

JUSTICE BLANK

by REX BOLT



Chris Seely
Vigilante Justice Book 6

Author's Note:

This series works best if the books are read in order.

That said . . . if you are reading one at random, here is a brief BACKGROUND SYNOPSIS:

Chris Seely is a relatively normal 42-year-old who goes to the doctor with what he assumes is a routine ailment, and receives a terminal diagnosis.

When the shock wears off, Chris decides he's going to make the most of the time he has left, and just go for it . . .

As well as tie up loose ends . . . which in Chris's case, means possibly killing off a few people who deserve it.

So he makes a list, and he takes it from there.

A few months in, he's not getting any worse, and his bartender Shep suggests they may have made a mistake in the lab.

Chris concedes that has crossed his mind too, but at this point he's in too deep and doesn't want to know.

He continues to address the list with mixed success--taking into account new developments and making revisions as necessary.

The story alternates between San Francisco and Manhattan Beach, and a couple times Chris is forced to lay low, once in Bingham, Nevada, and once in Eclipse, Arizona.

Eventually he approaches the one-year mark with still no symptoms, and he's reasonably convinced he's going to be okay.

His idea is to retire his list . . . and relax on the beach . . . but something always gets in the way.

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Chapter 1

“There you go Mrs. Jimson,” Chris said, handing her a towel. “Have a great workout.”

The woman laughed and said, “Honey at my age, very little earns the distinction of *great*, I’m afraid to say.”

Chris said, “In that case, what if I just said ‘*Have* a workout’? Does that resonate better?”

“Indeed,” she said, and Chris couldn’t help admire the bounce in her step as she went off to do her daily 20 minute stroll on the treadmill, the towel in one hand and a paperback novel in the other, a John Grisham one today Chris noticed, and of course a large-print edition.

This was the thing in Eclipse, Chris was learning, and more specifically at the Rancho Villa--that the older people tended to be pretty sharp.

Rancho Villa was a condo community of about 6,000 residents. You had a fancier side called Gold Valley that included a golf course, and a more modest side, not surprisingly called *Silver* Valley, that only included a duck pond.

The two sides were separated by a two-lane road that was typically full of golf carts, and the whole shebang was on the east side of Interstate 17. Both the Gold and Silver residents, however, all had access to a main community center that included a whole slew of stuff, such as a fitness complex and 3 pools, along with the Rancho Villa’s signature facility, the 40-person hot tub.

Of course they called it a spa, but Chris didn’t see why you’d make such a big deal out of it . . . sure it was impressive that 40 people could theoretically cram into the thing together if they needed to . . . but how often did you require a hot tub in Arizona?

Even now, mid-January, the daytime high was around 75, though admittedly it cooled off to around 50 at night, and Chris *had* jumped in the thing a couple times before work and it wasn't bad, and okay, he was starting to get in there *after* work as well . . . though once the weather morphed into even March, his suspicion was you'd pretty much say forget it for about 10 months.

Work right now was three 4-hour shifts a week, greeting the residents entering the fitness center, handing out towels and locker keys, and taking care of various administrative duties behind the huge, polished marble front desk.

This earned you 12 bucks an hour, plus a free membership at the fitness center, if you required it.

There was a restaurant inside, open for lunch and dinner, and Chris had landed a shift there as well, bartending, which paid a little better, and which he didn't know anything about but he faked it well enough to get hired and went home and watched a couple YouTube videos on how to mix drinks.

He'd had the bartending job for a week and a half and he was getting better, but he still screwed up some of the concoctions, though the only residents who complained were under-40 . . . the older crowd either didn't notice or didn't care, likely figuring it was all alcohol anyway, so just guzzle it down and don't worry about it.

Which pointed to a real distinction down here, the type of individuals you dealt with.

Which was essentially two branches of humans--though you better throw in the third as well.

For starters you had the retired folks living out their golden years in the Valley of the Sun. Playing golf (if they lived on the good side), shuffleboard, pickleball--and there was a ton of that, the Rancho Villa had 18 courts and there was pressure to add more--taking the occasional dip in

the pool, but mostly lounging around, shooting the breeze, sometimes getting on a bus for an organized day trip to look at a red rock canyon formation or something similar.

Chris figured this was 60 percent of your constituents. Then you had the younger crowd, some with kids running around, and they took everything more seriously, in and out for their workout on a schedule, didn't waste a lot of time lingering at the front desk talking to Chris or anyone else--though there was an attractive gal named Gayle who followed Chris's shift on Mondays and Wednesdays, and some of the young husbands *would* hang around her for a while, before getting down to business on their elliptical or whatever other dumb machine they were going to torture themselves with.

At any rate, this younger crowd, not exactly Millennials, pretty different than the breed running around Chestnut Street in his old stomping ground in San Francisco--and different as well from the crowd in their board shorts and flip flops wheeling and dealing on their devices at Starbucks in Manhattan Beach--but these folks had to make a living *somehow*, and Chris couldn't quite pin that part down yet, since there wasn't much obvious opportunity in town or nearby, though you did have to option of commuting the 36.2 miles south to Phoenix if you had to.

You figured this group accounted for another 30 percent of the humans at Rancho Villa, and that left the remaining 20 percent, which was the snowbird population from up north and back east, the ones that used the condos for extended vacations but made sure they got the hell out of here by June or even May, when you literally *could* fry an egg on the sidewalk, according to what the locals were telling Chris.

That was another little wrinkle . . . he wasn't *Chris* here in Eclipse, Arizona, like he wanted to be . . . he unfortunately was *George*.

And you wouldn't need to be a rocket scientist to figure out what might have happened.

The Christmas season finished itself off uneventfully enough in MB. Marlene came back from San Diego, and she and Chris were back to hanging out a bit, though taking it slow in terms of any in-depth angle, but it was fun, and they went to a New Year's Eve party in Redondo Beach, a guy from the tennis courts actually, one of the two guys Chris and Chandler were able to beat in that doubles match, when the two of them left the court yelling at each other.

But one of those turned out to be a nice guy, and invited everyone to the party, though Chandler didn't show up and Chris didn't see the guy's tennis partner there either.

And Kenny was around between Christmas and New Year's too, doing his thing, which was mostly morphing into the *new* thing, the adult film business in the house on the Strand . . . and Chris came to grips with it, that Ken seemed pretty dang happy, not to mention was getting paid in cash, the 200 bucks a scene on the spot, so Mancuso was holding up that end of the bargain . . . and it was a little awkward using the word 'fulfilled' to describe what was going on with Ken currently, but Chris supposed that was accurate.

There'd been more word in the news about what happened up north--nothing with Chris directly thank God, but the business with the guy in Berkeley who decoyed the would-be mugger and shot the guy.

Luckily he didn't kill him, and the guy was out of the hospital limping around on a leg that had a bullet hole.

Chris was thinking 'luckily', though the honest truth was if you rob an innocent student, or *fake student* as in this case, at gunpoint, and the fake student kills you--well, you knew the risks.

But the reason it was fortunate that the scam lived is because they arrested the guy, meaning the poor decoy person who was simply standing up for the public and making a statement that he'd had enough.

Then the story picked up some 'legs', and the national media got a hold of it too, and the story got a small mention on the Drudge Report for one day but then fizzled out, except for in the Bay Area.

Chris figured that was just as well, since the intent of his letters had been to slow down car break-ins and strong-arm robberies, specifically in San Francisco and Berkeley, and if the concept gets too watered down it loses steam.

What had been getting tossed around in the media was the comparison to Bernie Goetz.

