least scare the daylights out of him.

“Gee,” Ken said. “It seems like we were having this discussion last time. At least you guys were. The problem having to do with a picture, you said.”

“That’s why he keeps changing the subject,” Chandler said. “Those things don’t end clean. Take it from me. Even when you *think* you took care of it, they eat at you.”

“Okay that’s enough of that,” Chris said. “And I *am* going change the subject, since *you’re* eating at me.”

“We have some time, right Ken?” Chandler said, who of course always had time. “What do you got?”

Chris wasn’t crazy about running it by him, but it was an excuse to shift gears, and he hated to admit it but the guy might have a little insight.

“Kenny and I were talking it over last night,” Chris said, “and I pointed out more than a couple detectives, most likely, went to their grave with the case still eating at ‘em . . . The Zodiac, we’re referring to.”

“Now *that’s* out of left field,” Chandler said. “What was the impetus *there*?”

“Not much, other than the gal who put me up for a couple nights, my high school reunion thing, she lives in Presidio Heights, near one of the locations.”

“Frisco you’re talking about,” Chandler said. “Buddy of mine, the DA’s office up there, he knew Dave Toschi pretty well.”

Ken said, “He was in the movie, wasn’t he? I think that was Mark Ruffalo.”

“It was,” Chandler said. “Dave was the lead investigator on it, career SFPD . . . But you got *that* right, Dave struggled with it.”

“He did?” Chris said.

“He passed away last year, in his 80’s. The way I heard it, on the anniversaries of the cabbie murder, he’d re-visit that intersection, look around, try to come up with any remote piece of the puzzle he missed.”

“Wow,” Ken said. “That has to be tough.”

Chandler said, “People don’t think of this, but that was the only San Francisco one.”

“How many *were* there?” Ken said.

“Confirmed or suspected?” Chandler said.

“Jesus,” Chris said, “I didn’t know you were such a jack of all trades.”

“I’ve kept an eye on it over the years,” Chandler said, “what do you want me to say . . . I’m not a fanatic, like these people online who obsess whether the guy gripped the pen tight or loose when he wrote the letters . . . but yeah, I pick up some things.”

“So, what *are* the actual numbers?” Chris said.

“Well . . . you had the two in Benicia, the teenage couple; the two in Vallejo in the parking lot, one of them survived so that’s three; those two in Napa, Lake Berryessa, one of them survived as well; then your guy Stine . . . So that’s five.”

“Except . . . the *un-confirmed* ones?” Ken said.

“Yeah . . . Five more there. Two up near Santa Barbara, one down in Riverside, one up at Tahoe.”

“Holy Smokes,” Chris said. “Surreal when it’s laid out like that . . . Someone capable of that degree of rage.”

Chandler said, “You look around the scene at all *yourself*? Presidio Heights?”

“Nah, not really. I mean I’ve driven through there plenty over the years.”

“Well *I’d* be curious,” Chandler said. “I can see where Dave was coming from.”

This was getting interesting, this son of a bitch Chandler continuing to surprise him, well-versed in a lot of areas apparently.

Should you go a little further with this guy? Chris weighed it, and figured what the heck.

He said, “Guy up there in the neighborhood, says he saw him that night, leaving the scene. What do you make of that?”

“Hard to know. A lot of people claimed the same thing. That one, and the other scenes too.”

“This guy says he was acquainted with him.”

“Sounds far-fetched,” Chandler said.

“It does, including running into him that night in the playground,” Chris said. “I can’t put my finger on it-- and the guy’s an alcoholic unfortunately--but I kind of believed him.”

“Wait,” Chandler said, “what’s that playground you’re talking about?”

“Julius Kahn. We called it JK. It’s a city park, but it’s in the Presidio, other side of the wall from the neighborhood . . . And not *much* of a wall, a ceremonial type thing, you can hop it easy.”

Chandler said, “Because someone *did* see a suspicious person head into the playground, the reports I’ve read . . . Your guy could have made up his story based on that. What else did he say?”

“Only that he was surprised to see the guy, but he said hello and the guy greeted him back. Cordial but preoccupied.”

Chandler said, “Of course the crux of the matter, they could have caught the Zodiac right there that night. You heard about the radio, right?”

“Maybe,” Chris said. “One of the cops had it set to the wrong frequency?”

“Not exactly,” Chandler said. “Dispatch fucked it up. They had ‘em looking for a black guy first . . . A patrol car passed the real guy on the sidewalk, going the other way.”

“Meaning toward that playground,” Ken said.

“We can speculate all day,” Chandler said, “and it’s fun to. But there’ve been a hundred suspects-of-the-month.”

“Until the next one comes along,” Chris said, “someone saying their history teacher back then switched to contact lenses. Since the sketch had the guy with glasses.”

Chandler laughed. “That’s a good one. Or the lady went to confession, I think it was Fresno, ready to admit she was cheating on her husband, and the priest interrupts her and says he was the Zodiac.”

“All that, yeah.”

“The Riverside one though,” Chandler said, “I’m hearing they found DNA. They match that to the postage stamps, it could be case closed.”

Ken said. “DNA’s like the great equalizer, right?”

“You can take it to the bank,” Chandler said. “Guy named Richard Wall, is who they’re currently liking.”

“Wait a second,” Chris said. “That’s not one of the main guys, is it?”

“He’s been under the radar, though he was questioned on Riverside when it happened.”

“Sheesh,” Chris said. “Does he . . . have a middle name, or nickname or anything?”

“Our guy is *Mel*,” Ken said. “Boss’s guy.”

“Not sure about that,” Chandler said. “He was mentally ill, and he got worse in the 70’s. The handwriting’s a decent match. But obviously the genetics is what counts.”

“Well where is he now?” Chris said. “Or do they know?”

“They do. Dead.”

Ken and Chandler played another set, and Chris decided that served him right for sticking his nose in something and getting emotionally caught up.

Jeez, it would have been something, for sure, to be the one who finally cracked The Zodiac. So probably not.

But what could you do?



Chapter Twelve

“I better take care of that Sharif thing,” Chris said to Ken as they were driving home. “I hate stuff hanging over my head . . . Now a good time, or do you have something going tonight, you gotta get back for?”

“No, I don’t have *anything*,” Ken said, “but are sure you’d like me to join you?”

“Maybe we can squeeze a dinner out of it,” Chris said.

Which is what happened. Sharif was extremely happy to see them, meaning Chris, and you could smell the curry a mile away and when Chris commented on it Sharif disappeared for a moment and then insisted they eat, and he ushered them through a door behind the motel front desk that opened onto a surprisingly large dining room, and he told them please make themselves comfortable.

A minute later two women appeared, in traditional Pakistani dress, and Sharif introduced his sister Afia and sister-in-law Raneem, and Afia said it would be entirely her pleasure for them to enjoy one of her dishes, and soon they were stuffing their faces with probably the best Indian food Chris had ever had, the only competition being this one memorable place in Hackensack when he lived back there.

Sharif said, “We eat early on Saturdays, because it’s the one day we have the whole family together, but there’s always extra, so it is our good fortune that you are here!”

Afia and Raneem laughed and agreed, and they brought another round of fresh bread, which they called chapati, and after making sure everything else was good, they left the three of them alone.

Chris was thinking this is a pretty special family, and he started feeling a little guilty breaking the rules last night and going in the pool.

Sharif said, “I feel terrible, having to burden you again . . . but please enjoy, and when you’re ready we can go into the office.”

Meaning he and Chris alone, and Chris said, “You can blurt it out right here . . . If you’re concerned about Kenneth, don’t be, he’s an ally.”

You could tell Sharif wasn’t comfortable with that, but Chris kept eating, businesslike, so Sharif got to it.

“It’s a severe embarrassment to the family,” he said. “My niece is being stalked.”

This got Chris to put down his chunk of bread and wipe his hands.

“Forget the embarrassment aspect,” Chris said, “that doesn’t sound healthy, dwelling on that.”

“All right,” Sharif said, “allow me to please begin again. I can tell you’re angry.”

“He’s not,” Ken said.

“No, no, I understand how it comes across,” Sharif said. “That we value the family honor almost more than the safety of our loved ones . . . and that sounds crazy.”

“Honestly?” Chris said. “I’ve been in better moods. I got some loose ends of my own, not to mention I got my ass kicked just now on the tennis court . . . The food helps, I’ll say that.”

“Absolutely understood,” Sharif said, reaching out his hand. “And we shall drop the matter entirely. It’s ours to handle, no one else’s.”

“Ah, I didn’t mean it like that,” Chris said. “All I was getting at . . . let’s leave the cultural analysis out of it, and give me the friggin bottom line . . . you’ve got someone actually being *stalked*?”

Sharif nodded, and his voice cracked slightly. “Our dear Nouran. She’s 19 years old. Sweet and innocent, at heart. That side of the family, they joined us in America when she was 12.”

“So let me guess,” Chris said. “Just in time for American high school, and all the goodies that go with it.”

“Precisely,” Sharif said. “And for whatever reason, she slipped through the cracks a bit.”

“Mira Costa, then?” Ken said. “Is that your district?”

“It is,” Sharif said. “And don’t misunderstand me, it’s a fine institution. Each year we hear of students who’ve been accepted at Ivy League colleges.”

“But there’s an underbelly, you’re going to tell me,” Chris said.

“Yes,” Sharif said. “I’m not saying she fell into drug use--though we can’t fully rule it out--but her choice of friends became quite disconcerting.”

Chris said, “Meaning, first of all, white guys . . . or black guys . . . if there *are* any black guys at that school.”

“No, you’re correct,” Sharif said. “Caucasians. But the wrong ones.”

Chris said, “So bottom line, her high school prom date type deal, he won’t exit the picture now.”

“We wish it were that simple,” Sharif said. “This is an older gentleman unfortunately . . . There have been threats, of late. They began, of course, under the usual circumstances, when they parted ways, which she initiated.”

“Jeeminy Christmas,” Chris said, “I mean if it were me, I’d want to throw the guy off a *building*--hypothetically obviously--but you’re going around calling him *sir*. Why do you do that?”

“How much older *is* he?” Ken said.

“Perhaps 7 or 8 years,” Sharif said. “Poor thing, she’s scared to death.” He took off his glasses and brought out his handkerchief and dabbed an eye.

“And the restraining order stuff?” Chris said. “You’ve been through all that?”

“That was the thing,” Sharif said, composing himself again, “we spoke to someone who advised us along those lines, but with the caveat that it could have the inverse effect, and serve to *antagonize* the individual.”

“Yeah it could backfire,” Chris said, “I can see that.”

“I might agree,” Ken said. “Those are the situations you see escalate on *48 Hours* and *20-20*.”

“*Dateline* as well,” Sharif said. “Believe me, we’re familiar with those worst case scenarios, which is, embarrassingly why I’ve contacted you. You negotiated so smoothly with our previous guest, I don’t know, I was hoping . . .”

Sharif’s voice broke off. Chris could finish the thought for him, that *the poor guy didn’t know what else to try* . . . short of packing up and moving the whole family back to Karachi.

“Sure, I’ll give it a shot,” Chris said.

“You’re kidding,” Sharif said.

“It’d be my pleasure,” Chris lied. “A simple conversation. That should be harmless enough . . . if we’re lucky, he’ll come to his senses, but don’t count on it.”

“Oh this is a *superb* development!” Sharif said.

“Don’t thank me yet, not even close,” Chris said. “Just give me the person’s address. And name, I guess that’ll be handy too, unless you’re going to hold back on me like with your motel individual.”

Sharif went around the corner to the front desk and came back with it written out.

“Good thing he’s local,” Chris said, seeing the Santa Monica address. “Otherwise I might have just volunteered for something over my head.”

“But Boss if he were out of state and she’s here,” Ken said, “then it might not be as big an issue in the first place, right?”

Chris looked at Sharif. “I like the kid, he’s more on the ball than he looks, but sometimes he says stuff, I want to slap him around.”

“I concede your point,” Sharif said. “But . . . so . . . do you suppose you can meet with the gentleman soon?”

“Like I said,” Chris said, “I got a few things ahead of you . . . But you’re in the rotation. So keep your shirt on.”

Sharif looked at him quizzically and Ken said, “Pretty sure what he means by that, is please don’t panic.”

“Exactly,” Chris said. “Now all I have to do is dust off my negotiating skills. Your last guy, the weightlifter, he was a pussycat in the end, it turned out.”

“Well we pray for the same,” Sharif said, actually closing his eyes for a moment and putting his hands together.

“Yeah, well,” Chris said. “As our president likes to say: We’ll see what happens.”

Back in the car Ken said, “What *kind* of threats, do you think? That wasn’t clear from Sharif.”

“There’s *degrees* of ‘em, you’re saying?” Chris said.

“Nah, you’re right. There can’t be.”

“Giving the guy every benefit of the doubt . . . let’s say she dumps him and he says fine, but just please don’t go out with his buddy Billy now, because that’ll screw up *their* friendship . . . A highly unlikely scenario, but would that be stalking?”

Ken thought about it. “Yeah, I guess you could make a case that it is. Inserting yourself into someone’s business.”

“Yep. And leaving it open-ended. The *concept* of a threat, even if it’s not intended to be.”

“I’m with you,” Ken said. “No need to establish specifics then . . . Except, how about this one, what if the daughter--the niece--wasn’t being totally truthful.”

“Most likely there’s some of that too,” Chris said. “But again, irrelevant if Sharif’s *older gentleman* has been acting out.”

“Well I like how you think,” Ken said.

“You do . . . I’ll take it as a compliment . . . more importantly, are you hungry?”

Ken looked at him funny and Chris realized he actually forgot they just ate.

“That’s a little embarrassing,” Chris said.

“No, no big deal at all.”

“What it is, I think, two things . . . I like the *process* of eating, not at home so much, but out . . . they’re taking care of you, you’re tucked into your booth cozy, and the real world stops for an hour and you can let the shit fly . . . unless you’re by yourself, but even then you flirt with the waitress.”

“I can tell,” Ken said. “So you’re automatically looking for an excuse to eat, and got mixed up. What’s the second thing?”

“Oh. Well, yeah, you put a gun to my head, I guess that art thing *is* bugging me.”

“Straining your focus,” Ken said. “What are your options?”

“Okay first and foremost? I’m gonna drop you. I got a couple errands to take care of, maybe swing by Emma’s, take my chances with that . . . You good for a while?”

“Boss, let me *help* you . . . I’m getting the impression you’re going to go see the art person, and I feel like it might not be the best time, that you haven’t quite re-acclimated yet.”

“You’re saying I’m high strung tonight? Compared to the normal even-keel guy you know?”

“That’s not for me to judge . . . but all’s I’m saying, let’s *talk* about the art person first. It’s Saturday night, everyone should be chilling.”

“I appreciate your philosophy,” Chris said, pulling into the beat-up parking lot at the *Cheater Five*. “Which reminds me of something. You know how on NFL games they always talk about philosophy? That’s pretty hilarious.”

“It is,” Ken said. “Their defensive philosophy is to not let Russell Wilson make plays with his legs.”

“At least you’re smiling,” Chris said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, and move your heiny on out of here . . . and I’ll tell Emma you said hello.”

Ken didn’t like it or believe him but he did as he was told, and Chris backed out and made the left toward downtown MB, and then a right onto Dianthus, a left onto 9th, and then you had to maneuver around the Ardmore until you hit Highland, and then the right . . . and that’d be that back way, not the quickest, but it would do the job and get you to Santa Monica.

This was one of those things you wanted to address right away, meaning beginning, middle and end . . . if he was lucky.

He had enough going on, a little headache tonight thrown in for good measure, that part maybe from too much sun today and having to listen to Chandler, but either way the Sharif matter needed to be negotiated before his mind got cluttered up worse.