Goetz was a guy--who Chris frankly thought seemed a little *off*--but what he did was one night in the New York City subway he decoyed 4 guys into robbing him and he shot them all, sort of like in this Berkeley deal, not killing any of them but making his point.

Chris didn't remember it happening, since he was only 10 at the time, but the incident took on legendary proportions, to where it gets studied in college sociology and psychology classes, and even law schools--since, if you can believe it, one of the muggers actually *sued Goetz* and won.

But back to the current good guy--his name was Bill Neil, and he was a bookkeeper for a fire extinguisher company in San Leandro.

In his statement Neil referenced exactly that--the good guys and the bad guys--and he said the bad guys were winning and someone needs to take a stand.

The problem now was he'd been arrested. He was currently out on bail, and specific charges hadn't been filed yet, but one positive was Andrew Bellman took the case for free, and was defending the guy. Bellman was one of the your high-profile Bay Area attorneys, and slick.

Chris couldn't help feeling bad for Bill Neil, and a little guilty about probably helping fire him up--and in a perfect world he'd go up there and help the guy, not sure how, but you felt like doing *something*.

Though Chris had his own problems now, so that wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

All you could do was keep an occasional eye on the news up there--and those North Beach guys too, the Viggliotti brothers, where the car break-in guy got 'lucky' that they didn't escalate matters after apprehending him--and you'd hope to see some residual effect.

Of course the realist in Chris figured you'd see a decrease in auto break-ins and Berkeley robberies for a few months--and then slowly but surely the mutants would pick the momentum back up again.

Unless you did something more extensive to stem it . . .

Which again . . . wasn't going on the agenda in the near future.

What happened was New Year's night--a little after midnight, so we're talking technically January 2nd now, there's a banging on the door of the apartment and it's Mancuso standing there, looking pretty dang serious.

Chris let him in and closed the door and Ned motioned to the back of the apartment, meaning is there anyone else here tonight, and Chris said no, and what do you got.

"Bud I'm giving you a heads-up," Ned said. "Our thing out in Tarazana . . . or Bel Air . . . or wherever the *fuck* it was . . . we have a situation."

This was a shock for a couple of reasons. One, they'd done their little deal on the 23rd, Chris keeping it straight because it was the night before Christmas Eve, which meant nine days had gone by now. You would have thought, either God forbid someone picks up something on you right away, like that night . . . or you have a pretty good chance *nothing* happens.

This was probably simplistic thinking, but that's how he saw it, so every day that went by he'd relaxed about 10 percent more.

The second thing though, and this was obviously silly thinking, especially now, with the guy standing here not looking too good at all . . . but Chris assumed that somehow Ned regularly got away with stuff, and if you rode his coattails you'd be okay.

Nope. *Holy Shit.*

Chris said, "Do I need to ask what *kind* of situation? Or is that irrelevant?"

Ned shook his head, which didn't give you *any* answer, but you could tell by the body language now that it likely *was* irrelevant . . .

Ned said, "So I stopped by. Decent guy that I am. Before I lay low for a while."

"Well Jeez . . . where're you going?"

"Haven't figured it out. There's a couple options . . . Hey look, don't take it too hard. We keep our head up, we should be okay." And Ned started for the door.

Chris said, "I appreciate you coming here to tell me."

Ned was halfway out and turned back and smiled very slightly and said, "All in a day's work." And he winked at Chris and was gone.

Chris stood there frozen in place for a minute.

The first thought he had, not what you'd expect to *be* your first thought right now . . . but that *no way* he was getting on another Greyhound bus.

And a little less than 3 hours later, that's exactly where he was, a dozen rows back on an aisle seat, the guy next to him snoring up a storm and smelling of booze, the 2:50 am local, headed to Nashville.

Here we go again, Chris thought.

Chapter 2

When Ned left, Chris took a moment to put on the tea kettle and at least drip a cup of strong coffee before he did anything rash.

It was pretty apparent that this was serious, and that time was of the essence.

Either *that*, or Ned was running some major bizarre game on him-- which Chris actually might not have put past the guy at one time, but now that he knew him a little better, that just wasn't likely.

And taking a step back . . . you did have to appreciate Ned not blaming *you* for this apparent current mess.

Since after all, it was your baby, you only asked the guy for a little advice, and he took you up to Chander's . . . and then one thing led to another, and finally Ned asked if you needed any help.

It occurred to Chris that Ned was a better man than he would be in that situation, since Chris was pretty dang sure he *would* be blaming the other guy right now. Who wouldn't?

That was getting way sidetracked though. The point was, yeah, you had to get your ass in gear. This was the beginning of Tuesday morning, with Monday being New Year's Day 2018, and you assumed law enforcement did everything 24 hours a day . . . but common sense told you if they had the option of picking someone up on New Year's itself, where they'd have to break away from their family get-togethers and the college football bowl games, or the next morning, business as usual . . . that they'd probably let it go a day.

On the other hand Mancuso may have gotten wind of a false rumor and panicked . . . but the guy was pretty steady, even when Floyd decked

him he kept his cool . . . so for him to *be* shaken up, there was pretty likely substance behind it.

It took a bit longer than normal but now the 1am caffeine was kicking in, and a million thoughts were swirling in Chris's head . . . What do I take, what do I leave, what do I get rid of, what do I tell Ken about, how do I handle the money, the ID, the weaponry if any?

And on and on . . . The only tiny measure of relief--and that wasn't the right way to put it since there was *no* relief--but the fact that he'd unfortunately had to go through something similar in November, the Bingham, Nevada, adventure and all the peripheral baggage that connected to *that* . . . Chris at least could simplify it to what you couldn't afford to screw up.

That meant the essentials . . . which were who *were* you, how were you going to *pay* for stuff . . . and not quite as critical, how were you going to *communicate*?

It went back to the fake ID that Booker had procured for him that time, when Chris seemed to be asking too many questions about how guns and bullets might be traced. Chris had downplayed it, telling Booker something about needing to research the topic, and Booker saw through his nonsense and didn't ask a lot of questions but suggested the ID and gave him a referral.

Chris checked now to make sure he had it on him.

It was a California driver's license, looking pretty dang official he had to admit, as he compared it to his real one. It had the fake chip and the holographic quality and you'd almost need to stick the thing under some kind of microscope to expose it as phony.

That was all well and good, but Jesus, the name Booker's guy came up with: George Worthy.

Couldn't they put you in a little better light than that?

First of all, not to insult anyone named George, but Chris never connected with that name. His father had a friend named George Willer, and if you can believe it the guy's wife was named Georgia--which could have been a nickname they adopted, but still--and they were an old-fashioned couple set in their ways. One time as kid Chris remembered being dragged over there for dinner, and all night long they played Mantovani records.

So there you had it, you were stuck being *George*, nothing you could do about it, and the last name Worthy . . . that sounded like a black guy. James Worthy for instance, the flashy forward for the LA Lakers back in the day . . . and Chris supposed that was fine to have an athletic name but it would take some getting used to.

And dang it . . . he had to keep slapping himself, that this was serious now, you really did have to make a move, and stop worrying about inconsequential details.

The other thing too, when he had to hightail it out to Bingham and lay low there for those couple weeks, he identified himself when he had to as Jeff Masters.

That was a good solid name, and why not go with that again . . . the concern being though, in this case, when you factored in Mancuso's tone a few minutes ago and the admittedly substantial uncertainty of what transpired with that Harrison person--that you might be in for a longer haul here . . . which means there's a better chance the ID will come into play, and you'll have to get used to being George Worthy for a while.