So he lied to the kid, which he hated doing, but you couldn’t keep dragging him into this stuff--but halfway to Marina Del Rey he remembered, God dang it, what about the brick.

Chris made a decision as Sharif laid it out--a spur of the moment one but solid--to employ the *Kyle* method on this new guy, whose name was Buckley.

Sheez, Buckley as your first name, sounds like someone from a New England prep school, but that was beside the point, and you *did* have the TV actor Buckley Board, who was a tough guy, at least on screen.

Not the *full* Kyle method, which was the guy opening the door in that sleepy subdivision north of Phoenix and saying hi and crashing the piece of red rock into his face.

But the implication of the Kyle method, holding a chunk of rock as you negotiate your settlement.

The problem being this was LA now, not the desert, and you weren’t going to run across a brick or big rock laying around, so he needed a Home Depot.

Which unfortunately meant backtracking like an idiot to Rosekrans, and down, all kind of stoplights to contend with, until you got to the shopping center with the box stores.

There was a Barnes and Noble there too, and Chris almost said screw it and go in and pick up an Elmore Leonard novel, grab a coffee and make yourself comfortable like the multiple other doofuses were doing in there on a Saturday night--but he caught himself and went into Home Depot.

Which wasn’t easy in itself, purchasing one lone brick, unless the guy trying to help him was confused, but eventually in the outdoor garden section there was some patio paraphernalia and he came away with one, beige this time, maybe not as imposing as the Kyle deal, but it would have to do.

At this point, being all the way down by the 405 you might as well jump on and take your chances, and traffic was surprisingly light until he got to Wilshire, and then it crawled to the guy’s neighborhood but overall you couldn’t complain.

The guy lived on Valerkin Court, two miles from the ocean, which sounded fancier than it was.

You had a series of four-family houses staggered around a cul de sac, not a suburban cul de sac with kids on bikes and skateboards and the free-standing basketball hoop, but a no-nonsense one, oil spots on the ground and older vehicles and debris, the whole thing surprisingly working class considering Santa Monica was one of the richer towns in California.

One consideration, since there wasn't much privacy-- if the jerkell *was* home, did you try to go inside and negotiate, rather than stand there looking like a nutcase with your brick?

The unit was upstairs in back, and a guy answered and Chris asked for Buckley Kitchell, and the guy said politely that was him, and what could he help him with?

"The answer to that," Chris said, "could be a long story or a short one . . . but *Nour Zaman*? You can't just please lay off and be done with it?"

Buckley's lips tightened slightly but without missing much of a beat he said, "What'd she tell you?"

"*She* . . . didn't tell me *anything*," Chris said. "And I'm not here to judge anyone, far from it. I'm just doing my job."

"So it's nothing personal," Buckley said, looking squarely at Chris now.

The guy was on the ball and at least had a little flair, probably the kind of guy if you met him in a bar and don't know any history you could tolerate talking to.

"You got it," Chris said. "It's easier if I step in for a minute, have you sign something, then we're hunky dory and we can *both* be out of each other's hair."

"And get on with our weekends," the guy said. And he half-smiled and let Chris in and closed the door.

Of course there'd be nothing to sign, but why not keep things *sounding* official for as long as you could, and meanwhile get the lay of the land here.

The place was comfortable enough, and neat, and the TV was on low to a news-talk show, and if the guy did have a roommate--or who knows, another girlfriend--there was no sign of them at the moment.

"You ever go surfing or anything?" Chris said.

"Do I go *surfing*," the guy said. "Really dude?"

Chris hated being called dude, so that amped up the intensity level just a bit. They were standing there in the living room, the guy not offering anywhere to sit and Chris fine with it, the brick dangling in his right hand.

Chris said, "But the other business, you can't let it *go*? I mean you're not a *great* looking guy, but you don't look *that* bad . . . you should be able to re-group, I mean Jeez."

"Reel in another fish," the guy said, and his laugh was obnoxious but also maybe a little maniacal Chris decided, which wasn't good.

Chris said, "At any rate . . . in the interest of expediting matters, so we can get on with our respective evenings . . . and if you could do me a favor and raise your right hand . . . Do you agree that should you contact the party again, through any means, you accept getting injured?"

The guy laughed again, more of a short snort this time. “You’re a piece of work there bud. Amateur Hour 101 . . . What’s your *real* deal?”

Chris was thinking, heck, he had the bat in the trunk didn’t he? Would that have made more sense?

Or maybe you *could* offer him a deal, requiring this Buckley to come to your storage unit, and lock *him* in there for a while. Then, what do you know, you make the deal with the art guy to sell him the ‘fake’ after all for the 50 bucks, and when he comes to pick it up, *son of a gun, how’d this guy get in here?*

And while the two of them are sorting it out you lock ‘em *both* in there and this time take your time remembering.

Ooh boy . . . in a perfect world, you might indeed be able to maneuver the pieces like that, but right now you needed to stop the lunacy and come back to earth.

Chris hit the guy under the rib cage with the brick, pretty hard.

It was too bad it came to this, no way was the intention to actually *employ* the damn thing.

Meanwhile the guy was doubled over at a weird angle, slightly scary, and had a wide-eyed look.

Chris was thinking, Jeez, at least fall down. Don’t stagger around like the guy in *Deliverance* for about twenty minutes in the woods after Bert Reynolds shoots the arrow through him.

Then the guy started breathing funny, still on his feet.

Now Chris was started to panic, could he have hit the guy directly on the heart, and he was having a heart attack?

Holy Smokes . . . he’d read about those situations, rare but still, where a high school kid in a baseball games gets hit with the ball in the chest and that’s it.

A freak thing, but why hit someone in the heart if you don’t have to?

Fortunately right around then the guy straightened up and staggered to the bathroom and closed the door for a while, and Chris could hear the water running intermittently but also the guy throwing up a few times and who knows what else.

Finally the guy re-appeared, a little color back in him thank God, and Chris said, “I apologize. I didn’t mean to do that. You calling me *Bud* and *Dude* hit a nerve and I snapped.”

The guy motioned like it was okay. He was trying to take deep breaths, like he wasn’t at all convinced he was out of the woods, and wanted to make sure all the parts still worked.

“Well what’d you say to her, anyway,” Chris said, “that necessitated us having to meet?”

This was going against what he’d told Ken, that the specifics didn’t matter, but he couldn’t help it, he was curious.

The guy took a minute. It was clear he didn’t feel like talking much, but at the same time he didn’t want to say the wrong thing and get hit again.

Chris said, “If it makes you feel any better, we’re done with the violence.” He laid the brick down and held up his palms to the guy like *no harm no foul* in basketball. He said,

“Again, that’s my bad. Just lay it on me, what you been telling her, since you won’t be doing it anymore . . . Look at it as a catharsis.” Chris forced a big smile.

Buckley said, “Fine. I struggled with it for a while . . . I expressed that to her.”

“Past tense then, right?” Chris said.

“Dude--I’m sorry--but yeah, rear view mirror.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Chris said. “Meanwhile, you hungry?”

Not sure why that popped out, since he *did* already eat, obviously, but he wanted to soften things up before he took off, kind of the way Ken would do it . . . although he’d started off trying that with the surfing question and that backfired.

But the guy said, “You’re kidding right? We’re supposed to break bread now together, or some shit? . . . You gotta be out of your fricking mind.”

Chris said he was right, it was an admittedly strange idea, and like they were saying earlier, enjoy the rest of the weekend and let me know if you need anything.

That part was out of left field too, but who cares, and for some crazy reason he *was* a little hungry now after raising the subject to the idiot, and he remembered a pretty good Chinese place on Wilshire from years ago and wondered if it was still there . . . big place, specialized in seafood.

And son of a gun there it was, and crowded too, but they found a spot for him at a big round table with two couples where he wouldn’t be in the way, and he went with the special of the day, the steamed fish with black bean sauce, and it was pretty dang amazing.

As he was finishing up he started thinking again how things never quite go according to script--and that’s if there even *is* one.

A case in point would be that fiction writing class he took at the College of Marin.

That class he took the class on account of the professor, a strikingly voluptuous woman named Jill.

She was technically his colleague, since he was an adjunct instructor there himself, teaching a beginning journalism class.

In fact that’s what he’d be doing right now, this fall, except the diagnosis got in the way and it seemed wise to put the brakes on extra activities. He supposed he was officially on sabbatical.

College of Marin a rinky-dink operation compared to a normal 4-year school, and there was minimal interaction between the faculty.

But one night Marlene showed up as he was dismissing his class and asked some unimportant question about switching rooms next week because she had a guest speaker and he had powerpoint setup in his, or some BS.

Either way, she radiated a healthy dose of sensuality, moving around just enough in an extremely tight green dress, her skin slightly dark, Chris guessing she had some exotic middle-eastern in her somewhere.

So Chris signed up for the course, Creative Writing 10, and if you could keep your focus on the material it wasn’t bad, and Chris tried his hand at fiction for the first time.

The hardest part was not the mechanics of it, or mastering the 3-act structure, or making sure you started off with a bang--none of that. It was allowing himself to open up on the page.

You didn't get that in journalism, where you were on the outside, arm's length from the subject matter. But here, this was a foreign experience. It was about *you*, no matter how you disguised it.

At one of the student-teacher conferences Jill remarked how his defenses kept kicking in, essentially spoiling all his writing, and Chris couldn't disagree . . . though his comment back to her was: How about we go *out*?

He tried that a few other times, different circumstances, struck out, and the semester ended and he supposed it had been worthwhile.

And dang, as he was thinking about it . . . next trip up there, why not look her up again?

But the point being . . . in that class he tried outlining stuff and it never worked. You rack your brain and come up with an elaborate plan, each chapter ending a certain way and feeding into the next, each character behaving or mis-behaving in accordance with your master plan--and then a couple paragraphs into the first chapter, *boom*, one of the characters says something and it comes out of their mouth a little different than you anticipated, and the whole shebang is thrown off.

A minor character might be more interesting than you thought, so you let them take over matters, and the big event you planned turns out to be a dud, and something replaces it.

In a nutshell, that's what he was chewing on back at Buckley's. You couldn't script this shit out. You couldn't force the issue and be Ken and all friendly and diplomatic if that wasn't your deal . . . Even though Ken at this moment probably *would* be having dinner with the guy, and they'd be having a good time and the guy would have already forgotten about Sharif's niece.

So . . . paying the tab and grabbing a toothpick . . . the question was, should you throw the script in the garbage once more and head back over there?

That was a tough one. There was something about the guy's tone, the incredulous part about breaking the bread together, that didn't sit quite right.

Chris tried to convince himself it wasn't personal--forget that aspect--but there was a small window of question whether the guy got the message.

Damn it.

And this was the thing. You have instincts for a reason. Why get fancy?

The right thing all along would have been, the guy opens the door you smoke him in the mouth right there. Displace a bunch of stuff, no discussion whatsoever. It worked just fine with Kyle, so what were you thinking?

That you'd *used up* that way of doing it, and you'd have to evolve it into something else now?

Ridiculous . . . and all this energy and time wasted when he had a *lot* better things to be worrying about.

So he drove back Valertin Lane or whatever it was.

Buckley opened the door and Chris moved forward and Buckley backed up a step into the apartment entry, and when Chris was convinced they had enough privacy he stuck the gun into the scumbag's right temple.

No need to say anything this time, Chris stayed with *that* part of the script, and he kept the guy's head under control for 45 seconds, and when he felt reasonably confident the guy's life had flashed before him a few times, he nodded and left.

This time he did take the lazy back-way home, through Venice and Marina del Rey and El Segundo, and it was a bright moon tonight and there were stretches north of MB where you could pick up the ocean, and he opened the windows wide.

That's how you do it, Chris thought.



Chapter Thirteen

It was around 10 when he got back and Ken was in the kitchen fixing a bowl of cereal.

“You’re looking pretty animated,” Chris said. “Like you’ve been up to something.”

“Ah well,” Ken said. “I was in the pool, and Stacey happened to come by and say hi.”

“On no.”

“What?”

“Forget it . . . none of my business.”

Chris felt a little bad reacting that way. On the one hand the kid sure seemed better off since that fell apart, but you couldn’t blame him for wanting some female company for Gosh sakes.

“At any rate,” Chris said, “how’s everything else?”

Ken took a minute to finish wolfing down the cereal and said, “Boss I feel like you’re dancing around *your* deal now. What happened with the art person tonight?”

“No, no,” Chris said. “I failed on all counts. Emma, like I said, I swung by there but nothing doing. The art guy the same.”

“That was *it*? It took you a while then.”

“There was something else . . . what am I thinking . . . oh yeah I went to Home Depot.”

“What for?”

“Walk around, browse . . . Jeez, you got a problem with *everything* suddenly.”

“That’d be a lot of walking around though, you would think.”

Chris shook his head. Ken was looking out for him once again, but this was getting ridiculous.

He started back to the bedroom but his phone buzzed. He was pretty confident the Santa Monica doofus wouldn’t be calling the police, but given that and a few other things lately you better see what this was.

Chris said hello and then mostly listened, sticking a word in here and there and then the call ended and he said to no one in particular, “Oh no.”

Ken said, “Second one of those . . . You sure you’re good?”

“My brother’s coming,” Chris said. “With a couple of female companions it sounds like.”

“So? That’ll be *great* for you.”

“No. This *oh no*’s for real . . . You don’t have a handle on it like I do, but believe me, this is totally discombobulating.”

“Ah . . . so they’re staying with you and everything?”

“I offered it like that, yes, when they called me up north, mainly so I could end the call . . . meaning it was off the cuff, but I never thought they’d *take me up* on it, especially the issues I’ve had with my brother.”

“I’m happy for you then. *Really*. That you’ve turned the corner . . . And don’t worry about me, I’ll clear 100 percent out of here in the morning.”

“No,” Chris said, massaging the situation. “What we’ll do then, we’ll get a room over at Sharif’s. Hopefully it’ll only be a day or two, they realize these beach towns are more glitz than substance.”

“Wait . . . I thought you loved it here.”

“I *do*. But maybe their experience’ll be different . . . you think?”

“No.”

“Me neither.”

“That’s another thing,” Ken said. “The Sharif niece concern. Any more ideas on that?”

“You know something?” Chris said. “You’re starting to remind me of *me*, the way you’re slinging shit around . . . What, you keeping track of my life now, waiting to check stuff off?”

“Not at all . . . I wasn’t implying that in the least.”

“I’m *joking*,” Chris said. “Jeez.”

“Either way,” Ken said, “The least I can do, I’m paying for that room at Sharif’s. I have plenty of income now.”

“You’ll pay worse, you don’t shut your mouth on that subject . . . What else you got going? Give me a different direction here.”

“Hmm.”

“Oh, and what I meant to add . . . don’t extend invitations unless you mean it. This doesn’t pertain to you personally--necessarily--just some general-life advice from an old guy in the cheap seats.”

“Like *you* did, you mean?”

“Right . . . you’ll see it as you get into more social occasions, people feeling giddy and making grandiose plans and regretting them later. Like at my reunion up there, you needed a violin to drown out the hyperbole.”

“Something missing in their lives then? That they want to add in? Without fully committing to, you’re saying?”

“Dang it, you’re getting smarter . . . Must have been the pool. See what I mean, that water on your head, it helps.”

Ken said, “Okay jumping back around . . . you really did *not* meet the art buyer tonight?”

“Dog, I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“Thank you . . . What are the options there again?”

“I’m not sure there particularly *were* options, that I might have shared with *you*.”

Ken waited patiently.

Chris said, "But seeing as how I'm in a funky mood now that I've absorbed that phone call . . . Fine. I gotta either put up or shut up Tuesday . . . is where we stand."

Ken wanted more detail and Chris spilled it out, most of it, softening the locking-the-guy-*in* part.

Ken took his spot on the couch and didn't say anything.

"The wheels are churning," Chris said. "You have that look."