The money part was a little simpler. Chris had kept a safe deposit box at the Bank of the West in downtown MB, but the Bingham experience sobered him up a bit, and he figured you better not leave yourself in a situation where you need a bank to *open* up for you, or something stupid . . . so for the last month he'd kept 10 grand in the apartment.

Somewhat risky, obviously, since for starters the lock on the apartment door wasn't very good, combined with the door being open-air to the parking lot, like a motel . . . combined with sharing the apartment with a budding porn star apparently, who occasionally brought others from the industry back to the apartment . . . and Chris decided he really was letting his mind run away here, that the *last* guy you'd have to worry about was Ken--no matter what new business he may or may not be in.

In fact Ken was the first guy in life these days you could depend *on* . . . and thank God for that because you could essentially leave him a note and know he'd handle everything until--and hopefully not *if*--you made it back.

So bottom line, you had the 10 grand, and Chris went in the closet and grabbed it, and he'd stuck it in a pair of old sneakers, 5 grand each, where he'd pulled out the insoles, flattened the cash underneath, and popped them back in. Pretty low tech and probably not recommended, but he rubberbanded it and threw it in his front pocket, plus there was another 1800 dollars he had in his wallet, so you could at least survive for a while, provided you didn't screw something up and get the whole shebang stolen, or otherwise lose it, now that it was on your person.

So you'd addressed the first two concerns--who you were going to have to *be*, and how you'd *pay* for shit.

The third, how to communicate . . . Chris saw that as unfortunately the same as before, you dump your current phone somewhere and when you need to you pick up another you go with a throwaway pay-as-you-go job from a convenience store--and of course your best bet, don't use it . . .

So Chris packed a quick bag and as he did he ran through the transportation options.

The idea of riding another Greyhound--even for one block--was so overwhelmingly distasteful that you'd almost turn yourself into the police and be done with it . . . though not quite.

Chris went through this last time, but *could* you get on a plane? Train? Travel by bicycle? Walk? Even drive your car, and then abandon it?

No. For all the same unfortunate reasons as last time, the bus was the least conspicuous way to handle it.

Maybe next time, you will have established a better alternative.

Right now, you had to get your rear end out of here to have a shot at there *being* a next time.

So Chris snagged a powdered donut from the fridge that Ken or someone had left in there and he wrote on the back of a piece of junk mail, which was ironically an invitation to buy life insurance:

Something came up, and I have to take off for a while.

You know the drill.

You're a good man, keep looking out for yourself, and don't worry about me.

Chris figured that was short and sweet enough, and that you really *didn't* need to explain anything further. Kenny no doubt had his own theories on why he might be needing to disappear, and hopefully by now the kid was used to it and wouldn't get bent out of shape.

Plus Ken could handle the cops, should they happen to show up . . . which was sounding pretty inevitable . . . but either way, he had demonstrated *that*.

So God bless him . . . and if Chris had gotten a touch sentimental in that last line, so be it.

This time, he wasn't going to go nuts with the layers of deception and walk all the way into town and get hold of a cab or Uber from there . . . that was too extreme, especially at 1:30 in the morning . . . so he hoofed it the

block and half to Sepulveda Boulevard, and man, traffic was flying even at *this* hour, little breaks in the action but mostly chock full of vehicles, 3 lanes each direction . . . and he crossed over and started walking north, and figured what the heck, just leave your hand up in the air, and a half block in some guy pulled over and said he was with Lyft and did he need a ride.

What Chris wanted to do was go to Seattle.

First of all he liked it up there, at the least that one time, a family vacation when he was about 12. Also it was a big enough metropolis that you should be able to get lost easy enough . . . plus the added factor, if you *had* to, you might be able to squirt into Canada.

But the earliest bus heading to the northwest wasn't until 8:51.

You had the Chicago run leaving around 5, but that was the infamous one from last time, the northern Nevada local . . . and there was just no way.

You had Kansas City departing at 4:19, and there was Philadelphia--Jeez, straight shot all the way back there--at 5:07.

But all Chris kept thinking about was something he saw on TV last week, all the craziness going on in Washington DC, so-and-so being named or indicted or accusing someone else--and he couldn't keep track of all the bit players and the prosecutors and lawyers and senators and special counsels--but what *did* jump out was the feds getting a warrant and raiding some guy's house and office--and it all happened at 4:30 in the morning.

Which Chris supposed constituted the surprise element.

Unlikely as it might be, if someone happened to raid one of the Cheater Five apartments, specifically the one at the top of the stairs above the deep end to the pool, and just to the right--it would be optimum to not be sitting around dozing off in a hard plastic seat at the local Greyhound bus station--just in case.

So without thinking too much harder Chris jumped on the next bus that was idling up and ready to go, which was #1016-L, the 2:50 am headed to Tennessee.

And again, trying to settle into his seat, Chris picking up not only booze on the guy next to him but garlic as well . . . and the bus is working its way through stop lights and onto the freeway approach, and after some maneuvering straightens itself out on a relatively even keel on I-10 toward Palm Springs and points east.

After a couple hours Chris had resigned himself to the inevitability of the conditions of bus travel, that everyone had their reasons for needing to be here, and that included the snoring liquor-and-garlic guy--or was it more onions than garlic at this point--but either way when they got to Palm Springs and the driver announced there'd be a 40 minute stopover, Chris was the first guy off the bus gulping down some fresh air.

He checked his watch and Jeez, 5:18. Meaning he'd already had a lot on his plate today, both physically and mentally, and the sun wasn't even up yet.

In fact it was very dark out, not what you'd expect from Palm Springs, at least your image of it, a 24-hour kind of carnival atmosphere with everyone having fun and everything lit up bright.

Of course that was unrealistic, and no doubt the image projected for the tourists . . . but when you stripped it all away and looked below the surface, Chris figured you had some of the same nitty gritty issues of even a depressed mill town in Pennsylvania.

Anyhow . . . he needed to move around so he fast-walked it, pumping his arms too, making sure to keep an eye on the time and not stray too far from the station . . . since *for sure* you didn't want a repeat of when you were trying to go to Chicago and the bus took off and left you in Nevada.

Which in retrospect wasn't the worst thing. If he had continued on to Chicago as normal he wouldn't have met those nice-enough folks in the casino, Stan and Adela and Mike, and one or two others.

And of course Terri, the musician. And that was a whole other story, not her fault, but it did indirectly lead to the Reno episode.

So the jury was out on that one . . . and Chris decided the jury was out as well on the guy he killed in the park.

When you put a little distance on these things you tended to come to the same conclusion, or at least raise the same *question*: Did it do any *good*?

For example, was Renee the blackjack dealer's life better now?

Or how about the McCall situation in Chico? Was anyone actually better off *there*?

Maybe it was a subconscious mental block, but it always took Chris a moment to keep them straight, the history behind them . . .

So yeah, McCall . . . that was on account of Leslie and Kim, and most specifically her parents.

And the reality was, you couldn't *tell* Leslie or Kim what happened--because how *would* you?--and the parents, the ones who endured the beating at the hands of the piece of scum and his partner--the mom passed away and the dad was living out the string in a retirement home.

Likewise Jerry Smith, up in Sonoma County . . . and that one had been a lot of work, not to mention slightly risky . . . but who's going to benefit from that effort at this point?

The poor kid up the street, who Smith mowed down--that family, what's left of it, they're not going recover no matter what.

You could go on . . .

Chris decided more than once that you were never going to get a clean result, like in an early epic happily-ever-after technicolor movie that concludes with everyone waltzing arm in arm down a path into a field of

golden poppies with the music reaching a delirious crecendo in the background.

No. And the other part of the equation, people affected by these dirtbags--his brother Floyd comes to mind, the Chip business--they were able to put it past *them* and get on with their lives.