"Okay, why don't we do this then . . ."

"Jesus, *we*."

"Let's see if we can get a postponement on the Tuesday deadline. You think we can?"

Already, Chris didn't like the kid's level of involvement, but the answer, he was pretty sure, was you normally could if you had a solid reason, such as not being able to complete that AXY test yet.

"Probably," he said. "What they *don't* like, is you not showing up, no communication . . . I don't blame 'em there. I hate that too in people. They're trying to run a business."

"So can you go in tomorrow and get the extension?"

"Tomorrow's Sunday."

"So? It's the police."

"I'll try . . . except not sure I want to hear, but what do you got up your sleeve?"

"Just the usual. I'll speak to him. We should be able to find some common ground."

"I *did* speak to him. On more than one occasion . . . Difficult gentleman."

"That's just it," Ken said. "I won't go in there anticipating him to be an enemy."

"Good vibrations you're throwing off, you mean."

"I guess . . ."

"Okay I'll give it a shot," Chris said, "with the fake extension. Only because I want to prove you wrong. This's going to be one of those non-negotiables. You'll see."

Of course Chris was praying that miraculously the kid *could* butter the guy up . . . but the prospect was grim.

And that was if that officer, Garcia, wasn't in a bad mood to start with and charged him with something for jerking him around.

Back to this other thing . . . Should he call Sharif and a) tell him he met with Buckley, and b) tell him he needed a good deal on a unit over there for God knows how long?

Not right now. It had been a full day--not to mention Floyd and Allison and Monica were just enough off-the-charts that they might not show up at all, so why get ahead of it.

He said goodnight to Ken and went back in the bedroom, and since he hadn't checked on a couple things in a while, he took a look.

First was an update on Smith from the Santa Rosa *Press Examiner*.

And sort of interesting . . .

Sebastopol Firm Linked to Indicted Miami Financial Advisor

by Taylor Sturgeon

November 4th, 2019--A Sebastopol-based entertainment business, Megatron Productions, had ties in 2014 to Miami, Florida, financial advisor David Gerkhe, who is scheduled to stand trial in February on federal wire fraud violations, the *Press Examiner* has learned.

The connection between Megatron and Gerkhe is unclear, other than Megatron is listed in court documents, along with eighteen other companies, as a 2014 client.

Megatron CEO Gerald Smith was found slain Monday off of West Sierra Avenue west of 101.

A sheriff's spokesman says police are pursuing "a couple of promising leads" but the case is thus far unsolved.

Megatron has occupied its current office space on Morris Street since 1997, records show.

Been down that road before, Chris thought, the BS (hopefully) announcing the promising leads.

Doubtful though those leads, if there are any, include some doofus in Miami, but you never know.

What you have here most likely is some enterprising young reporter, fresh out of a junior college somewhere, trying to make a splash by uncovering an astonishing connection . . . but you had to give the kid credit for digging around.

If it were a real story, the Chronicle would have picked it up . . . but still, what was the harm in at least distracting the police for a few days.

In a perfect world, maybe you could tie the Miami guy, or one of his cronies, to Thad too, and for that matter the wayward driver out there . . . meaning the ballistics . . . and then you'd have a 3-ring circus of speculation going.

Wait a second . . . it was the *Chico* guy, McCall, that would have tied in to Thad and the other Idaho guy . . . Smith was the *hammer*. No connection to anything. *Jeez*.

Again these little mix-ups worried Chris a bit. Maybe he needed some more chromium in his diet, or whatever it was the Whole Foods gal was recommending to someone for brain efficiency last time he was in there, not looking for any nutrients himself, but for some of those chocolate-covered almonds they have.

But maybe his diet and nutrition *was* all screwed up at that, and he was starting to pay the price.

Whatever. The second article was from the Chico Statesman, dated yesterday.

**Police Seek Public's Help in CSA Maintenance Killing
by Ronald Frontone**

November 3rd, 2019--Butte County and Cal State University police are asking for the public's help in the Wednesday night death of Chico State University employee Mason B. McCall.

McCall, 38, of 418 Beale Street, was discovered in an outbuilding adjacent to the stadium, the apparent victim of a gunshot.

Authorities say they are to this point baffled by what may have precipitated the incident.

CSU spokesperson Nadia Cosquer said McCall was a "reliable employee" who had worked campus Fields-and-Facilities maintenance since 2014.

McCall was previously employed as a woodcutter in Bend, Oregon, a family friend said.

Ty Trok, of the Butte County Sheriff's Office, said police are appealing for the public's help.

"Anything you might have seen or thought of, even if you don't consider it important, might aid us substantially in the solving of this crime," Trok said.

Good. Looks thin enough. Once again, there's always the likelihood they're holding shit back--such as whether they think there's a connection to that robbery the next day--not to mention there'd be forensics, but Chris's gut told him they probably *were* reaching out to the public.

Chris was relieved he never did one of those *Ancestry.com* tests you see on TV.

He'd thought of it a few times, these last 9 months, since the diagnosis, that it would good to go down the tubes at least knowing what you *were*.

Both sides of the family were scrambled up, background wise.

It would be fun to pin it down. One guy he read about--guy spent his life hating minorities, and then gets tested and comes back 13 percent African-American.

Chris never did it, which was lucky because by forking over your 79 bucks you likely added yourself to some master DNA database.

That was one more thing you weren't going to ask Chandler about, even though you wanted to.

Bottom line--leaving some possible genetics in the vicinity of McCall didn't freak him out. *Necessarily*.

He checked his messages, and there was one. That Laurel gal, if you could believe it. Miranda's ex-boyfriend's wife. Just indicating she was checking in.

Chris took a deep breath on that one and sat up at attention. Checking in--and warning him that his name, or someone who seemed like him, was being circulated through the grapevine in Chico?

And Jesus you had that other husband, of Laurel's friend the broker--who *was* a Chico cop.

Chris tried to re-trace the whole shebang--what could I possibly have screwed up?

He wasn't going to get a wink of sleep by wondering, so he texted Laurel, and a minute later she replied, her concern being when was he going to come back up and look for more houses, and he's welcome to stay at their place no problem.

He replied that he'd keep it in mind and shut off the light . . . and, totally unimportant compared to that worst case scenario there for a second, but he was pretty sure Laurel's invitation didn't include Miranda.



Chapter Fourteen

The knock on the door came about 6:15. Chris turned over and you could hear birds starting to wake up and tweet, and if you used your imagination you could hear the ocean stirring in the distance.

What Chris first thought, the knocking was part of his dream, he was in his childhood room, and the Zodiac killer was tapping.

It wasn't scary, Chris knew the Zodiac wasn't there to get *him*. The guy wanted to know which bus to take back downtown. He'd killed the cab driver and had part of the bloody shirt, which he would send pieces of to the newspapers.

Chris's understanding in the dream was the Zodiac was staying in the YMCA downtown, the foot of Market Street.

He was ready to tell Zodiac that from here, outside the Broadway gate of the Presidio, your options are go over two blocks and get the *3 Jackson*, or down three and get the *41 Union*.

Chris was also going to throw in if you went down a couple more blocks you could the *30 Stockton* as well . . .

Except *whoever the heck it was* knocked again, louder.

He opened his eyes and he could hear Ken stirring in the other room, and Chris's heart rate shot into overdrive and he had a profound sense of devastating panic.

For a second, he wondered if you could climb out the little bedroom window, and disappear somehow-- but meanwhile Ken was at the front door asking a couple questions, and then *boom*, he opens up, Chris frozen in the hall halfway between the bedroom and living room in his pajamas.

"Chrissie!" Allison said, barging in past Ken like she owned the place and giving Chris a huge hug.

Monica was next, struggling to angle not one but two suitcases through the door.

No sign of Floyd.

"Well what a surprise," Chris said.

"Isn't it though?" Monica said. "We absolutely *adore* road trips . . . But you knew that already."

“Chris took us to Arizona once,” Allison was saying to Ken, not bothering to ask who he was or introduce herself, or anything close.

“I might have heard something about that,” Ken said. He seemed half awake at most, not to mention a little uncomfortable with the situation.

“Al, don’t forget,” Monica said, “we started off, we went to Idaho first.”

“That’s *right*,” Allison said, “That’s where Chris tried the prostitute.”

“Jesus Criminy,” Chris said, looking over at Ken and trying to make eye contact that they’re being ridiculous, except that didn’t work because Ken was staring at the wall, probably hoping *he* was back in the middle of a dream.

“No wait a moment,” Monica said. “The prostitute, she was in Nevada, remember? Winnemucca.”

“*Oh* yes . . . Hey Chrissie, weren’t you supposed to take us there on the way back? So Mon and I could see what that was all about?”

“Yeah, what *happened* with that?” Monica said.

Chris decided it’d be worth a couple of grand out of his pocket, if you could pay to mute these two idiots right now.

“My brother got in the way,” he said. “Speaking of which.”

“Unh-huh . . . well,” Allison said, “Floyd’s here, but he’s still in the car.”

“Is that right,” Chris said.

“Now *please?*” Monica said. “This is so great to be here finally, you don’t know. Can we start off on a good note?”

“*Finally?*” Chris said. “I’ve only been here a couple weeks, tops.”

“We’re just *saying*,” Allison said, “Being back together. And the brothers reuniting. One big family unit.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Chris said. “I feel . . . in fact I *know*, you’re still mad at me for getting mixed up that time and missing your open mic . . . You’re a very stubborn person.”

“Allison is a singer-songwriter,” Monica explained to Ken.

Ken nodded politely and Chris said, “We need to back this up a second, show a little integrity here . . . This is my friend Ken . . . Kenny, that’s Monica on the left, and Allison.”

“We know who he is by now,” Monica said, “I mean we have the idea, *obviously*.”

“You’re cute, by the way,” Allison said to Ken.

“He is,” Monica said, and Chris was getting *deja vu*, thinking didn’t they both react like that to Kim when they first met *her*, in the old apartment on Broderick?

One more reminder that trying to figure out their *real* story, these two, was too complicated--and not even close to being worth it.

“How *is* the music?” Chris said.

“Fine. Those songs you helped me with? They’re my best ones now. I close with two of them.”

Chris said, “Well that’s good . . . and how about the traffic down? Can’t imagine you had much of an issue, the timing and all.”

“Chrissie, your stalling,” Monica said.

“Big-time,” Allison said.

“If I could interject,” Ken said, “I believe they’re wanting you to go out to the car.”

“Well you’re a sweetheart,” Allison said. “Thank you for being right in tune with us.”

She went over to Ken and took a good look at him and starting brushing back his hair.

“You have nice lines,” she said.

Chris decided he did need to go out to the car, if only to avoid having to witness any more of this.

He threw on his sweat clothes and went outside and looked around and there were a couple of empty spots in the lot but no sign of his brother, so either he’d gotten cold feet and taken off, or was parked around the corner.

As mad as he’d been at the guy, it was tough seeing your little brother scrunched over to the side of the front seat, scared to see you.

A million thoughts went swirling around, and then it was clear . . . and Chris opened the passenger door, and for a second Floyd recoiled like something was going to happen, and Chris reached in and held his shoulder and kissed him on the forehead.

Floyd started to cry.

Chris said, “You keep that up, I’m going to have to take it back.”

Floyd got out and they embraced, which should have done the job, but Floyd seemed over-the-top emotional, and Chris was afraid things were going to escalate to where, *Jesus*, he might start apologizing real loud, and sobbing in between, out there in the middle of the street, 6:30 in the morning on a Sunday, and some neighbor’d be liable to call the police.

So Chris pulled out the trusty hole card. “Hey,” he said. “Let’s keep it real here . . . *did you eat?*”

Floyd said he hadn’t and that sounded pretty good, and Chris was relatively confident the eye of the storm was over, and he helped Floyd get a bag out of the trunk and they went upstairs.

By this point a haircut was underway, Ken with his shirt off and both Allison and Monica fiddling around with him, passing a pair of scissors back and forth past his ear a little too casually, but having fun, not really doing much, and you could tell Ken was okay with it too.

“Wait, you’re not being clear,” Allison was saying to Ken, “you *do* have a girlfriend?”

Chris cleared his throat. “Ken, this is Floyd.” They shook hands and Chris said, “We thought we’d go have breakfast.”

“You two, you mean?” Monica said.

“Well yeah,” Chris said, “that was kind of the deal. It’s been a while.”

“We understand,” Allison said. “Bonding.”

“Good idea,” Monica said, the translation being it wasn’t.

“Where were you thinking?” Ken said, perking up himself.

“Ah Christ,” Chris said. “I knew this was going to happen. Now, a) there goes my quiet time with my brother.”

“There’s a b?” Monica said.

“Yeah. Little bacon and eggs now’s going to run me a hundred bucks.”

“That’s fine, we won’t come,” Allison said.

“It was a *joke*,” Chris said. “You’re as bad as *this* guy, in the gullible department.”

“*Kenny* falls for stuff, you mean?” Monica said. “Well wherever you found him, you did good . . . How’d that come about?”

“I’ll tell you at breakfast. We have to be quiet walking into town. No one’s up, except for the surfers.”

“We have to *walk*?” Allison said. “We just did all that driving. We’re beat.”

“Exactly,” Chris said.

She gave him a look but soon enough they’d all five made the left turn out of the *Cheater Five* and were in the luxury neighborhood and up on the crest of the hill, and the sun was coming up and the ocean was in view, and things could be worse, though it had already been quite a morning and Chris needed that first cup of coffee in the worst way.

Chris said, “Not at the top of my list of fun stuff to do . . . but I guess I need to stop by that police station.”

They were outside *The Kettle*, on Highland Avenue, an hour-and-a-half breakfast taken care of.

“Huh?” Floyd said.

“We’ll come too,” Allison said. “Where is it? . . . And *why* is it?”

“Redondo,” Chris said. “This is when a bike would come in handy. Too far to walk, so now I have to go back and get the car.”

“Something you should have thought of,” Monica said. “Though thank you for forcing us. The exercise felt good, and that food was scrumptious.”

“Except,” Floyd said, “I over-ordered.”

“So did Chrissie, I noticed,” Monica said. “Big gap filled in this morning. You two are excited. We’re so relieved about that.”

“We *are*,” Allison said. “That was the purpose of the trip . . . it just didn’t feel like it was going to straighten itself out otherwise.”

“Bull by the horns then,” Chris said, not quite coming out and saying it, but thinking, *welp*, since you have *mission accomplished*, that mean you’ll be taking off soon, and things can re-stabilize around here?

“Now that we have that out of the way, we can enjoy Manhattan Beach like a real vacation,” Allison said.

“Ah,” Chris said.

“I’ll run and get the car,” Ken said. “It won’t take long.”

“Me too,” Allison said. “I’ll help you get it.”

"I'm going to be the sensible one, and have a look at the *beach* for Gosh sakes," Monica said. "Surprising to see some minimal swimwear going that direction already. Pretty early, plus it's November."

"That's the way it works around here," Chris said. "They tough it out, strut their stuff for the tourists like you."

Floyd said, "I hear you . . . Time I was here before, not right *here* but down in Laguna, there'd be people spending the whole day working out."

"It *can* intimidate you," Chris said. "But go with Monica. I'm good, we'll catch up later."

"You sure?" Floyd said, and Chris waved them on their way, since it was clear Floyd wasn't real comfortable yet talking one-on-one . . . and what would you say, really?

Ken got back pretty quick, his own car, taking a big chance double-parking it right in front of Starbucks, the cops down here money-machines as you got close to the beach.

Ken said, "You don't mind, we'll go back, and you can switch cars."

"What other way is there?" Chris said, but he was aware of Ken preoccupied now, which people like Allison had a way of doing to you, and he didn't want to embarrass the kid by asking where she was at the moment.

Either way, he had a job to do, and at the *Cheater Five* he got out and back in the Camry and GPS'd the police station and gave a little wave to Ken who was heading upstairs, and he hit the road and hoped for the best.

Hmm . . .

And meanwhile something was going to transpire in the apartment these next few minutes, you could bet on *that* . . . but it wasn't your concern.

You tended to hold your breath *anyway* when you went into a police station, even if you were the good guy, because the atmosphere dictated it, and this was no different--*except possibly much worse* . . . because could they have put together a composite of him from up north, and all an All-Points-Bulletin or some shit?

Chris took a moment to calm down before he got out, reminding himself he was being delusional, and he relaxed a little more when he saw it was a casual modern low-rise that could have been a library or an H&R Bloch in a strip mall.

No, Officer Garcia was off today, a friendly guy manning the desk told him, but could he assist him with something?

Chris gave his name and the Tuesday business, and the guy punched around on the computer and said, "Would a week work? For the extension?"

Chris said that should be fine, and the guy wrote out a slip of paper with the date and handed it to him and mentioned it was supposed to hit low 80's today inland, so we should be in good shape.

Chris thanked him and got out of there, a little thrown off that it was that routine, having been all prepared to make an excuse for the delay, and the whole scenario was so darn friendly that he wondered if you did nothing would it just go away.

Which these things didn't, unfortunately . . . so let the kid do his thing, give it a go . . . for better or worse you have an extra week before you have to cave in.

It had been so quick that he figured you better not stop back at the apartment quite yet, so to kill a little time he went over to Sharif's.

You had to hand it to the guy, he was out there with the clippers himself, trimming one of the motel hedges along the back walkway, and he saw Chris and perked up.

"I did speak to the person," Chris said, holding his hand up with his fingers crossed. "Nothing ever etched in stone, but my gut says we're good."

Sharif put down the clippers and stood there processing it, mumbling under his breath, and slowly turned to Chris looking like was going to anoint him king of something.

"What?" Chris said. "Sounded like you were bringing Allah into it there."

"My friend," Sharif said, his voice going slightly high, "I am truly in your debt. Anything I can do--middle of the night, included--please do not hesitate."

"How about a room for tonight?" Chris said.

Sharif thought he was joking for a moment, realized he wasn't, and then frowned.

"Jeez," Chris said. "You just *asked* . . . Not the end of the world, I had some visitors show up is all."

"So unpleasant to have to say . . . but we are totally booked. Both motels. Highly unusual for November."

"Yeah, well, it happens I guess . . . I see they got some sort of X-Games at the Staples Center. Maybe that's it. The overflow."

"I feel just awful . . . Okay how about this then? . . . My wife and I, we shall vacate our master bedroom and double up with our relatives. You stay there."

Sharif brightened up with the suggestion, and that sounded like a terrible idea, much worse than having to stay squeezed in the *Cheater Five*, and that was never going to happen.

Some guy in sunglasses and a swim suit with a big gut came out of one of the rooms and spotted Sharif.

"Hey bud," he said. "We got bugs in the shower. You need to send someone."

The guy waited for a reaction and Sharif took his time.

"Did you hear what I said?" Beer Gut said. "Or, when something needs fixin' . . . then it's no speaky-English?"

Chris considered making a comment to the guy, keeping it light, confusing him a bit . . . but he could see Sharif really chewing on it now, and figured it'd be more fun to keep his mouth shut and see how this plays out.

Sharif said, "Okay, fine. Out! Get off of this *place*. Immediately!"

"Hunh?" the beer gut doofus said.

"Now! You're not welcome here!"

"Bud . . . calm down . . . all's I did, what anyone else *would* . . . point out you're running a sub-standard establishment . . . You got a problem with some of that?"

The fake bravado now. The guy's girlfriend or wife was in the doorway of the room, and an older couple passing by had stopped as well.

Sharif said, "Sir, if I could ask you, what rate did we charge you, currently?"

"Since you bring it up," the guy said, "\$149 plus tax . . . Which adds up to highway robbery."

Chris could grudgingly agree with the guy there, his own motel tribulations still a bit of a sore spot.

"Fine," Sharif said. "Ten percent room tax amounts to \$165 . . . Here's 300 dollars to please evacuate."

He was still using that word *evacuate*, kind of cute actually, and meanwhile the guy's jaw pretty much dropped open.

Sharif had the cash out, separating it from his money clip, 3 bills extended toward the guy.

The guy looked at his wife and you couldn't tell what they were thinking, and he narrowed his eyes at Sharif and said, "Five."

"Four," Sharif said. "Provided you've completed your evacuation in 10 minutes . . . The clock starts now." Looking at Chris, who gladly pulled out his phone and started the countdown.

"Fine, except I said five," the guy said.

"Nope," Sharif said, and he picked up his clippers and went back to work.

Sure enough, about 8 minutes later the guy's trunk was open and they were packed up and he was handing over the plastic key card, and Sharif pulled the 400 bucks back out and handed *it* over and wished the guy pleasant travels, and a couple minutes later they'd driven away.

Chris let it settle for a minute and said, "Dang . . . I would have scooped up those bugs *for* you. Saved you a wad of dough."

"You've saved me already," Sharif said. "Let me see, what number are we here . . . 119? Please allow me a half hour, and it will be all yours."

The older couple who'd stopped and watched had moved on, and Chris was thinking they'd gotten some unexpected action this morning which should keep them busy for a while.

Sharif was on his phone, giving instructions to housekeeping, and when he finished Chris said, "I won't argue with you, but I'll make it up to you."

Sharif shook his head like Chris was crazy. Chris said, "You look like a pushover, you want to know the truth. But you got some reasonably serious backbone."

Sharif half-smiled, Chris figuring he wasn't sure how to take it.

Chris looked around and lowered his voice and said, "I see now, it's good I was able to reason with your niece's gentleman."

He waited and Sharif didn't say anything.

"Because if it kept going," Chris said, "and nothing else worked, you might have killed him. And then life as you know it would have been over."

“Don’t be silly,” Sharif said.

Chris said goodbye, for now, and thanked him for the room, and as he drove away he thought of the guy’s heritage, and the tribes lining the Kyber Pass--and family honor going back centuries--and he was pretty convinced that’s what would have happened.



Chapter Fifteen

Ken was there by himself when Chris got back, and the place had the fragrant spell of people recently showering.

“What happened to Allison?” Chris said.

“I dropped her off. Back down at the beach . . . Listen, I want to get started on the art thing today. Could I please get the information on your storage room?”

“The *key*, you mean, you’re asking for?”

“Well, yes, that’d be nice.”

“I can’t imagine what you’d be doing in there,” Chris said, “unless *you too* now have joined the doubters, and you want to inspect it to see if it’s fake.”

“You figure, always best to negotiate from a position of strength,” Ken said, poker-faced. “Know what you have.”

Chris didn’t care for this at all, and was worried that if Ken tried to meet the guy there the guy might bring someone with him this time, and could Ken be in a situation? . . . And then he remembered it’s on record with the police, obviously, so that’s unlikely . . . either way he didn’t like this spinning out of his control.

“Do me a favor,” Chris said, pulling the storage room key off his ring, “don’t be rendezvousing with anyone there, by yourself. Let me know first.”

“Boss, absolutely,” he said.

Definitely unconvincing, but Chris let it go for now and said, “Don’t you want to know how I made out over there? Pleading my case under oath?”

“The extension? Yeah I saw you got it. I still want to get on this today though.”

“Wait . . . what are you talking about, you *saw*?”

“It’s online. The case. I just checked. We have like nine days.”

“Son of a gun . . . I really *am* out of touch with the modern world, worse than I thought . . . I suppose you have the guy’s name and address then too, you’re all set?”

“Oh yeah. It’s all part of the filing . . . One thing I feel bad about, cancelling on Chandler today.”

“Oh. So you guys play most days?”

“Pretty much. I mean work gets in the way, but they have the lights for later if we need them.”

“Sheez . . . well . . . you think I should fill in today?”

Ken seemed genuinely excited. “That’d be great, because he was disappointed, I could tell . . . But what about your brother . . . and the others?”

Chris gave him a look. “I could ask you the same thing,” he said.

It hung there and Ken said, “At any rate Boss, if there’s nothing else . . . I’m off.”

Chris watched him go, tried to catch himself from speculating what might have gone on in here this morning, and called Chandler, who was clearly thrilled to have the opportunity to kick his ass in an hour.

“How bout we just do drills this time?” Chris said. “Remember when you gave me a bunch of those? They weren’t enjoyable, but I think you helped my game.”

The best thing about the drills being, you didn’t lose on any scoreboard, where this guy could go home and tell people the results, or joke around about it to Kenny the next day.

“We can do that,” Chandler said, “though best always to combine them with some live play after.”

Chris could see this was a losing battle, and he went along with it, and being honest, the guy was a pretty good instructor. He couldn’t demonstrate certain things because he had his own deficiencies, but he did know the game and could pick up what you were doing wrong.

“What would that run me,” Chris said when they took a break, “a *real* guy drilling me like that?”

“All over the map,” Chandler said. “My guy’s \$120. Why, you want him?”

“No. I’m just thinking, I’m making money coming here then.”

“You’re an unusual individual,” Chandler said. “Hey I took another look at your Zodiac business.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Not as open-and-shut *after* all. Like I thought.”

“You’re talking about . . . the one guy being *him*? . . . He’s *not* now?”

“Could still *be*, but the DNA might be garbage, is the latest . . . Not his, the Zodiac’s. If that’s the case, they got nothing to match anyone *against* . . . Then you go back to old-fashioned police work, which has only narrowed down about 92 possible prime suspects over the 49 years since it happened.”

“You’re being sarcastic,” Chris said. “What, you mean the DNA got contaminated?”

“They may have never *had* a profile. I mentioned the History Channel thing right?”

“What about it?”

“Big to-do, ran just a couple months ago. Couple of retired detectives down here, Riverside, think they’ve cracked it based on the guy licking a stamp, from a letter he mailed to the newspaper . . . There’s a little more to it, but now they’re saying the DNA sample came from the *outside* of the stamp.”

“Wow . . . so that could have been anyone who handled it, right? Postman on down.”

“Yeah. No good . . . the new information goes a little further, that the son of a bitch may have been savvy enough, even back then before forensics, to use tap water to wet the envelopes and stamps, not his saliva.”

“Wait though, didn’t you say he left gloves in the cab, that they picked stuff up there too?”

“That didn’t work. They were banking, the whole enchilada, on one postage stamp.”

“Sheesh,” Chris said. “But the guy in question . . . Your Richard Wall? He still looks pretty strong? Forgetting the DNA part?”

“Yes and no. They can’t definitively place him in the Bay Area during the crimes. Again, irrelevant if you have a DNA match.”

Chris chugged down some Gatorade.

“I give you my story,” he said, “some old guy says he saw him that night--and you shoot me down like I’m telling you I was abducted by an alien . . . 24 hours later, you’re agreeing with me.”

“Now you’re going way too far,” Chandler said. “Which you tend to do. What happened to Kenny? He said he had to help you with the art guy.”

“Yeah, well . . . I got an extra week, not sure what for, and Ken’s trying to be a diplomat . . . At this point, honestly? I’ve gone from wanting to maim the guy to saying ‘here, take the painting for free’, and be done with it.”

“I get that too, still, with mine. But it goes in cycles. The fury’ll return when you least expect, and bite you in the ass.”

“The other thing throwing us off, Ken and me both, my brother shows up this morning, and with these two women.”

“Yeah? From where?”

“The gals, Berkeley. My brother, Arizona. We had a falling out . . . That’s the only positive part, I think we got past it at breakfast.”

“Falling out over what?”

“You’re supposed to be retired, but you keep cross-examining me . . . He and my girlfriend at one time, they hooked up on me, when I was out of town. And sustained it for a while.”

“Well that hurts.”

“I should have let it roll off. It was back when . . . that medical thing I was telling you about . . . when I was pretty dang sure I wasn’t going to be around too long.”

“Ah.”

“I was being an idiot anyway. I was trying to womanize like there’s no tomorrow. Very little of it rewarding. Finally I connect with someone, feel like she understands me, and Floyd steps in.”

“You’re saying you broke bread today with this person? Your brother? You’re a better man than me.”

“I’m portraying it worse than it was . . . the main thing now, I’m counting down how long they’re sticking around.”

“You have a history with the two females too then?”

“The first one, Allison, yeah I met her in Mill Valley one day. Not long after I thought I was death-sentenced. I asked her out across a few tables, based on a couple lines of conversation.”

Chandler said, “Not a bad way to be, when it comes down to it. I see where you’re going. Why fool around, what’s there to lose . . . Too bad it required an extreme circumstance.”

“It sounds good, the impulsive element, but it’s overrated . . . Meanwhile, Ken though, pretty sure he and Allison connected this morning . . . I’ve been feeling guilty, he’s been reduced to spending Saturday nights with me.”

Chandler was quiet for a moment. “You’ve meant a lot to the kid, you have to know that,” he said.

“Yeah, well, he’s helping me out too, it runs both ways.”

“Taking him under your wing like that, not a lot of guys would do it.”

Dang, a softer side of Chandler.

“I guess thanks . . . then,” Chris said.

“Don’t fuck it up. By that I mean, don’t do something where you end up going away for some reason.”

Chris said, “You’re still hung up on that Sonoma County thing they talked to me about . . . Can you please let it go?”

“I have,” Chandler said. “Just don’t present me with anything *else* I have to let go of.”

“What about the Zodiac?” Chris said.

“What *about* him?”

“Well let’s say I found him, for example?”

“If you *did*? Probably 5 to 1 the guy’s not alive.”

“But if he *were* . . . for argument’s sake.”

“Then I’d talk to him. Try to get to the bottom of it.”

“That’s kind of what I was thinking,” Chris said.

The *Crow’s Nest* was hopping tonight. Not out-the-door crazy like during an event down here, Chris figured, such as a pro surfing contest or AVP volleyball tour stop, or after one of the summer concerts on the piers.

But plenty lively for a Sunday night in November.

“We’re on the early side,” Chris explained. “The reverse of your *Saturday* night. People need to get the boozing out of the way sooner, so they can get up and go to work.”

“They work down here?” Allison said.

“It’s true, you don’t get that feeling,” Monica said.

“Big houses though,” Floyd said.

“I like it if they don’t work,” Allison said.

“She says the same thing in Berkeley,” Monica said, “when we go to a coffee place, middle of the day, and everyone’s sitting around. She feels better about her *own* situation.”

“Deceptive here,” Chris said. “Not that different from Chestnut Street, up in the city? . . . You guys remember the scene there, right?”

Letting it hang, and Floyd shifting around a bit.

Chris said, “Both places they’re following the gold rush. There’s big money in dumb stuff. How many more phone apps does the world need?”

“You have to hand it to them though,” Floyd said. “Finger on the pulse.”

“Oh definitely,” Chris said. “Working *smart*, such as it is.”

Ken said, “I’d like to pay tonight, so please no one hold back.”

“You’re cute,” Monica said. “Did we tell you that already?”

“Kenny she’s pulling your leg,” Allison said. “And we’re going dutch treat.”

Rory the waitress came over and she was a little frenzied but Chris introduced everyone. Rory leaned in to Chris and whispered something, and said she’d be right back with their drinks.

“What was *that*?” Monica said.

“Yeah, you’re not *kidding*,” Allison said.

“She likes him,” Ken said. “I told him last time, but he brushed it off.”

Chris was half listening to them playing around, but absorbing what Rory had just said, that Ned Mancuso is here tonight.

He scanned the room and spotted him on a barstool in the corner, his back to the picture window that gave you a partial view of the ocean. Ned/Lou was in heavy conversation with another guy, though Ned/Lou was doing almost all the talking, probably working who-knows-what kind of game on the unsuspecting guy pinned there.

Though of course he could have it all wrong.