Leslie and Kim had been the same way. That first time Kim brought it up to him, when he asked how her parents had been doing all these years . . . and Chris had posed a simple question, did anyone ever follow up on what happened to those two mutants . . . and Kim seemed astonished that anyone would want to *pursue* that.

The problem was, right or wrong, *Chris* was the one who had trouble putting all this stuff past him . . .

And that's why he was here now, wasn't it . . . essentially the middle of the night, walking around like an idiot, trying to keep warm on top of it, since even though it was Palm Springs, it still cooled off on you overnight in January.

He had another 20 minutes to consume before the bus left, and rounding the corner now there was some sort of confrontation up ahead.

Chris was surprised to see any people, period, at this hour, but there were four of them and it didn't look good.

As he got closer it was pretty clear what was going on. You had a couple of delicate looking guys, who Chris assumed were a gay couple, and they were being harrassed and shoved around a bit by these two knucklehead thug types.

Chris was worried about multiple things now, such as could he get hurt somehow--of course you had the clock ticking down on missing the bus, incredible as it was that that possibility could even be on the radar after all the concern.

He was about ten yards away from them now, nobody noticing him yet, and he made a calculated decision, that if you were going to speak up you better do it right away.

He said, "Can I *help* you?"

This got all four of them to pause their confrontation for a second and look around and find Chris.

The two thugs started laughing, kind of a maniacal thing, Chris felt, since what was so funny about that question?

One of the thugs had a gap between his two front teeth, and when he smiled it made him look a little unbalanced, which they both probably were *anyway*, but it was slightly unnerving.

"What kind of help were you offering?" the non-gap tooth guy said.

"Just a little conflict resolution," Chris said. He didn't really know what that meant, but he remembered the term from elementary school, the teachers tossing it around a few times when two kids got into it in the yard at recess.

So it wasn't exactly true that he didn't *understand* the expression--he just didn't know how to *apply* it right now, if these two doofuses pressed him on it.

The gap tooth guy spoke up, "Well now seeing as how *you're* a faggot too . . . you'd best step over there with your boys."

This confirmed Chris's guess that the issue was two rednecky a-holes picking on two gay guys.

Chris was a little irritated at the gay guys actually, wondering what are you doing walking around at 5 in the morning anyway . . . since they were both kind of dressed up he figured there'd been a late event, or they'd closed down a bar, but then why not go home, why still be *out*?

But that had nothing to do with it. What was coming into focus was the two thugs probably lived outside of town, country boys, and maybe their

families had roots here going way back and they resented the influx of outsiders and the way things have changed.

Maybe he had it figured all wrong . . . but you did have that all over the place, the same concept . . . and fine, you could resent change, that was human nature . . . Chris had his reasons for resenting the mushrooming Millennial population in San Francisco.

But at the same time . . . think what you want, but keep your fucking *hands* off people.

The non gap tooth guy had enough of Chris and ignored him the way you handle a pesky little gnat by swatting him away, and he was back working on the two gay guys, who seemed increasingly petrified.

Soon enough the other thug joined the fun again.

For whatever reason they were picking on one of the guys specifically, poking him in the chest, and then occasionally in the face, and the other guy, his partner, was holding his hand and pleading with the two thugs to please let us walk away, that we didn't mean to offend you.

Chris couldn't see how they could have offended anyone, other than challenging their masculinity, alcohol very likely a factor, the redneck guys probably having closed down *their* bar the same time the gay guys closed down theirs.

The challenge part though--that seemed obvious enough in cases like this, the redneck a-holes likely not entirely sure *they* were straight, and therefore beating on someone who openly reminded them of that fact.

The poking in the face got worse, and then gap-tooth mumbled something Chris couldn't make out, and then he gravitated from the index finger on the cheek to a *closed fist* on the cheek.

First he hit the guy half-speed . . . then he took a step back and coiled up and unleashed a real punch, plenty of leverage behind it, and the guy fell down and his partner let out a horrified wail.

That was the other thing, how could it be so deserted? Where Chris realized they were, was the little street *behind* all the restaurants and bars, where you could picture trucks making deliveries and workers putting out the garbage, and plenty of other activity taking place back here.

When things were *open*, that is.

Now it was totally dead, and pretty dang dark.

The gap tooth idiot mumbled something else to the guy on the ground and starting approaching him again, and as he did Chris came up behind him and grabbed him by the hair--and Chris couldn't help noticing how greasy it felt in his fingers, and he worried momentarily that he might lose his grip--but he was able to hang on and angle the guy toward the only piece of metal that was fortunately nearby, one of those industrial double-sized green garbage bins on wheels.

The kind with the two side-by-side lids that opened as heavy-duty flaps.

Gap-tooth was able to spin around on Chris and things could have gone south in a hurry but luckily he'd angled the guy close enough to the steel garbage contraption by that point that he was able to use the guy's spin to work against him . . . and Chris continued that momentum right up until he could coax the gap-tooth's face into the front rim of the double dumpster.

The alignment of that front rim worked nicely, you honestly couldn't have designed it much better . . . it was as though someone calculated the mutant's height and weight, and speed and angle of the spin move he was trying . . . and you were left with a perfect storm of the physics of motion . . . and Chris could hear some stuck stuff cracking in the guy the first time he put his face onto the bar . . . so he repeated the effort a couple more times.

The other three were dead silent at this point--nobody threatening anyone, nobody crying, nobody doing any pleading.

Of course you couldn't worry about them right now, you had your hands full here . . . and admittedly the gap tooth guy felt pretty limp at the moment, and it crossed Chris's mind that Jeez, could he have actually finished him *off*?

Again, not something you could worry about . . . and, no better option he could think of really at this point . . . so he hoisted the guy part way up the steel dumpster until that front rim more or less met the guy's waist . . . and he got the guy balancing there for a second, and then reached down and applied a little persuasion under the knees, and the guy went tumbling head over heels into the dumpster, and Chris reached up and grabbed the steel side-by-sides that were hanging open, and he flipped them closed.

The gay guys were sort of bear hugging each other for security, and redneck number one made what Chris hoped was only a half-hearted effort to come at him.

Chris crouched slightly and put his hands out in a defensive fighter's pose, and thankfully the guy didn't take it any further, and an instant later the guy took off running, and shortly after the gay guys did too, the opposite direction . . . and Chris very quickly surmised that wouldn't be the worst idea in *his* case either, not at all, and he sprinted it the two and half blocks to the bus station, slowing down at the very end to make it look casual, and wouldn't you know the thing was fired up and about to close the door, and Chris realized he'd come within about 30 seconds of missing it . . . and next thing he was in his same seat and they were back on I-15, still pitch black out there . . . and Chris didn't stop sweating until the sun was coming up over whatever the heck mountains those were that you were looking at in the distance.

Chapter 3

When you bought your bus ticket they'd included a black-and-white printed map, showing your upcoming route, which was at least an upgrade from the Nevada trip where they included zippo.

Chris found himself pulling out that route map every hour or so, trying to picture what Nashville, the final destination, might be like.

He supposed it was a good choice as any . . . in fact for disappearance purposes, it probably beat most places in the south, at the least the ones on this route.

Yeah, you'd still stand out a little bit with the northern accent, but then again with the whole music scene you'd assume there were plenty of non-locals running around, no doubt including a few fake country performers who were born and raised in Brooklyn or somewhere as unlikely.

The printed map they gave you unfortunately included two other routes, and you couldn't tell for sure which one was *your* bus's, but Chris was pretty sure they'd be staying on 10 through Phoenix and down to Tucson and all the way to Las Cruces, then taking 25 North to Albuquerque, and turning east again, this time on 40 the rest of the way to Nashville.