They ordered burgers and fish and chips, all of it coming in red plastic baskets and piled sky-high with french fries they way these places tended to do it, in case the food wasn’t that great the customer felt they got their money’s worth and you couldn’t really screw up fries.

Allison insisted they get dessert, Monica agreeing it was a special occasion that made for celebrating all around, and Floyd said in that case he’d step outside for a few minutes and excused himself.

“That was kind of weird, didn’t you think?” Chris said.

“He smokes,” Monica said.

Chris remembered Floyd smoked on and off, but thought he quit that last time in Mesa.

It seemed as good a time as any to bring it up, so he said, “Not like I’m going to use the information, but what happened with Kim?”

“That?” Monica said. “You never heard? Oh, well, they fought a lot, and this one time she came at him with a knife, and he killed her.”

“Right,” Allison said. “Luckily it was self-defense.”

Chris felt like an idiot for asking.

Ken looked sort of stiff.

Monica checked her phone, as though it was no big deal, and said, “You *guys*. You fall for everything . . . That was pretty funny.”

“What really happened,” Allison said, “the little bitch got a job at a gym in Phoenix. Sound familiar? . . . And she waltzed off into the sunset with one of the personal trainers.”

“Oh,” Chris said. “Well . . . what are you gonna do, huh?”

“Right,” Ken said. “What’s that expression? Real wisdom is knowing that we don’t know anything?”

The energy came out of the balloon for a second and all three of them stared at Ken.

“This is what I’m getting to,” Chris said. “The kid is evolving on me. Pulling out esoteric material now.”

“Aw, you embarrassed him,” Monica said. “He’s turning red.”

“Jeez, I intended it as a *positive*,” Chris said, even though he didn’t necessarily. “I mean nothing like a young, fertile brain . . . but hold on just a second.”

Making his way through the evening crowd now, looking like he’s on a bee-line right for him, Ned Mancuso.

“Yo, my good friend!” Ned said. “No, no, don’t get up.”

Chris stood up anyway and they shook hands and he said, “*My* buddy the movie star . . . Hey, it’s good to run into you . . . What’s doing these days?”

Ned’s big fake grin didn’t change but you could tell the movie star reference irritated him. Chris had to admit the guy looked pretty good. Healthy head of black hair slicked back, thin gold chain under the collar, a big flashy ring on each hand, and tan.

Chris was thinking, *I* should be more tan, all the outside activity I claim to do--this mope looks more presentable than me, in every department.

Not to mention the energy level. Ned/Lou was one of those guys who always seemed *on*, ready for something, whether it was *talk* about it, or *do* it.

Ned said, “I see you brought the lovely ladies today. To what do we owe this?”

“Sit down,” Chris said, and Ned took Floyd’s chair, though just the edge of it, like he’d only bother them for a minute.

“You’re a real movie star?” Allison said.

“In my next life,” Ned said. “I couldn’t fool ‘em. That’s why I’m reduced to hanging around joints like this.” Big grin again.

“Well do you know any?” Monica said. “I mean you seem like the type that might.”

Ned said. “There’s actually quite a few living here, Hermosa too. They tend to keep a low profile.”

“Athletes too?” Chris said. “Rams? Dodgers, Kings?”

“Some,” Ned said, “Tennis players too, Sharapova . . . and of course Kobe. He moved to Newport, but he was a local too.”

“Wow, Kobe *Bryant*?” Ken said.

“That’s him.”

“But you call him Kobe?” Chris said.

“Why not?” Ned said. “We hung out.”

Chris thinking, *you believe this friggin guy*. He said, “Ned lost most of his Yonkers accent from acting classes out here.”

“Really,” Monica said, “that’s so interesting.”

Chris not knowing if the guy was *from* Yonkers, but a good enough guess, and Ned didn’t correct him and he delivered a few lines with the old thick accent for everyone’s amusement. Rolling with it, smooth . . .

So Chris said, “You mentioning all the celebrities you hung out with, how about a guy named Chandler Sweeney . . . he one of them too?”

Ned covered it well but you could tell this surprised him. Chris didn’t know why he threw it out there, except see how the guy reacted.

“Yeah I know Chandler,” Ned said, toning it down a notch, slightly more serious.

Right about then was when Chris looked to his left, toward the door, and Floyd was coming back in, but with a peculiar look on his face.

Ned looked that way too, and was mouthing a *what the heck* and starting to come of the chair when Floyd came forward, and when Floyd got to the corner of the table he corkscrewed himself and planted a major right handed fist on Ned’s temple.

It unfolded in slow motion, Chris not thinking about what just happened as much as *wow, this is a new side of Floyd*.

Which it was. Both the degree of wild, out of the blue anger . . . and the surprising hand speed, along with the balance and timing . . . That part of it too . . . *Jesus Christ*.

Then the reality started to hit home, that Ned wasn’t moving.

Could he have hit him that hard? It wasn’t like Floyd packed the power of a heavyweight boxer . . . and it didn’t seem like Ned hit his head on something sharp or on really anything, since he caught himself and then just sunk the rest of the way down.

You did unfortunately hear stories about pressure points, where you catch a guy just right, and something goes haywire in the cranium and *that’s it*.

Chris flashed on a few things. What were the odds Floyd could run back out the door and blend into the neighborhood and escape? Get on a Greyhound bus to points unknown, isn’t that one way they used to do it? And if they did catch him . . . would this actually be *murder* he’d be on trial for? And could Chandler do anything to help straighten it out . . .

Monica was down on the floor with Ned cradling his head, and Allison had a wet napkin and was getting involved, and Rory the waitress was standing there too, her hands to her face . . . when Ned groaned and twisted and tried to sit up.

Meanwhile two guys had a scary-looking hold on Floyd, his arms behind his back. One was a little guy, who Chris didn’t place at first but realized was the bartender, and that maybe the guy stood on a platform back there to make him taller.

Either way, he'd apparently come flying over the top of the bar, and he was one of those guys you suspected had been around, and the *Crowe's Nest* was comfortable with him doubling as the bouncer. The other guy seemed to be a customer.

Allison and Monica, and Ken now too, got Ned back into the chair and were asking him questions and when he started waving everybody off like he was okay, the other patrons got back to their conversations and booze, and the noise level picked up and it was mostly a regular Sunday evening again in the place.

The little bartender and the other guy marched Floyd past the end of the bar and turned left and disappeared into a side room.

Mancuso was dabbing at his forehead with the napkin Allison gave him. Chris couldn't resist asking him, "You had some history then? You two?"

Ned was surprisingly civil, considering, and all he said was, "*Tell* me about it."

After a couple minutes he got up a little shaky and went into that same back room.

Chris knew enough about bars to understand the police weren't going to be involved tonight.

Places didn't want the publicity, for starters, nor the hassle with the witnesses and paperwork and probably a court appearance . . . But it was also the old-fashioned mentality, pride, of handling your business in-house.

Chris thought about Shep, his favorite bartender up north, and Shep was the nicest guy in the world. But Chris didn't know anything about the guy when it came down to it. Maybe he even *owned* the place, who knows--the point being, an incident like this, he could picture Shep taking care of it himself.

"They're going to hurt Floyd back there, aren't they," Allison said.

"You would think, yeah," Chris said.

Monica started crying and went outside, and Chris got up and found Rory and took care of the bill.

Rory said, "This is too weird. I'm not even going to ask you."

Chris said, "All I can think--they must have known each other in Las Vegas. Like I was telling you, my brother worked for Chip . . . Ned must have been in the picture out there . . . No way my brother expected to run into him here. Though I guess Chip moving to Hermosa and all, it should have been a possibility."

And that was the truth, Chris had no idea they'd ever crossed paths, but that had to be it . . . or a close variation . . . with some misunderstanding going unresolved.

Separately, if it got around that Floyd clocked Ned because Ned had something to do with expiring Chip . . . well, Chris supposed that wouldn't be the worst thing either.

"If you need any help," Rory said, "you can let me know."

Chris looked at her, and there was a moment.

"Well the good thing then," Chris said, "I should be around for a while. For a second there, I thought we had a murderer in the family, and all bets were off."

“You’re not amusing,” she said, but there was a hint of a smile, and Chris and Ken and Allison went outside and found Monica and waited.

It took another few minutes, and then you had the bartender coming up the hill with Floyd.

Which was confusing until you pieced it together, that the establishments on that side of Manhattan Beach Boulevard fed into a rear alley that looped around.

Floyd didn’t look too good, but at least he wasn’t too bloody, and the bartender had him by the arm and handed him off to Chris and said quietly, “He’s not welcome here.”

Chris thanked him, which kind of odd, but one legitimate reason was because they did keep the police out of it. And the guy went back inside.

Floyd was pretty hunched-over, and there *was* blood coming out of his nose, and his mouth too . . . and honestly? Chris couldn’t feel all that terrible for the guy.

After all, you act on impulse, lose your poise like that, these things happen.

They’d all walked down here from the apartment, and Ken asked if he should go up and get a car, help Floyd out, but Floyd said no.

“I’ve got this,” is what he said, a strange way to put it under the circumstances, but whatever . . . and they started trekking it back to the *Cheater Five*.

Except they were three blocks in, Floyd dragging his rear end as best he could, and when they got to Von’s Supermarket, the corner of Valley Drive, Allison said, “Hey, *ice cream*. Can we get some?”

“We can,” Chris said. “I’ll take care of it. In fact you don’t have to wait for me, I’ll catch up.”

“She means real ice cream,” Monica said. “A cone. Which I can’t disagree with, you guys put us through a lot tonight.”

You guys.

And naturally the good ice cream place was two blocks back down, and then a block and a half to the left.

Ken said he’d be happy to go, and what did everyone want, but Allison said how could she know what she wanted until she was there . . . so they reversed direction . . . and it was *true*, even when she got inside the place it took her five minutes to figure it out.

By the time they finally got to the apartment Floyd was 15 degrees more doubled over, and Chris said, in all seriousness, maybe they should get him checked out.

Floyd wasn’t going for it, and Chris remembered the rigamarole with *The Breakers*, Sharif’s motel over on PCH . . . *oh Man*.

They were sitting around the pool by this point, no one in any hurry to go inside.

“Chrissie, this is a nice set-up, you know that?” Monica said. “You get together with the neighbors and everything?”

“Not at all,” Chris said.

“Anyone skinny dip here?” Allison said.

Jiminy . . . what was it about this beat-up complex out of the 1960's with the pool in the middle, no privacy at all, that people kept *asking* that?

"You're not allowed to, if that's where you're going," Chris said, thinking that probably is it.

He said, "Kenny, let me change it up a sec . . . I forgot to ask--probably on purpose is *why* I forgot-- but any luck with the art person?"

"*What* art person?" Allison said.

"Could be making a little progress on that," Ken said.

"That's it?" Chris said.

Ken nodded it was, and Monica said, "Hey, we should roast marshmallows. Do you have one of those thingies?"

That was about enough, and Chris had a decision to make here, and there were pros and cons either way but in the end he better keep an eye on Floyd tonight.

Not just so he doesn't take a turn for the worse and expire, but also on the off-chance in the middle of the night he gets worked up again and produces a .22 out of his trunk and decides to go hunt down Ned.

"Here's what we have then," he announced. "I got another room, I'm driving Floyd . . . You two . . . three . . . promise me I'm not going to regret this."

Allison and Monica held their hands out like, *are you kidding, of course everything'll be fine* . . . and it took Ken a moment to realize the ramifications, not to mention the possibilities . . . and he held his hands out too.



Chapter Sixteen

Floyd didn't have a good night.

Two, three in the morning, it got to the point where Chris insisted he take him to the ER.

"Not happening, Floyd said. "One thing in life, very important lesson, never let yourself get in the system."

"Hospital system, you mean?" Chris said, but he knew the answer, that if you show up in one of those places beat up, they're gonna be curious how *that* happened, and before you know it they're calling it in, just to cover their own self.

Also Ned/Lou wouldn't appreciate you volunteering that particular information.

Floyd said, "It ain't that bad. High school football I cracked a rib . . . This'd just be that, multiplied a couple degrees."

"You say *ain't* now?" Chris said. Totally irrelevant, but he hadn't heard him talk that way.

"You didn't hear anything I said."

"Nah, I did . . . Besides the ribs though, anything internal, creeping up on you, like your organs leaking blood, where you're gonna collapse on me mid-sentence?"

"Put it this way . . . I won't be scarfing down any *Bob's Big Boy* all-you-can-eat buffets for a while."

"They have those in Phoenix? I remember 'em in Washington, DC, when I lived back east . . . Nice portions, I'd give them like a 9.5 out of 10."

"Why don't you do me a favor, and shut the fuck up."

"So you can get some sleep, you mean?"

"I don't know *what* I mean. I'm sorry."

"How about this then," Chris said, "seeing as how there's nothing on TV at this hour . . . you mind clueing me in, what was *up* with that guy?"

"I do mind," Floyd said, and he tried to roll over but couldn't get it, and groaned, and he tried it a different way and yelled out.

Chris thought about a few scenarios.

He said, "You keep up the screaming you're going to get us thrown out of here . . . But forgetting that . . . how would you feel, otherwise, about leaving now?"

"Come again, there," Floyd said.

“Driving back to Arizona. Or Nebraska, I don’t care. Just not hanging around here, where you could get hurt worse or killed, or one of those type-things.”

“Uh,” Floyd said.

“Or the opposite deal, that’d be on the table too.”

“Okay, I think I’m following you. That chapter’s over, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“No it’s not over. Otherwise you’d be telling me about it . . . So what you’ll do? You shoot right down here to Rosecrans, go a mile and jump on the 405 toward San Diego, 10 minutes you look for 91 to I-10. It’s all marked . . . Six, seven hours you’re back in the Valley of the Sun, piece of cake.”

Of course they had to switch the vehicles around first, which was a pain, but that was minor.

Floyd said, “*Now*, you mean? You’re out of your freaking mind.”

“Let’s go,” Chris said, getting dressed. “I’m your big brother, right? . . . I make plenty of mistakes of my own, I’ll be the first to concede, but hey . . .”

Meaning, *so I know what’s best for you, I’m looking out for you*, all that cliched stuff.

Which Floyd wasn’t buying. Except he thought about it and said, “You’re not going to be happy if I *don’t* go, I can see that . . . so might as well get a move on.”

“That’s wise thinking,” Chris said, “plus heck, you *got* the basic feel for MB. Not a whole lot more to it, frankly.”

Luckily Floyd never got undressed, because he couldn’t, and Chris put his shoes on for him and drove him back to the *Cheater Five*, and Floyd got in his car, though that part wasn’t easy at all and Chris was wondering would he be able to *drive* the sucker, but Floyd started it up and it looked like he was going to make it.

Chris wasn’t sure how to handle the little finale this time, remembering how leaving Phoenix he didn’t want to make a big deal about it, his diagnosis, so he gave Floyd a wave and that was it . . . But then in front of Broderick Street the next time, the implications a little more acute, he gave him a solid hug, not sure how many more times he’d be seeing him.

Now, here . . . he reached in, gave Floyd a squeeze on the shoulder, and said, “You take care of yourself, my brother.”

And Floyd nodded and threw it in drive and was gone.

Man oh man . . .

What the heck time was it *now*?

10 to 4? . . . Forget about going back to Sharif’s and falling asleep now.

You did have *The Kettle*, available 24 hours . . .

So Chris drove down there and studied the outside menu, and the only thing that appealed to him was lasagna, and that was ridiculous, so he walked down to the beach and onto the pier and you couldn’t see much but there were a couple guys at the end getting ready to start fishing, and he sat down on the bench where he’d dealt with that bicycle guy, which seemed a long time ago, and he fell asleep.

Ken calling brought him to life, though he was half-awake by that point, the early sun angling in his face from the left and the water down below full of surfers this morning.