The major stops along the way would be Amarillo, Oklahoma City and Memphis, and none of those places thrilled him, though Albuquerque was a possibility.

The way it worked out though . . . the decision was made *for* him, for better or worse, after the bus got back on the road following a stop in the tiny town of Centennial, Arizona.

This was four hours after Palm Springs. By this point they'd passed through some interesting terrain, Chris had to admit. First you had Joshua

Tree National Park and a couple hours later you crossed the Colorado River, and a little while after that off to the right was the northern fringe of the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge.

Unfortunately they had to swing off the interstate in Centennial to pick up one person.

It seemed the driver would check in on a device about 5 minutes before each stop, and you assumed if no one had bought a ticket by then, combined with no one needing to exit--then the bus simply passed up the occasional rinky dink town that didn't require it.

Different than the old days where they make all the stops and wait regardless.

In this case it didn't feel like anyone was stirring around ready to get off in Centennial, but they pulled off the interstate anyway and crossed over the freeway, and all by itself, no sign of an actual station, was one glass enclosed bench . . . and sure enough one guy pops up and gets on.

The guy was wearing an old pair of jeans, the belt line way down there, barely visible beneath the huge gut sticking out from under the T shirt . . . and the guy's friendly enough, you had to give him that, and he's saying hello to people and *how's your day been going* until he gets halfway back and takes a seat two rows from Chris.

Now in fairness it might not have been the guy's fault, he could very well have had some medical condition, but by the time they got back on the freeway and were up to cruising speed, the guy had released enough gas to power the thing at least to Amarillo.

People were shifting around, and even the booze and garlic guy next to Chris, who had been mostly dead to the world, comes alive and says, "There's really no ventilation in here, is there?"

It was the first time the guy had said anything since they left L.A., at least anything coherent, and Chris was surprised that the guy had a British Isles accent, though of course there *were* no surprises on Greyhound buses.

It got worse. Pretty soon you really couldn't breathe through your nose without risking a gag reflex and whatever might come with *that* . . . and Chris said *excuse me a moment* to the British Isles guy, who was pretty dang animated now, telling a story about seeing the rock group Tower Of Power in concert somewhere in 1988.

Chris didn't want to outright *embarrass* the new guy, but you had to do something. He walked up to the driver and quietly asked if it was possible to increase the air conditioning.

The driver called him son, which was kind of odd, the guy looking to be late-30's, maybe 5 years younger than Chris, and your instinct was he could be ex-military, nice and neat and really did handle the bus with precision, his sleeves rolled up and a kanji tattoo exposed on his left forearm.

"Son," he said to Chris, "I know where you're coming from, but we're at the limit. I open it up any more, they complain they're freezing. Trust me, I've been down this road before."

One thing that *was* open, Chris noticed, *wide* open, was the driver's little side window, and it looked like the guy may have adjusted his personal position to optimize the inflow of air hitting him in the face.

Anyhow, Chris thanked him, since what else were you gonna do, and made his way back to his seat, which had the feel of negotiating a war zone at this point . . . and he thought maybe if you went *all* the way back . . . but you could detect that people weren't real comfortable back there either . . . and he pulled out that Greyhound-issued black and white route map, and he tried to study it, and your guess would be you were an hour and half from Phoenix . . . and the clear-as-a-bell all-consuming thought was you had to get off this thing there.

If you valued your mental and physical health.

And of course Phoenix, right from the start, that was off the radar--the last place you'd want to be getting off.

Meaning you'd be pretty dang stupid, to put it mildly, to be starting off your *laying low* at your brother Floyd's tract house, conveniently located in Mesa, about 5 miles from the station.

If they wanted to find you--and if they were going to be looking, which Chris wasn't fully convinced of, but again you couldn't afford to wait around and find out--they'd be checking with relatives first, that was a no brainer. Then old friends second.

Which for the same reasons, you could take it to the bank that Mancuso wouldn't be disappearing in Vegas . . . and likewise Yonkers or the Bronx . . . or probably places like Miami and Philly either, and who knows where else he might have left his previous imprint, that he didn't want to be hanging around now.

It was kind of interesting to think, where *would* that guy go, and you somehow couldn't picture Ned hanging out killing time in a place like Bozeman, Montana . . . but you never know.

Though realistically, Ned's style was probably more keeping a low profile while living on some guy's yacht in the Cayman Islands . . . again, you couldn't worry about *that*, you had your own major deal now, stepping off the bus into the warm, dry and extremely bright conditions of downtown Phoenix on a Tuesday afternoon in early January.

Chris had said goodbye to the British guy, name of Alister, pretty interesting character it turned out, and they shook hands and Chris started to say he was *Chris*, and then caught himself and worked it into George . . . and that part was going to take some getting used to.

Standing there outside the Phoenix Greyhound station with his bag in his hand, the corner of 24th Street and Buckeye, central Phoenix it felt like, not too far from the airport was the impression, the planes angling overhead in a steady stream--Chris decided he was going to risk it for a night and head over to Scottsdale.

That'd put you a full 13 miles from Floyd and Mesa, which was south and east . . . and shouldn't that be sufficient for now?

He'd only visited Scottsdale marginally before, he didn't know it, but he liked the *idea* of it. For one thing it was supposed to be fancy, and Chris always liked being on the outside looking in, in those situations.

The other thing, this was spring training baseball country and there was a big stadium there, the Arizona home of the Giants in fact, and they played minor league ball there as well in a fall league.

Official spring training didn't start for a month, but you could be sure be there'd *some* kind of action, guys getting a jump on things, working out the kinks.

The cab driver recommended a couple of options and dropped him in front of the Holiday Inn Express, and Chris checked it out and they had pretty reasonable rate of \$82 and he took it.

You weren't far from Old Town, and that sounded good as well, and he took a thorough shower and headed over there, for one thing being starved out of his mind, and there was an all-purpose place where you sat outside, simple fare but good enough, plus they had Guinness on draft which positively hit the spot.

It hadn't dawned on him, but one of the Holiday Inn Expresses down here . . . wasn't that the scene of some fireworks between Monica and the Bethany husband guy?

Not this one, but a similar HI Express north of here, not too far-- Chris picturing the scenario better now--driving there from where that doofus lived, which Chris remembered was a place called Anthem.

Even though there'd been the unpleasant circumstances with the guy, Chris liked the feeling up there. You had essentially an artificial, planned community . . . but you had everything you needed, no reason to have to *go* anywhere, and of course, like so many residential complexes in retirement

country, you had the tennis and swimming and fitness and putting green activity and whatever else, up the wazoo.

So sitting there on the restaurant patio in Old Town Scottsdale--starting to bake was actually more like it, and a second Guinness would take the edge off of *that*--Chris made the simple decision to head up that way, the northern suburbs, and if you did have to be laying low, somewhere like Anthem could make it more tolerable.

An hour later he moseyed on over to the baseball stadium, and it was wide open, though Chris didn't want to go in at the moment, but there were places where you could look in and get the idea, and there were some guys flinging the ball around and playing pepper, and another group working out in a batting cage against a pitching machine.

Chris didn't recognize any of them, but they had the look of major leaguers, or at least some level of professionals . . . and if you were in there Chris supposed you could walk right up to the cage and lean on it and watch, and it occurred to him that this was rare--post 9-11 security being what it was--that nobody seemed to be around to tell you you couldn't walk out on the field and stand there.

So you hadn't fled to Nashville . . . but the day had at least rounded out to be upbeat, not just the hotel and restaurant and baseball park but the people here in general seemed to be having fun . . . and that continued into the evening, you'd hear the hum of positive activity emanating from the restaurants and bars, and punctuated by the occasional burst of loud group laughter.

If you'd stayed on the bus, by contrast . . . Chris didn't even want to try to figure it out, what state you might be passing through now.

Life can turn on something simple sometimes, and the next morning Chris had a crepes place in mind for breakfast, which he'd been eyeballing yesterday afternoon, but coming down the stairs of the Holiday Inn it

smelled pretty good, *their* breakfast deal, so he figured he'd at least take a look, and he got roped in.

Because of that, he noticed on the center of the table they had this round thing with compartments that you spun around, and sticking up were various printed announcements of local activities--and one of them was from a real estate place which now was offering:

Early Phase 3, Rancho Villa Estates

Eclipse, Arizona

Get In Early

Chris asked the guy at the next table where Eclipse was, and the guy gave him the palms up, and Chris realized the guy was foreign and might not have understood the question but either way definitely wouldn't know.

He finished breakfast and took the little promo tab with him and asked the gal at the front desk, and she said her step-dad thought about retiring there at one time but opted for St. George, Utah, instead . . . but she told Chris what he wanted to hear, that it *is* up there by Anthem . . . a little north of it, and there was a well-known developer involved, not Del Webb who'd set up Anthem but someone similar.

So Chris went back to the room, called the real estate person on the flyer, and they said he was in luck because they were running a sales shuttle up there today, and every Monday Wednesday and Friday at noon, if he could get over to Mesa of all places, where the head office was.

Chris said he'd try . . . and this part was a little disconcerting, Ubering it on over there, some streets looking pretty dang familiar as he got close, realizing at one point if the guy hung a left instead of a right you'd be directly on the western border of Floyd's 1980's tract-house development.

So Chris felt foolish but he kind of kept his head down, and when they got to the office, sure enough there was one of those mini-shuttles sitting there that held about 12, all decorated with advertisements, and Chris didn't worry about checking in with anybody, he got on the thing and kept his head down there *too*, and thankfully it left more or less on time.

When you got up there--and Jeez it was pretty extensive, with Phase 1 and 2 looking like they'd been up and operating for a while, and the sound of nails being driven all over the place at Phase 3, which looked like it gobbled up at least a hundred acres of desert--but the deal was, you'd be impolite if you didn't at least fake you were an interested buyer.

And this was *deja vu* all over again, wasn't it. You had to go through the same concept in Chico, and even in Bingham to an extent, at least the driving around part . . . and here they had a model home set up and a very energetic guy taking you through it, who could have been out of a Tony Robbins motivational seminar . . . and fortunately there were three other couples on the tour, and Chris was the only single person, so when he slipped out of there while the salesman was extolling the virtues of the backyard, no one seemed to notice.

Chapter 4

That was one problem right away of course--you couldn't walk anywhere.

It wasn't set up for that. A car, a bike, golf cart . . . all fine, but old-fashioned pedestrians were pretty much shut out.

All Chris wanted to do at this point was get to the other side of the freeway, I-17, since on the way up when the shuttle had turned off for Eclipse there'd been a cluster of motels over that way.

Just getting *out* of the Phase 3 was starting to tick him off, which except for the couple of model homes was a giant construction zone.

And unfortunately when he ducked away from that home tour and got back outside his sense of direction was screwed up, and he went about a quarter mile the wrong way before he figured it out and reversed himself.

Finally there was the main entrance, where you passed by the community center and branched off into your correct phase, and a couple guys were throwing their golf bags into a Lincoln Continental and Chris was ready to beg for that half mile ride to the other side of the freeway, but one of the guys told him he looked lost and hot and to hop in.

So that first night up there, which was Wednesday, January 3rd, he picked a motel at random, he couldn't remember which one it was . . . and that night in the room it all kind of caved in on him what was going on here . . . and that he'd been basically running on empty since the midnight knock on the door from Mancuso . . .

And that he really *was* in a *situation* . . . until proven otherwise . . .

And you'd better continue to keep your head down, so to speak . . . and you needed to remember your name was George, and you couldn't be

absent-mindedly doing something stupid, like pulling out a credit card and paying for a burger at In-n-Out.

If they *had* those around here . . . but that was the point, you needed to maintain your wits about you, and right or wrong, you hadn't ended up in Nashville, and weren't back in Bingham, Nevada, you were an Eclipse, Arizona, resident now, for the indefinite future . . . and you didn't need to make more--or less--of it than that.

In retrospect Chris knew it wasn't *entirely* coincidental that he ended up here.

On Christmas Day, if you can believe it, back in the *Cheater Five* minding his own business . . . actually watching the Mormon Tabernacle Choir sing on one of the cable channels, which people made fun of him for over the years, but he really enjoyed the power of their blended voices.

Anyhow the phone rang, interrupting the performance, and who was it but Bethany.

"You're kidding," Chris said.

"How are you babe?" she said, "and Merry Christmas."

"Now you're *double* kidding," Chris said. "Pretty sure you never called me that before *ever*, even when I half-successfully put a few moves on you."

She said, "I prefer to not categorize it that way, and remember some good times instead."

"Clinically you mean?"

"I'm not following you."

Bethany of course was his doctor's secretary, so she was one of the few people who did know about his diagnosis back then, and she'd been genuinely concerned and sympathetic, which you had to appreciate.

And if he'd just left it at that, she likely *could* have been a good friend and would remain so today . . . but Chris couldn't leave it alone, he was in his idiot, manic, womanizing stage, where he feared the plumbing--and the opportunity--could fail on him for good, at any time, and he just went after

what he wanted . . . with, in retrospect, a total disregard for the consequences.

There'd been that initial encounter, outside the doctor's office on California Street, Bethany coming back from her lunch break, wearing one of those mini backpacks, where the pressure of the straps happened to substantially accentuate her assets . . . and Chris asked her out for dinner at that point and it all spiraled forward from there.

There had been the trip to Manhattan Beach of all places, and that was admittedly a pretty good weekend, despite Chris having to leave her by herself a couple times while he was dealing with Chip.

Of course the big issue with Bethany was she claimed she couldn't get past her ex-husband, that he had a psychological hold on her--but it turned out more complicated than that, that she was a player herself and fairly mysterious.

So when Chris did go ahead and clock the ex-husband with the red rock that he conveniently found in Floyd's front yard, the intent was to get the guy to move forward with his *own* life, and apparent new family, and let Bethany move forward with *hers*.

By then Chris wasn't sure that was going to work, that there was more to it, but he trusted his instincts and took care of it . . . and the rest is history, as it backfired big time, Bethany making it clear she never wanted to speak to him again, and not only that, leaving her doctor's office job in San Francisco and actually moving back down there with the guy.

Even though Chris's impression when he rang the bell that time was the guy seemed to be re-married with a pregnant wife.

And Jeez . . . and additionally, that guy putting the moves on *Monica* . . . though not being able to consummate the effort . . . allegedly . . . and meanwhile Chris having to kill time with Floyd and Allison at a strip club in Tempe while waiting to pick her up . . . it was all coming back into focus now.

At any rate, the simple point being, despite the unpleasantness dealing with that guy--whose name Chris forgot briefly but remembered now it was Kyle--the lifestyle in Anthem, and the planned community element got the hooks a little bit into Chris, and ever since that trip he thought a place like that wouldn't be the worst way to end up.

Of course *better* would be about 20 years *later*, when you really *were* ready to hang it up.