You were getting into the winter swells, apparently the best surfing of the year, though they all looked pretty frozen out there bobbing around, the ocean flat at the moment.

Ken said, "Boss, just wanted to give you the schedule . . . and hold on please . . . and also, the girls were wondering if Floyd is feeling better this morning. They didn't want to wake him up."

"Yeah, well," Chris said. "He is doing better. So he's on his way back to Phoenix."

Things got a little muffled and it sounded like Ken had his hand over the phone and was relaying this to Allison and Monica.

Monica grabbed the phone and said, "Chris, don't be playing around. It's way too early."

"The guy couldn't *sleep*, and furthermore he was afraid he might act out again with the person from last night. A loose end, he said . . . I tried to talk him out of it, but I guess I see where he's coming from."

There was more chaos on the other end and Allison came on and said, "That son of a bitch!"

"Well . . ." Chris said, "we all knew that right. I mean to an extent? What do you want me to say?"

Continued muffled noises and Ken came back on.

Chris said, "Tell them they can whine, or they can suck it up and meet me at the restaurant and feel better. I'm down there now, I'll give all three of you 5 minutes to get out of the apartment, 20 to walk down . . . so 25 minutes and the meter starts now."

He hung up. Where else had he been counting something down recently, he couldn't quite place it?

Oh yeah, with Sharif's bug guy, though his phone wasn't turned on, he was faking that, but it worked.

The gals weren't going to miss a meal, especially a free one, and there they were at the 23 minute mark. Chris said how about an outdoor table this time and they fell into place like a couple of zombies and barely communicated until the coffee got refilled twice.

Kenny looked pretty shot as well, and Chris didn't love that. Not that he was envious of what might have transpired overnight in the *Cheater Five*--though there probably was *some* of that too--but he needed the kid full speed ahead on this CraigsList mess now.

Which was the ironic part, since yesterday he didn't even want him to *start* on it.

But now the issue being, the girls stranded here on account of Floyd, *he'd* have to drive them back home.

So the sooner you could get *that* engineered, the better . . . And things might settle down after that, and maybe you could finally embrace some of the MB lifestyle you moved here for, provided you didn't get arrested or something crazy.

Everyone was eating, and Allison and Monica were tied up in their phones, and Chris said to Ken, “You working today, or you on call like you were saying? Or what?”

“Boss I’m going to continue on the art project today.”

It was a *project* now.

“Oh, so nothing doing at the library?”

“No there is, they can use me all week, but I told them no. This is more important.”

You really *did* have to love the kid.

“Well listen . . . you need my help, or something?”

“Not at all. The girls were talking about renting bikes and going up to Venice, so unless you’re up for *that*, why not take it easy? You deserve it.”

Dang . . . that didn’t sound bad at all, you know it? It had been a while since he did nothing, and it was shaping up to be a nice day and you had Sharif’s pool, a big improvement over the *Cheater Five* one, and a hot tub with strong jets.

So they finished up, and Chris directed Allison and Monica to the bike rental place but he said he’d take a rain check, and if they cared they didn’t show any sign of it, and meanwhile Ken took off to do his thing.

It was around 10:30, kind of a sleepy Monday, and across the street they were washing down the sidewalk in front of the *Crow’s Nest*, looking like they were opening up for the day . . . and Chris contemplated it for a second and went over there.

The chairs in the front section were up and there was some cleaning going on and the waitress from the first time, Cindy, was in there setting tables.

Chris stuck his head in and asked her if Rory was around.

Cindy came over and said, “I heard about last night.”

“Gee,” Chris said, “I wouldn’t have expected to get identified right away. Since you weren’t even there . . . And I didn’t participate.”

Cindy smiled, “We know our customers, even the rookies.”

“Well the main thing, I didn’t get banned. It’s friendly here. Typically.”

“Rory’s off today,” Cindy said.

“Oh well . . . I was here anyway, I mean up the block.”

“I’ll tell her you were inquiring about her though, you want to give me your number.”

Chris took care of it and said, “I was going to go swimming . . . you think she’d be into that?”

“You’re a character,” Cindy said, and got back to work.

No sign of the gals by dinnertime and Chris and Ken had ramen noodles in the apartment.

“They did call,” Ken said, “but that was about 2. Haven’t been able to reach them since . . . Dark now, and they would have missed the return deadline on the bike rental place.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Chris said. “You spend enough time with those people, you’ll learn . . . There *is* no normal.”

“Sort of the impression I’m getting,” Ken said, and even at age 25, just a couple of days in, the outer layer might be wearing down a tad.

“More importantly,” Chris said, “any breakthroughs at all?”

Ken was confused for a second, still stuck on the first topic, and then picked up on it and said, “Yeah we *should*. I think it’ll wrap itself up tomorrow.”

Chris put down the chopsticks and waited for more, but Ken didn’t volunteer anything else and Chris didn’t want to jinx it so he dropped the subject.

Allison and Monica rolled in about 8, in bad moods and having to stick the rental bikes in the apartment now too, and Chris figured it was the right time to get out of there, and dang did that bed in the Sharif motel feel good, and there could have been bugs all over the place and a guy lifting weights upstairs in the middle of the night too, and Chris wouldn’t have known about it.

They put on a decent continental breakfast in *The Breakers*, Chris noticed, so you might as well take advantage.

Nothing so far this morning from anyone over at the apartment, so he was nice and relaxed, and they had those waffles you could make yourself by pouring the cup of batter in and flipping over the thingamajig and waiting the two minutes.

They had old fashioned morning papers here too, the LA Times and the Wall Street Journal and USA Today, which did make it feel like vacation, and he was reading about this family from Saginaw, Michigan, who’d created artificial honey using their backyard vegetables--when Rory called.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey back,” Chris said, “except I was in the mood for a swim *yesterday*, not sure about today.”

“I’m on at 4,” she said. “You were thinking, the ocean?”

Ooh boy, he hadn’t considered that.

He said, “Well I wasn’t suggesting *real* swimming, I guess. I’m in a motel, *The Breakers*, I’ve got access . . . in case you want to carefully dive in.”

A pause. “Funny . . . you just said you weren’t sure you’re *up* for it today . . . I’m game though.”

“Jeez . . . okay then . . . well I’ll see you around the pool.”

Now there was a touch of excitement, the butterflies in the stomach . . . the alternate thinking being he’d just piled something else on.

He’d have to hang around the pool now, out of politeness, since he hadn’t given her his room number on purpose, not wanting to sound like a wise guy.

There was a James Patterson novel laying on one of the umbrella tables, and no one claimed it so he eased into a chaise lounge and read a couple chapters. It was pretty bad but it put you to sleep, so it had some merit.

“You’re sunburned already,” Rory said.

Chris sat up quick and tried to get his bearings, and he pressed on his opposite arm to see if the spot would look white when he took his hand away.

“Sheez, just what I didn’t want to have happen,” he said.

“Welp,” she said, “I made it, which surprised me a little, so let’s go in.”

Chris watched her peel off her shorts and T-shirt, down to a lime green bikini, and walk around to the shallow end where the steps were, and ease in.

“You’re not doing anything,” she said, after she swam the length underwater and popped up.

Chris reluctantly got in. It sounded better on paper than it was, and he had to swim a couple laps to partially warm up.

“They got a hot tub too, I forgot to mention,” he said.

“I saw it on the way in,” she said. “What happened to your brother?”

“Why?”

“Okay,” she said, playful. “No reason then.”

“You want to come up to San Francisco with me?” he said. “I gotta drop the other people off, it turns out.”

“Let’s get in the hot tub,” she said.

There were a couple guys in there, looking like salesmen from a convention yukking it up. There was a sign on the fence pointing you to an alternate hot tub in back, should you require it--and that was a good choice, no one in that one and sweet smelling flowers in the mix.

“So where were we?” Chris said, sliding down to where the water hit his chin and putting his head back.

“This really does . . . work wonders,” Rory said. “It’s been a while since I was in one of these.”

“When was the last time?” Chris said.

“You probably won’t like hearing it, it’s kind of embarrassing.”

“Let me guess. A golf event in Palm Springs, you tagging along with Ned Mancuso.”

“You’re kind of a bastard,” she said, “aren’t you. And that wasn’t it.”

“Well you can spill it out . . . My stage of life, nothing’s going to surprise me.”

You could see she was hesitating. She said, “Last spring. Cabo San Lucas. Someone paid my way.”

Chris stared at her, trying to process it, thinking he had it wrong, but probably not, the bar scene and the underbelly that went along, kind of making sense, and he said, “You’re kidding.”

“I knew that would happen,” she said. “Honesty is usually not the best policy.”

Not sure why at that point he put his arm around her but he did, and it was nice, and she was okay with it, and he left it there.

“That depends,” he said.

“What does?”

“The honesty part.”

She said, “So when was *your* last time, in one of these spas?”

“Jeez, you’re getting fancy now with the terminology. There’s been a few indoor ones, at health clubs . . . but outdoors under the open sky would be Utah.”

“What were you doing there?”

The answer was escaping from doing Thad, but the rest was essentially true. “I was driving to Boston . . . the high-altitude air, it gives you a different feel, especially at night.”

She said, “You’re kidding about San Francisco, right? I mean I’m not coming or anything . . . but really?”

“So come next time.”

“You’re quite pushy.”

“One place I’ll take you, Mount Tam . . . I got all screwed up last time, I realize. That was like at the top of my list. I didn’t go anywhere near it.”

“Well don’t be so rigid then. Things happen . . . I have to go though.”

“That’s too bad . . . but *what?*” he said. “You’re looking at me weird.”

“Please let me get my towel this time before you stare at me? Back there at the pool, I have to say you were impossible.”

“I tend to do that. I believe it’s absent-minded. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to *apologize* . . . I’m just saying.”

“Oh.”

“Okay then.”

She got out and did her thing, and he made sure *not* to look, and then she was at the gate giving a little wave and that was it, and Chris sat there letting the jets work him over for a few more minutes and tried figure out if anything significant happened here, and yeah, that was anyone’s guess.

“Oh good Boss,” Ken said.

Chris looked at him. “You know what? I got too much sun today, things are throbbing, you gotta speak more complete English.”

It was late afternoon, and Chris had stopped by the apartment for no particular reason other than to get his nail clippers.

Ken said, “It’s good you’re here. The girls are on their way, they said, but I wanted to update you on Mark.”

“Mark . . . that’s the *guy?* *Schneiderman*, whatever it was? Holy Toledo, we’re on a first name basis now . . . am I going to need to brace myself?”

“Yes, we met at the police station within the hour. It’s a done deal . . . I mean no, you don’t have to brace yourself.”

Funny the stuff you dwell on when you get news. Right now Ken’s left sideburn looked off, much shorter than the other one, and Chris pictured Monica and Allison having something to do with that when they gave him the haircut.

Ken continued. "To that end, I got some champagne."

"I thought you weren't a champagne *guy*," Chris said.

"Not normally. But you made a little money, and of course it's the spirit." He opened his wallet and handed Chris five hundred dollars.

"Okay I'm digesting this," Chris said. "And I'm a little confused . . . Obviously we didn't bother with any *test*, right? . . . I thought it was either that, or sell it to the piece of scum for fifty bucks, conceding it's a fake."

"What I did," Ken said, "I sold it to him for \$500 . . . conceding it's a fake."

Chris smiled and shook his head at that one. "Not quite sure how you do it . . . You got coffee arranged with this guy too now, or does he have to compete with the weightlifter for your time?"

"We didn't go that far," Ken said, "but suffice it to say we parted on good terms."

"Jeez, Louise . . . so . . . what happened with Redondo PD? Garcia was okay with you . . . representing me?"

"We actually didn't deal with any officers. There was a front desk clerk, very nice guy, and he handed us a simple form, I think it was called a *Satisfaction*, and only Mark had to sign off on it."

"Meaning . . ." Chris said, "after all the huffing and puffing . . . and me laying awake at night with blood pressure issues . . . this guy was happy to walk away with my thing for \$500."

Which, let's face it, wasn't the original plan, which was to try to get a couple grand for it, more like three, which was what Bill Dole the art restorer told him it was worth when he gave it to him.

That was another thing . . . the *Mark* jerkell claiming it was fake, and then Chandler joining in, that yeah, it sounded that way . . . and Chris after a while getting confused *himself* and thinking, Gee, maybe it *was* a fake, even though Bill Dole was a veteran stand-up guy.

And even Kenny now proceeding that way too, to close the case . . . which admittedly Chris was thrilled to be done with.

So forget the money, the best part was at least *Mark* didn't get the satisfaction of dealing with *him* . . . which would mean having the last laugh at *Chris's* expense.

So that was a good thing . . .

Except . . . Chris was pretty sure the guy believed him all along that it *was* real, didn't he . . . The guy kneeling down and inspecting it with his little bullshit magnifying glass and declaring it phony? That was a total crock wasn't it . . . All to whittle him down on the price, because he knew no-way Chris would spring for the *AXY* test . . . So even at \$500, he just got the steal of the year.

That son of a *bitch*.

"There is one more detail," Ken said.

"Oh."

Ken lowered his voice. "I retained your original, it turned out. I sold Mark a knock-off."

"You, what now . . .?"

“Yeah. That seemed the logical way to handle it. We reproduced it.”

“Huh? . . . Who’s *we*?”

“Stacey actually. She’s an amazing draftsman, you should see some of her work.”

“Now,” Chris said, “you really got me . . . kind of speechless.”

“I can tell,” Ken said, “and that’s pretty rare, right?”

Ken started opening the champagne, and Chris wasn’t ready to laugh yet, this amazing curveball being launched in there out of left field.

Chris said, “I mean the same material and everything? Paints? You took care of all that?”

“Oh yeah. Your piece is on simple luan, so I ran down to Home Depot, and they have a little service, for 5 bucks they’ll cut sheet goods to size . . . Stacey used acrylics, and they dry right away . . . The whole painting, honestly? It took her maybe an hour and a half . . . And Boss, I’m not kidding, no way could you distinguish the two.”

Ken poured the champagne and they touched glasses and Chris took a nice healthy gulp and thought about it a little more, and said, “I guess I’ve seen everything now.”

“Boss I know it sounds crazy,” Ken said, “but it was actually fun. I took it as a challenge, a bit of a chess match.”

“*Un*-believable . . . First thing, when you get a chance, give Stacey half that 500 bucks . . . you keep the other half, and I’m going to have to figure out something else to do for you too.”

Ken motioned the suggestion away and said, “We keep having discussions like this, and they get old. Knock that shit off now.”

Wow, some animation from Ken, the champagne doing its thing.

Chris said, “Fine, this isn’t part of that, but how about we drive to San Francisco tomorrow.”

“Right on,” Ken said, “absolutely.”

Kind of a quick answer, but Chris thinking if he wants to come, let him.

“Because I’m driving the girls,” Chris said. “They don’t know it yet.”

“Good enough . . . so I’ll call them and tell ‘em.”

Meanwhile Chris thumbed through the mail, nearly all of it forwarded from his address up north, and it was junk except for one briefly alarming piece, an official-looking letter from the Superior Court of San Francisco which Chris tore open and luckily was only a jury duty notice.

Ken got off the phone and said, “Actually it looks like they’re going to be later. They’re at a party in Redlands, they said.”

“Sheesh . . . that’s got to be like a two hours, and they don’t even have a vehicle . . . how’d they end up out *there*?”

“Not sure. They met a couple people in town, who said they were doing some sightseeing. They asked me did I want to join them, but I had the Mark situation going on.”

“Whatever,” Chris said. “On my end I’m getting a good night’s rest. We’re leaving at 6. Sharp.”

“A.M.?” Ken said.

“Unh-huh. A *different* 6, you were thinking of?”

“Not really, no.”

“So why’d you ask me?” Chris said.



Chapter Seventeen

One thing for sure this time, no screwing around waiting for the traffic to lighten up like Sharif had instructed, since that never happened.