Chris had even brought it up to Floyd, that there was an appeal to the *simplicity* of a planned community--that everything was more or less taken care of, you didn't have to go anywhere, you could exercise until the cows come home, you could sit outside at night and take in a million stars and know that there was red rock all over the place.

And Floyd had shot the concept right down, that yeah, you *had* all that stuff--meaning the whole shebang was artificial and plasticity and largely devoid of human stimulation.

Either way . . . once he was forced off the bus in Phoenix, Chris supposed it wasn't a complete accident that here he was now, back up this way.

Back to Bethany . . . Chris had closed the door on her quite a while ago, figuring he'd never hear from her again and in his mind wishing her well with whatever her *real* struggles were . . . but here she was, starting off by wishing him a Merry Christmas--and Jeez, you weren't going to crucify the woman for *that*.

Though Chris couldn't help saying, "You have a good heart, but if I had to lay odds when it typically shows itself, I'd go with Christmas Day, and maybe Easter."

Bethany said, "Why Easter?"

"I have no idea. I just threw it out there."

"Chris, the second reason I'm calling . . ."

"Uh-oh. Here we go."

“No I’m serious. Will you hear me out *please*?”

“Billy.”

“You know what Chris? Screw *you*.”

“This is the thing,” he said. “In the early days you were sweet. After I tried to intervene on your behalf, you changed. I detected a modicum of bitterness.”

“You are so fucking frustrating. What’s your problem? Have you ever taken the time to look in the mirror?”

“Of course that one time,” he said, “when you were playing racquetball down at the Bay Club, you got real mad when you lost. Didn’t speak to anybody for about 20 minutes.”

“Well I do apologize for *that*,” she said, “and I believe I did *then* as well, that it’s something I need to work on, handling competition.”

“No, that part was good. You were feisty. You weren’t pretending you enjoyed getting your hiney handed to you, which a lot of others *do*.”

“Do you have to put it that way?”

“Well that’s the accurate version, from what I could see as a novice on the sidelines. You were in control, you were the superior athlete . . . and then you kind of fell apart.”

“Oh really? Who are *you*? . . . So *fuck* you,” she said, and she hung up.

At that point Chris grabbed the remote and turned the sound back up on the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, debating maybe turning it up *real* loud so he couldn’t hear the ring on her return phone call . . . either that, or turning the dang phone off.

Because of course there *was* going to be one, and it only took about 30 seconds, and Bethany said, “Let’s move forward here. Chris, okay fine, Billy asked me to call you. Is it the worst thing to have someone concerned for your welfare?”

Chris said, “Before I address that . . . I’m trying to think back, but I don’t recall you ever calling him Billy.”

“Jesus. Dr. Steiner then. You’re a genuine piece of work.”

“Because I brought that up to him once. Admittedly at a low point, can’t remember what was going on, specifically, but I was angry at the world I guess and I threw it out there, *are you banging Bethany?*”

“Oh my *God.*”

“You don’t even want to know what he said?”

“Chris . . . I’m going to hang up now . . . and I’ll keep it civilized, I’m not going to slam down the phone or anything . . . but do yourself, and everyone a favor? Call him up?”

“Let me ask you this . . . I’ve been pre-celebrating a bit, ever since it struck me I’m approaching the 11-month mark. Is that pretty good?”

“Call your doctor.”

“Okay, thanks . . . Before you do hang up, where *are* you?”

“I’m in Texas actually.”

“Oh. Sounds good then, a change of scenery. Depending. What part?”

“Austin. Listen, I don’t want to bore you with the details, I’m in a bit of mess. That wasn’t why I called though.”

Chris didn’t want to open any more doors, that was for sure, but he had to ask, “What *kind* of a mess?”

“It’s . . . not an over-the-phone mess,” she said. “If I ever see you again, I’ll tell you in person.”

“Well how about the ex-husband guy . . . I mean is he still out there in Arizona or whatever?”

“No, they moved to Dallas,” she said, “and please enjoy the rest of your day,” and at that point she did hang up.

So that was a blast from the past, out of the blue. Billy the doctor had been his friend growing up, not a particularly close friend until one summer they both worked as counselors at a camp along the Klamath River up in Siskiyou County, and they became reasonably tight.

Billy was a year older, so fortunately he wasn't part of the 25th high school reunion, which he would have been at for sure, since Billy was a team player and never missed any of that stuff . . .

Sitting in the motel room now in Eclipse, Chris was trying his best to process it all, and come up with some sort of plan going forward.

One tiny bright spot, which he hadn't considered until he replayed in his head just now the Christmas conversation with Bethany--which was, at least the Kyle guy wasn't around here anymore apparently.

What the rest of Bethany's story was--and how accurate it may have been--that wasn't good to hear obviously, some kind of *mess* . . . but at least right here, Anthem being just down the road from Eclipse, it hopefully meant you weren't going to run into Kyle in the vegetable aisle at Safeway.

At any rate, you needed a basic strategy, and Chris tried the motel desk drawer and it was empty, but there was a pad of paper on the nightstand and he ripped off a sheet and wrote:

MASTER PLAN

Long term housing

Work

Low profile

Patience

Glass half-full

That looked pretty good. Simple. Two specific actions, two general tactics, and the final one, a motivational tid-bit.

The *work* notation would be an add-on since the Bingham experience. But *a*, it would help fill up your days, and *b*, you might need the money.

You could try to sugarcoat the situation all you want, but the hard truth was, if they really were looking for you, really did think you had something to do with that thing in the wild animal sanctuary . . . then you'd better be ready to dig in for a while . . . and you might as well try to get up in the morning and go to work like any other doofus.

As for the glass half-full . . . Chris knew you could pretend to downplay that one, but it was probably the most important thing, the mental aspect of it . . . You're *in* the situation, you can't go backwards and control that part . . . so no point feeling sorry for yourself.

Easier said than done of course, but he figured your first step at the moment was to be busy, and *eating* was always an acceptable way to kill at least an hour, and there was a brew pub connected to one of the other motels, and Chris wandered over there and ate and had a couple of drinks to wash everything down, and he was a little shaky walking back afterwards, which wasn't the worst thing tonight . . . though he had to admit, he could see Floyd's point, even the food seemed a little artificial.

Chapter 5

The bed had seen better days and it felt like there was a ravine in the center that you kept rolling into and Chris finally figured out you needed to rearrange everything and lay at a severe angle, even though that meant your feet were hanging off the side, but after the dust settled he woke up pretty refreshed.

Of the half-dozen motels you had in this cluster, the one he was partial to was the Super 8, the fifth one down the service road, and after breakfast he went down there and asked for the manager.

The desk clerk told Chris the manager was playing golf and would be back at noon, and that was a little odd in itself, Chris trying to think if he'd run across a motel manager being busy doing *that* . . . or for that matter, being off the premises in *any* capacity.

The other motels might work too, though not his own, which he had straight now, it was a Rodeway Inn, and based on the bed you'd eliminate it. But Chris had had good experiences with Super 8's and you should at least wait for the guy to finish his 9 holes, so what the heck, might as well sit right here in the lobby, if you could tolerate flipping through the tourist brochures, but at least it was air-conditioned, and man, you were already starting to need it.

The desk guy wasn't doing much, so after a while Chris said, "You look like a high school kid."

The guy said he went to the community college, but that wasn't the first time someone said that.

"Good to look younger than your age," Chris said. "Certain advantages to it."

“Like what?” the guy said.

Chris had right away backed himself into a corner, there were probably *no* advantages, so he said, “Give me a little time, I’ll figure some out.”

The kid at least laughed and said, “Are you sure you need Mr. Kumar specifically? Can *I* help you with something?”