Probably Sharif based it on 20 years ago, since he himself admitted he never goes on the freeway, so why would you listen to the guy?

Chris had to give the gals credit, the door was at least partially open when he showed up and a couple bags were sitting there. But there was no communication emanating from inside, and if you dropped in from outer space you'd question the wild-looking creatures you had on your hands.

Luckily they fell asleep about two seconds after Chris closed the car doors, though both their positions sure looked awkward back there.

Chris said to Ken, "Very late night I'm assuming. But they're conditioned to it. My guess is their normal day starts around 3."

Ken grumbled some reply you couldn't understand, and *he* looked in shaky condition too, likely having participated in some activities himself when they got back from whatever it was in Redlands.

The good thing, Chris figured, they'd all be history for several hours. Though the flip side, a little conversation never hurt when you were in bumper-to-bumper conditions.

At least you were *on* the road. You could have left at noon, wasted the morning, and they'd all be sleeping anyway.

There was an exit with a whole bunch of franchises near Harris Ranch, and Chris stopped at a *Jimmy John's* sandwich place and went in, and it looked like the triumvirate was going to sleep straight through, but they woke up just in time and scarfed down quite a bit, Chris thinking he could have saved 40 bucks if he'd hustled up finishing his own sandwich quicker.

Somewhere around the Altamont Pass, the edge of the Bay Area, Allison said, "Chrissie, we asked you this before, returning from a road trip, but can't we do something in the city tonight? The four of us? You don't have to drive us to Berkeley already do you?"

"Yeah c'mon Chris," Monica said, though not as much conviction behind it on her part.

Chris said to Allison, “Interesting you break out that nickname again, not sure why. No we can’t. Ken and I have to get back.”

Ken looked at him a little puzzled, since he *didn’t* have to get back for anything he could think of, plus you could see he was up for what Allison was talking about . . . though Chris knew from his own experience that Ken would be fine *not* doing anything more.

The girls did both thank him, just like last time, as they got close to Berkeley and it was clear that’d be the end of the line.

“It *was* fun, I’ll admit,” Chris said. “And hey, we didn’t get into your music much, but keep plugging away, and who knows, we’ll probably catch you at an open mic soon.”

“You’re so transparent,” Allison said.

Chris tried to smile, even though she was right, one of those coffee-house performance deals just wasn’t going to be on the radar.

Ken helped them with their stuff and Monica went inside and Allison said a little something extra to Ken, and an unlikely chapter was closed. For now.

Chris said, “I was three-quarters serious about making a u-turn and going back . . . It’s only 2:20, we do that we’ll be back in time to catch *Property Brothers* at 11.”

“Those are the twins, right?” Ken said.

“I think so. They’re not identical . . . you know what I found the other day, flipping around on-demand? Re-runs of *This Old House*. A hundred times better, I realized, than those guys. They take their time, show you a project start to finish, even include the mistakes.”

“What’s the other quarter?” Ken said.

“The *who?* . . . Oh. The other option, we don’t want to drive back tonight, we can try to find the *Zodiac*.”

“Well I *like* trying to find stuff,” Ken said.

“So wait,” Gloria was saying, “you *did* go home? . . . or no?”

Chris was on the phone with her, across the bridge now in the city, barrelling up Pine Street, and he pulled over.

“I know it sounds dumb, but yeah,” he said. “Getting to the point here though, I thought I might talk to Dirk just a little more.”

Gloria said, “That’s a terrific idea . . . So--and I can tell you’re afraid to ask, and you don’t have to. I’m right here.”

“Darn,” Chris said, which was all he really could say, since how many times could you feel embarrassed about the hospitality.

“She’s one of those people,” he said to Ken when they were moving again. “You’ll see what I mean . . . what I really need to do, is bring her something. I’ve been a total mooch.”

“How about candy?” Ken said, and Chris thought about the Mel guy with the See’s Candy from Laurel Village 49 years ago . . . *Supposedly*.

That wasn’t a bad idea, but wow, stopping again and googling it, there weren’t many of them left and it looked like the Laurel Village one was long gone.

The closest See's would be down by Ghirardelli Square, and Chris made a right on Polk and when they got close he threw it in Park and told Ken to drive around the block a few times while he ran in, and he came out with the largest old fashioned double-decker box, that hopefully was in the ballpark of how See's used to taste.

There was *a lot* different than 1969 . . . so you could be on a real dumb goose chase here . . . but you'd have to at least find out.

It was close to four by the time they got to Gloria's and she welcomed Ken like he was a long-lost nephew and pointed out up front that this was a perfect week for guests, since her daughter was once again at her ex's and it was a lonely place around here all by herself.

"I told you before, and you're going a little *too* far with your justification," Chris said. "But we shouldn't be in your way much . . . In fact, now's probably a good time to catch Dirk, do you think?"

"Hmm," Gloria said.

"Cocktail hour, you mean?"

"That too I guess. I was thinking of his process, the deliberation."

Which was a good point, one question might take a half hour to get an answer. If you were lucky.

"All I think I need from him," Chris said, "is *which* apartment building on California. We swung by there just now on the way, and it's confusing, there are three that might be it."

"So I'll ask him," Gloria said, and she went in the living room.

"Did I fill you in?" Chris said to Ken. "The Chandler stuff, about the faulty forensics? Now it's wide open again, apparently."

"You mean the guy he was telling us about. . . who was open and shut if the DNA matched?"

"Yeah you got a new development trumping all that. There *is* no Zodiac DNA to be matched. That TV thing on the History Channel misled people."

Gloria came back and said it was the first building this side of Locust.

Chris said, "Thanks for that then . . . Kenny's idea is a good one, see if anyone moved out right after the murder."

"Admittedly a stab in the dark," Ken said.

"Ah, I think I follow," Gloria said. "Very interesting angle. One that you'd think the police would investigate."

"You would," Chris said, "if they took Dirk more seriously."

"Or, who knows," Gloria said, "perhaps he felt they were disrespecting him in the interrogation, and didn't go any further."

Chris said, "You're not bad, I have to say . . . that *could* be . . . He tells them he recognizes the guy from the neighborhood, they react like he's a looney bin, and he doesn't bother adding in the part about seeing him go in the building."

"It doesn't matter though, does it?" Ken said.

Which was a fair point--who cares who may or may not have checked out what? . . . They were here now, so get a move on.

"He keeps me in check," Chris explained to Gloria.

"Well I'm going to make you boys dinner," she said. "So have a good detective session."

"See what I mean *now*?" Chris said, as they were walking over to the building, which ended up being 3402 California.

"I do Boss," Ken said. "Was she, like your girlfriend back in high school or something?"

"Way too much class for me," Chris said, and they opened the door to the inner lobby, where you had to get buzzed in to go any further . . . and what now?

There were 24 apartments, 4 stories with 6 on a floor. No doorman or on-site manager, not that fancy a place, though Chris figured in the insane market the smallest unit would set you back three grand, easy.

There was a narrow alley around the side that fed back toward Sacramento Street and you could hear water running, and when you went a little ways there was a guy with a hose.

He was washing down some piece of equipment, hard to tell what, and he saw Chris and Ken coming and stopped the water.

It was an impulsive thought Chris had and he pulled out his wallet with his old press-pass still in there in one of those laminated pouches from when he worked at the Chronicle, and he held the credential up to the guy and said, "Hi there, we're from the newspaper . . . is there an office around?"

The guy didn't speak much English, and he probably didn't know what the heck Chris was holding up except it looked official--and Chris threw out the Spanish word which he thought was *oficina*.

The guy nodded, likely relieved it had nothing to do with him, and he motioned them inside and stopped at an unmarked door and he had about a hundred keys on a contraption on his belt but he found the right one pretty fast and opened up.

This wasn't exactly what Chris expected--though he didn't know *what* he expected, except maybe an office with a live human somewhere . . . but you might as well take advantage, and he motioned thanks to the guy--pretty sure now the guy thought they might be inspectors from the Building Department-- and he and Ken went in.

What struck you was how tidy everything was, and that the computer looked pretty dated, as though it still ran Windows 95.

There were three gun-metal filing cabinets that looked like they weighed a ton, with the drawers organized by decade. Chris figured no way they'd be transferring all that stuff to any computer, and Ken was ahead of him thinking the same thing, and had the drawer *1/1/60 to 12/31/69* open.

Unfortunately the inside of the drawer wasn't as organized, there were notes and scraps of paper mixed in and you'd have various file folders opened up within other ones, but after a couple minutes Ken found a list of tenants.

“It’s from August 1969,” he said, “no leases though, just a list. I mean there *are* leases here and there, some, but it’s a bit overwhelming to piece together.”

Chris figured the drive was catching up with the kid now too, and he couldn’t blame him, this wasn’t a pleasant process, and then he thought of something.

“Why don’t you give me that sheet, the list, and if you can, dig around in 1970.”

“I got you Boss,” Ken said, “good idea, see if there’s the same list from then.”

After a couple minutes he came up with March 1970 and Chris said that should work, and he folded them both up and put them in his pocket.

“Wait,” Ken said, “we’re *taking* those?”

Chris said they were, not to worry about it, and they closed the file cabinets and shut the door and waved thanks to the guy out in the alley, and when they got back to Gloria’s there were some serious aromas of meat and garlic and spices and this was probably going to be about the best thing you ever tasted.



Chapter Eighteen

Chris spread the two sheets out on the table over coffee to see what they had.

You couldn't deal with anything more Zodiac-related last night, and after dinner they went to the movies, the old 4-Star on Clement, an indie film on fraternity hazing, and it was well done, though a couple scenes were hard to watch.

Ken fell asleep but Gloria was into it, and on the way home she was talking about her own college sorority experiences, though nowhere near as heavy duty as the movie.

This morning you needed to do a simple cross-check, and see if it turned up anything. Less perfect than seeing who might have moved out on October 12th or 13th of 1969 specifically, right when the cab driver murder happened, but that seemed pretty impossible to pin down so you gave it a shot this way.

Of the 24 apartments, 19 of the tenants were on both lists.

So that left five question marks, where the apartments turned over.

Three were men. None named Mel . . . It's possible Mel was a nickname . . . and it's also conceivable the Mel guy gave Dirk a fake name . . . in which case you'd probably be screwed period.

But setting the men aside for now, a) because none of them were outwardly a *Mel* and b) because the hunch would be Mel was visiting a woman if he was showing up with See's Candy.

So . . . that left you two women . . . who apparently moved out of the building between August of '69 and March of '70.

Sonia Serfass and Faye Hayden.

Gloria was talking to Ken about the pros and cons of raising a 12-year-old as a single parent, and it started to get a little more serious, Ken opening up about being raised by his grandmother, and Chris didn't want to interrupt them.

They wrapped it up, at least that segment, and Ken said, "So what do we got Boss?"

"Well we got two candidates, if we bypass the men . . . I'm googling the first one now, on the off-chance."

Ken picked up on it and started checking the second one, and they came up with a bunch of Faye Hayden's, all them out of state, which didn't necessarily discount any--and a single Sonia Serfass.

The Sonia Serfass was one of the White Pages deals, where it lists probable people related to her as well, and there was no address for Sonia but with a little checking there *was* one for a Margorie Royster from that bunch, and it was in the city, 6487 43rd Avenue, the outer Sunset.

“Let’s go over there,” Chris said.

“Gee,” Ken said, “just like that?”

“Well weren’t *you* the one telling *me*,” Chris said, “how sometimes these things play out simple? . . . It might have been something *else* we were talking about, but even so.”

“I hear you Boss,” Ken said, putting on his sweatshirt.

“Does it say how old anybody is?” Gloria said.

“That’s an excellent point,” Chris said, “Jeez, we haven’t paid much attention to that . . . let’s say the guy was 25, 30--so the woman would be roughly that too--where’s that put ‘em again? Late 70’s? Or early 80’s if the Mel guy was a little older and she was too?”

Chris tried the White Pages search again but it wasn’t clear how old *who* was, so they told Gloria they’d check in later, and headed out to the avenues.

Chris supposed you better use your press-pass again, and standing there ringing the bell he made up something fast, that he was working up a nostalgia piece about the north side of San Francisco in the 60’s, but when a middle-aged woman answered the door, cheerful, he felt wrong misleading her like that.

“I appreciate your time,” Chris said, “I was looking for Sonia, if she might be available.”

“That’s my mom,” the woman said. “She passed away, it’s been four years now.”

“Okay that’s tough then, I’m sorry,” Chris said, appreciating the woman’s honesty, and he waited a moment. “Can I ask you a personal question? And feel free to slap us around if you don’t want to answer.”

“That should be fine,” the woman said, still friendly. “I won’t slap anyone.”

Chris said, “So did your mom . . . this would have been before she married your dad, so it’s even a little more awkward . . . but did she ever date a guy named Mel? Is that anything you ever heard?”

The woman handled it well, wasn’t particularly thrown off, or curious why he was asking, but said, “I have no idea . . . You know who *might*, is my sister. She lives in San Rafael.”

Without asking she started texting, and her sister got back right away, and the question came up, *what was this for?*

So Chris said, “I’m researching an article on the Zodiac killer from the 1960’s. We’re putting together, this lead we have, a Mel, he might have lived in the same building she did, on California Street, way back when.”

There was more texting and the woman said, “My sister wants to know why you think she may have dated him.”

“We *don’t* know,” Chris said. “We’re kind of stumbling around in the dark here, trying to get something to stick.”

Another exchange of texts, and the woman said, “You’re welcome to go over there. She’s a pack rat, my sister. Whatever my mom didn’t throw out, she’s hung on to.”

Chris and Ken thanked her and took the address and headed up to 19th Avenue which connected to the Golden Gate Bridge approach.

Ken said, “I feel like *Law and Order*. They pop in somewhere, ask 3 questions, move to the next location.”

“With that same sound-effect every time, in between,” Chris said. “How do you like the Bay Area so far?”

“Oh, sweet,” he said. “In fact I’m trying to figure out why you’d move away from here.”

“I told you, I love the ocean.”

“You never go *in* though,” Ken said.

“So? . . . Plus, you’re seeing it here kind of artificial. Usually by this time in November the weather’s all screwed up, very unpleasant to deal with.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Ken said.

The San Rafael house was a spread, up in the hills above Dominican College on the east side of 101. The grounds had seen better days, lot of overgrowth, and there was a tennis court beyond the main house but judging by the condition of the fence it probably didn’t get a lot of action.

The sister, Karen, invited them in and brought out an old-fashioned tea pot and English shortbread cookies.

She sat down with them and said, “The last half hour, after Margie said you were coming, I’ve been digging. What I do have, and I’d prefer not to show them to you, but instead refer to them myself, is a series of diaries she kept.”

Chris and Ken looked at each other.

“We always told Mom she should be a writer, she told great stories,” Karen continued.

“So she didn’t try to become one, I’m assuming?” Chris said. “But she filled up notebooks instead?”

“That was the sad part,” Karen said, “she didn’t do either one. She kept her riches in her head, and there’s certainly some merit in the oral tradition.”

“There is,” Chris said, hoping to redirect her to the diaries. “But meanwhile . . .”

“Yes,” Karen said. “She’d purchase a journal the beginning of every year, nothing fancy, the cheap datebooks from Woolworth’s. She’d proceed to write something nearly every day, and I have over 20 volumes . . . but each entry was minimal. A couple words or a phrase. Who she might have had lunch with. What book she was reading. What the weather was.”

“Ah . . . so not much interpersonal detail, then, huh?” Chris said, thinking this was starting to feel like Dirk’s, and the initial promise of the diary discovery maybe fizzling out.

“That said,” Karen said, “what dates would you gentleman like me to try?”

“We’d be talking early October, 1969, optimally,” Chris said.

“Could be late September as well,” Ken said, which was a good point, if Dirk had seen Mel around the neighborhood for a couple weeks like he claimed.

Karen sat at a side table and turned on an antique reading lamp and took her time, and at one point paused and raised a finger, and then kept reading, and finally came up for air with a verdict.

“A Mel is indeed mentioned,” she said.

“Wow,” Chris said. “I mean that’s an amazing piece of news, just to confirm *that* much . . . could I ask if she says anything else, characterizes him in any way?”

“Of if he has a last name,” Ken said, the kid thinking more clearly and practically than he was.

“I’m afraid not,” Karen said. “None of that. I searched a bit further, from September 1st through October 31st. Mel surfaced twice. No details, just the name, no surname attached. Unless perhaps Mel *was* the surname.”

“What was the date of the final Mel reference, if I might ask?” Chris said.

Karen opened the diary again. “That would be . . . October 2nd, 1969,” she said. “A Thursday.”

“Well . . . you’ve given us something to work with, we sure appreciate it,” Chris said, standing up.

“Does your mom have any friends, who might still be alive?” Ken said.

Chris was thinking that was a damn good question, so simple and obvious, why hadn’t he thought of that right away?

“There is one . . . *Elsa*,” Karen said. “She’s in good health.”

“Well do you think we could speak to her?” Chris said.

“Do you mean by phone? I can ask her.”

“That would be great, but I’m thinking in-person is this best . . . does she live local?”

“She’s in Point Reyes . . . Won’t you please excuse me a moment.”

“I know what you’re thinking,” Chris said to Ken. “The phone could work fine . . . except you might get that one little extra thing, face to face.”

“I hear you,” Ken said.

Karen came back and said it was all set, they were welcome to drive out there, and she recommended The Station House Cafe on the main drag if they were hungry afterwards.

“You can’t truly be serious though,” she said, “that our mom may have actually crossed paths with the Zodiac killer?”

“Highly doubtful,” Chris said. “But that’s what investigative reporting is all about I guess . . . You can’t leave any stone unturned.”

Chris asked Karen about the tennis court on the way out, and she said she gave up hounding her husband to resurface it ten years ago, and he told her she had a beautiful property regardless, and Chris and Ken took off for Point Reyes.

There were different ways to go but they took Sir Francis Drake through Fairfax and out to Olema, and then a couple miles north to Elsa’s just east of town.

She was a hardy woman with mud boots on and an award-winning garden, and she was no-nonsense--pleasant enough, but ready to answer their questions and get back to work.

They stood on the brick walkway out front and Chris said, “Well the first thing, I guess the *main* thing, there was this guy *Mel* that Sonia evidently knew for a while, in the late 60’s.”

“I did know Sonia by then, relatively casually,” Elsa said. “We met at a ceramics class at City College . . . This would have been . . . approximately 1965, maybe ‘66. One’s mind plays tricks as you age.”

“You have us hanging on here now,” Chris said, “I have to be honest.”

“Sonia was an attractive woman, and my impression was there were several men in the picture before she met her husband, Bob. I do remember briefly meeting a Mel.”

“*And?*” Chris said, the suspense killing him, “anything *more* on that?”

“The reason it stands out, it was quite quirky, the circumstance. It was a Saturday night, and this Mel took Sonia to Mel’s.” Elsa chuckled.

“The drive-in you mean? On Geary?”

“The *original* Mel’s. On South Van Ness. This would have been substantially past the cruising era. But car people still congregated there, and there was an event that night, where everyone parks and opens their hoods and so forth, and Sonia invited us to come by. *Us* being my then-boyfriend Philip. ”

“So . . . Mel was a car person?”

“He was. He had one of those cars from the ‘30’s that people fixed up back then. We used to call them hot rods.”

“I don’t suppose,” Chris said, “there’s any way you would have known his last name?”

“No.”

“Or possibly be able to describe what he looked like?” Ken said.

Elsa shook her head. “He was just one of the fellas that night, honestly, nothing distinctive I’d be able to recall . . . I do remember Sonia mentioning he was from Brisbane.”

“Oh,” Chris said, the wheels churning a bit more now. “You’re saying, that stood out then?”

“It did, it was the one thing. *No one’s* from Brisbane.”

Ken said, “What about his personality, did anything jump out there?”

“I’m sorry, I was introduced to him quite superficially, and it was brief, I simply couldn’t tell you,” she said.

Chris said, “Did Sonia ever . . . later on, after they weren’t seeing each other . . . bring up Mel in any capacity?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Elsa said.

They wrapped it up and Chris thanked her for taking time away from her gardening and they headed back toward the city.

“It was interesting,” Ken said, “she didn’t ask anything about the Zodiac, even though obviously Karen told her.”

“I know what you mean,” Chris said. “You would think it would strike a chord, being told something about a person you met once . . . Then again, you get elderly, a *lot* of stuff rolls off, probably.”

“What was the Brisbane part? What did she mean by that?”

“That part *did* make sense. Back then all locals looked at Brisbane as an armpit. Sandwiched between Hunter’s Point and South City. When you thought of Brisbane you thought of processing plants, no idea *what* they’re processing, and nobody cares.”

“Ah.”

“You’ve heard the expression ‘there’s no *there* there?’”

“I haven’t.

“Doesn’t matter. Someone pinned that on Oakland and it stuck, but you could apply it to Brisbane . . . though Oakland’s changed a lot, and Brisbane probably has too . . . My guess is you can disguise it, and it’s still an armpit.”

“That’s where we’re going then?” Ken said. “Next stop?”

“Not sure . . . give me your two cents.”

“Well . . . let’s see,” Ken said, working it around.

“Better eat first, you know it?” Chris said. “This shit beats you up.”

“Oh totally,” Ken said, “I didn’t want to say anything, interrupt your process, but yeah . . . what were you thinking?”

They were going back a different way, Point Reyes-Petaluma Road, everything green and rolling and reminding Chris of Ireland this time of year, and he thought of the dog-and-soda for \$1.50 at Costco in Novato, and they each wolfed down two.

“You have to admit,” Chris said, feeling a lot better now, on 101 South toward the city, “I mean for the *filling you up* factor, as well as taste plus value--I think this beats ‘em all.”

“Hard to dispute,” Ken said. “Now what I was thinking, we could try the library down there, and look at the old high school yearbooks. You never know.”

“Wait a second . . . what are we looking *for*, exactly?”

“A guy named Mel who looks like the Zodiac sketch.”

“Jeez Louise. That’s a thought. You’re saying narrow it down to, what . . . if the guy was 25 or 30 in ‘69 . . . he would have graduated in maybe, ‘62 . . . going back to ‘57 or so . . . do I have it right?”

“More or less. We run like ‘55 to ‘65 if we can.”

“Well,” Chris said, “we got the afternoon, nothing else *that* urgent . . . Speaking of which, Chandler’s probably bouncing off walls, you not being around this week.”

Ken laughed, and Chris took the Lombard exit and ground his way through the city onto the Bayshore Freeway, and Brisbane came up before you were quite ready for it.

“Of course a potential problem,” Ken said, “is Elsa said Mel was *from* Brisbane, but no indication he went to high school here.”

“*That* I wouldn’t worry about,” Chris said. “Again, especially back in the day, you’d be out of your mind to *choose* to live here. Good chance, a guy like that, would be still living off the parents.”

There was a main street about two blocks long that couldn’t have changed much in 50 years, and Chris had to admit that was a positive.

The library was pleasant and the woman at the reference desk tried to help, but there were only odds and ends of high school yearbooks on hand, and she suggested trying the high school directly.

Brisbane High was up a hill, and to the west you could see Daly City spreading out toward Fort Funston, if Chris was picturing it right.

It was after 3 now, and school had let out, and the main office had no signs of life, and Chris figured you're here anyway, don't fool around, and they knocked on the door of the principal.

A Dr. Weinglobe greeted them, pretty impressive that you'd have a PhD heading one of these places, but that was beside the point, and Chris pulled out the press-pass and the guy was pretty accommodating and he sat them at a table in the vice-principal's office, who was apparently gone for the day . . . and it took Dr. Weinglobe a little while, he had to go down to the basement, but he came back with the 10 years they needed.

The first thing, Ken suggested, was might as well stick to the graduating classes, since the photos were bigger and you had the individual captions.

Sheesh . . . a while later . . . 10 years, all that careful checking, and there was one guy named Melvin . . . and he looked very Asian. Melvin Limcaco. Who Chris figured was probably Filipino.

The school wasn't huge so the graduating classes weren't all that big, but still . . .

"The thought then," Ken said, probably a little discouraged but trying not to show it, "we check sports teams and clubs, all that."

"I'm with you," Chris said, even though this was going to be a lot of work. "What you're saying, Mel could be someone's nickname, that he went by normally--except in the official graduation photos."

"Could be," Ken said, neither of them crazy about it, but they went to work on Plan B.

One thing you *weren't* going to do, Chris decided, was go back through the 10 years of graduating photos and single out the males who had a middle initial M . . . that was going too far.

If it came to *that*, you get in the car and drive back to MB.

But meanwhile you wouldn't realize how many clubs and groups there were in these schools until you sat there like an idiot and did this.

The sports teams, you would *expect*, and maybe a spring play cast . . . by man it felt like dozens of other group pictures, and this was starting to become a royal pain in the ass.

Ken said, "Boss, you stretch your legs, I've got this, no worries."

And Chris wasn't going to argue, and Ken finished going through every last book . . . and they came up with zip.

"Well," Ken said, "one thing we *didn't* try . . . how about forget the name or nickname and just check photos?"

"I've been eyeballing them, with that in mind," Chris said. "But no . . . The composite, you have the Nordic looking face with the short hair and the black glasses . . . The problem

being, there's a couple dozen guys in these books that fit it. That was the hairstyle, and there wasn't much option in glasses either."

"So we're at a dead end here?" Ken said.

"Anything we haven't thought of?" Chris said. "No one signed anything in back of them, right?"

"Doubtful, since they're administrative copies," Ken said, but he flipped to the back of one to make sure, and there was no handwriting but on the very last page there were acknowledgements, in very small print.

"Might as well check all those too, then," Chris said, and there it was, the 6th or 7th yearbook that they flipped to the end of, which was the 1959 one:

Acknowledgements:

Julie Ward, graphics

Frank Belson, Melvin Williard, Bill Sterno, offset

"Well, something anyway," Chris said, and they rifled back to the graduation photos, except there was no Williard, and Chris wondered, maybe these weren't students they were recognizing but outside employees? . . . but Ken said no they *were* students, because he saw Julie Ward just now *in* the graduating photos.

So . . . maybe the guy was a junior or something, when he helped with the offset . . . and they ripped open 1960, and boom, there he was:

Horace M. Williard

"Son of a bitch," Chris said. "He looks like the *guy*."

"Wait, *Boss*," Ken said, "you just said *half* of them look like the *guy*."

"Either way," Chris said, "he doesn't *not* look like the *guy*."

"What is offset?" Ken said.

"Jeez . . . we may be solving the crime of the century here, and you're worried about *that*? It's printing stuff. Most of the schools had print shop back then as a trade. All it means, I'm guessing, Mel helped out when they got ready to produce the thing."

Ken stacked the yearbooks back in order and said, a little more serious, "Do you think he's still alive?"

Chris said how about they find the principal and thank him, and not worry about that right now, since beating rush hour traffic was more important.



Chapter Nineteen

As far as Chris could remember, he'd been to Modesto once before.

It was an unlikely trip, his dad took all three of them--he, Floyd and his sister Bonnie--out there spur of the moment one Sunday to watch wrestling.

This was the same wrestling Ray grew up with too, and which caused Ray to fall down unfortunately, while picking up tickets for that revival night at the Cow Palace.

Back then there was a local wrestling show on TV, and they always mentioned upcoming bouts at Modesto on Sunday afternoons at the old Civic Auditorium.

So his dad paid attention, and it had been fun, that time.

Now Chris was by himself, on a modest residential street, looking for an address. He didn't want to involve Kenny today.

They'd roamed around online last night at Gloria's, and they found the guy. There weren't many Horace Melvin Williards. In fact there were *no* other ones, that they came across.

What Ken pointed out of course was we don't know this was *the guy*.

For so many reasons.

Dirk could have made it up, or at least the part where he saw him in the Presidio that night.

Sonia could have moved out of the building on good terms with Mel, nothing to do with the crime.

This could be a different Mel altogether than whoever might have dated Sonia.

And so on, ad infinitum.

What Chris also looked at last night were a couple of Zodiac websites. Amazingly active 49 years later. Amateur sleuths, retired law enforcement people too, some of them even from Australia and the UK, having fun with it, trying to come up with new pieces like it was a game.

And of course all kinds of speculation, such as the guy was mentally ill and ended up in a ward or committed suicide.

What motivated Chris to come out here today was something else they found last night while sitting in Gloria's living room, the guy's name in a news story from the little town of Colfax, on the way to the Donner Summit, two hours east of Sacramento.

Horace Williard was charged with making a threat against a young couple in a convertible sports car behind the Chevron Station on East Wilson Drive on the evening of May 11th, 1973.

It said the confrontation was interrupted by a motorist who was searching for the station's tire inflation machine.

A follow-up article said Williard pled guilty to a misdemeanor.

There was nothing more about the guy, no reports of other crimes.

But one was enough . . . certainly sufficient to at least speak to the guy . . . and here we were . . . 311, 317 . . . 319 . . . okey doke.

Chris parked across the street and sized it up.

You had an attached one-car garage in front, little lawn, unpretentious, 2 bedrooms, maybe 3 if you converted something. Simple neighborhood, quiet.

A guy answered, and it had been a grand total of 57 years since that yearbook photo, but it was the same guy, and Chris reached out and grabbed him by the throat.

Chris said, "First of all, what's your name please." And he released the grip enough so the guy could answer that he was Mel Williard.

So Chris went back to work. "Tell me who you *really* are," he said.

"I just told you," Mel tried to say, though it didn't come out smooth.

"But you got away with them, didn't you," Chris said. "Don't worry, I'm not going to turn you in at this point, that's not what I'm looking for."

He let up again, and Mel tried to say, "Then what *are* you looking for?"

"I just need you to agree with me," Chris said.

"Fine," Mel sputtered, "I agree."

"That's interesting," Chris said, "because I don't believe I mentioned what I need you to agree *with*."

"Fuck you," Mel said, and you had to give him credit for not caving in.

So Chris added his other hand to the guy's throat now too, tightened things up a bit more . . . Sort of the same concept as how they'd ratchet up the turnbuckles in those wrestling rings.

Chris said, "You ever think about the victims? The families? While you were jerking yourself off mailing your letters?"

He loosened the grip, and Mel didn't say anything.

"And the stupidest part," Chris said, cranking the pressure back up, "the silly symbols, the misspelling words on purpose . . . I mean a 3rd grader would be more creative."

Mel's expression narrowed, and Chris let go again and Mel said, "Go to hell scumbag." More full-throated this time, more conviction behind it.

Chris thought for a second, how you'd handle it from here.

The guy lived alone, it felt like. Chris wondered who might find him, and when.

This time he squeezed down and didn't let go.

Mel's eyes went back and unless it was Chris's imagination the guy was turning slightly blue.

Which surprised Chris. He thought that only happened with infant babies short on hemoglobin, or in the movies, when the good guy got mad and drowned the bad buy in the creek.

Mel went limp and Chris thought of how you're driving on an Interstate and you get to these junctions, where you can go left toward Indiana or right toward Palm Springs, or if you don't do anything, keep it straight, you end up in Albuquerque.

You start leaning toward one option and then you're not sure, but now the interchange is right on top of you, and you have to do *something*.

Chris let him go, and Mel slid to the ground, and Chris waited a minute, and when Mel's breathing was sort of normal he waited another minute, and Chris said shame on you to the old man lying on the floor and he got in the Camry and drove away.

THE END

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