“That depends. You going pre-law, over at your college?”

“Huh?” the kid said. “Oh, I think I get it. You’re a process server or something?”

“Nah,” Chris said, “sorry to be a wise guy and throw you off track. I was more wondering about your negotiating skills . . . I’m . . . George, by the way.” And he got up and shook hands, almost having blurted out that he was Chris, and the guy said he was Max, and what *kind* of negotiation?

Chris said he was looking for a favorable monthly rate, or possibly longer, and would there be any tips on how he could present that to Mr. Kumar.

Max thought about it and said there was no cut and dry approach, that he could think of, but that Mr. Kumar was looking for a new *super*.

“What,” Chris said, “you mean like a resident manager?”

“Well, *that’d* be the Kumars, they live on-site . . . but it would be more a handyman.” Max lowered his voice. “The current one’s a little shaky. You do get a free room out of it.”

Chris considered that for a minute. “Jeez. I appreciate you letting me know. Something like that, it would be nice . . . couple of problems though, mainly I’m not that handy.”

“Well what are the other problems?” Max said.

“I don’t know, it would pin me down, I think, cut *into* stuff.”

“What stuff do you have going?”

Chris said, “You know something? I’m thinking maybe you *should* be a lawyer. You ask penetrating questions.”

“Thanks.”

“I didn’t mean it as a compliment. Necessarily. But what are you taking at the community college? And where is that, anyway?”

“I go to Paradise Valley,” Max said. “20 miles down 17. I’m taking English, Algebra 2, Biology and Karate.”

“That’s a pretty good load,” Chris said. “Plus you work. I admire that. How’s karate?”

“It sucks.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“Ah, it’s all moves. Like we’re taking a dance class. No sparring.”

“Jeez . . . no contact at all, you mean?”

“I’m afraid not. The semester’s almost over, so I finally asked the guy, and he said his instruction is based on a certain method, some Japanese word.”

“Well, yeah, I guess that would tick me off too,” Chris said.

“So that was a waste. I should taken netball. At least you’re playing a game.”

“*What* ball?”

“A new thing. It’s in the Olympics already.”

“Okay that sounds equally dumb, so don’t do that . . . Any particular reason you’re interested in karate though?”

“The usual,” Max said. “You know, the self-defense aspect.”

Chris took a moment here. An answer like that, not always, but sometimes for sure, implied you felt like you needed it.

He said, “Why, you’re worried about stuff around here? This seems like one of the safer regions, to be honest, though I guess what do I know.”

“No you’re right, in that regard.”

“But?” Chris said.

“No big deal,” Max said. “Just some things, here and there, I decided it wouldn’t hurt is all.”

Chris took a longer look at the kid his time. “Anyone in particular?” he said.

“Yeah . . . going back a few years.”

You didn’t need to embarrass the kid pinning him down any further. Chris had the idea.

He said, “I dealt with a thing too, growing up . . . some issues that could be similar.”

“Yeah? What’d you do about ‘em then?”

“That was the thing, I *didn’t*. The funny part, the main guy, the *worst* one, I’m friends with now . . . In spite of that though, I’m still walking around with a chip on my shoulder.”

“What about the other ones?” Max said.

“Jeez, you’re pretty direct, aren’t you . . . That’s okay . . . The answer would be, I found out what happened to one of them, but not the other.”

And that was accurate. The three guys that jumped him that memorable day in junior high school, coming off the 3 Jackson in front of Alta Plaza Park, sending Chris to the emergency room for a few hours--that was Ray, Charles Fuqua and CJ Williams.

Chris in fact gave the name Fuqua to the desk attendant at Ray’s building when he first confronted him back in February, and Ray not only saw through it but cleared it up pretty quick, informing Chris that Charles Fuqua got in with the wrong crowd some years back, and was no longer walking around.

Chris never had asked about the other player though, Williams.

Which was probably because Ray was the ringleader and he was the guy you focused on killing off at first, and then of course the acknowledgement from Ray and the apology--or as far as Ray was *capable* of one of those, but what he did say is *it shouldn’t have happened*.

So Chris didn't worry much about Williams beyond that . . . but this Max kid was right, shouldn't you at least wonder what happened to that guy?

In theory, maybe, Chris said to himself, but for Christ sakes, not right now.

Max, though, was following up with, "I think *I'd* be wondering about the third one."

"Okay I'm going to shift gears on you," Chris said. "What are you trying to accomplish here? Bottom line."

"Like I said, just get tougher."

"You gotta be more specific. *Walk around* tougher . . . or *do something about it* tougher?"

"I don't know," Max said, with that sing-song tone where the person goes up on the *know*, which Chris hated, since that was dodging the question.

But if he had to guess, it wasn't just a *general* deal, there was something concrete eating at him, and it may have been festering for a while.

Who knows, maybe he lived right here across the freeway, Phase 1 or 2 of the thing, the Rancho Villas, nice suburban environment . . . on the surface.

The larger point being, if someone was giving him trouble, that likely didn't just dissipate, especially with the kid still at home and going to the JC, and whoever the hypothetical idiot was, still in the kid's face, or at least on his mind.

Chris said, "What about UFC? They got any of those places around here?"

"What about it? Yeah we've got *one*. North Phoenix Fighting Alliance, I think it's called. There are a couple of the real guys, that train there."

"So *go* there."

“I looked into it. It’s very expensive.”

“Well what do they do for you? The members I mean.”

“What it says. They train you to fight. Then you go to matches and tournaments.”

Chris said, “Well what if you just wanted to learn it, have it available if you needed it . . . but didn’t want to compete, didn’t want to go that far?”

“I guess you could,” Max said. “Why are you asking all this?”

“The head stuff,” Chris said, “it makes me nervous. Getting hit there a lot.”

“I hear you.”

“But you say it’s expensive--*how* expensive?”

“When I looked it was two hundred a month. Like I say, off the charts, no way.”

Chris said, “Dang, so \$2400 a year . . . Is there . . . like an annual discount or something?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Take a look then,” Chris said, meaning check the website, or whatever you do.

A minute later Max looked back up from the computer and said upfront it was 2 thousand dollars.

Chris turned his back and pulled out the wad of cash he had rubber-banded in his front pocket.

“Here you go,” he said, handing Max the two grand. “Don’t make a big deal about it.”

The kid’s mouth dropped open and he said, “You can’t . . . be serious.”

Chris said, “What’d I just tell you *not* to do? You don’t take it, in five seconds, the offer’s off the table.”

And he started counting it down, which unfortunately reminded him of Mancuso counting down something or other with the Harrison guy, but

either way when he got to three Max took the money, though he looked like he was in a mildly catatonic state of shock.

Luckily right about then Mr. Kumar walked in. There was nothing to figure out, it was the guy--he was nicely dressed, a blue sportcoat, and he had a printed name-tag, *Kush Kumar, Super 8 Management*.

Max gave Mr. Kumar a little head motion toward Chris, and Mr. Kumar said, "May I help you?"

"I'm hoping," Chris said. "You have any leeway in your pricing? I know this is a national chain, but is this a franchise you *own*, or what?"

"We do own it, yes," Kumar said, "to an extent. It does feel as though corporate maintains a stranglehold on us at times." He laughed, short and high-pitched. On the one hand Chris thought of Sharif, and how running motels seemed to be in the east-asian culture for whatever reason these days . . . though of course Sharif was Pakistani and *Kush Kumar* sounded Indian if he had to guess, and you had centuries of bad blood between the two countries, so doubtful these two guys would be best buddies.

Anyhow, Chris said, "I'm not trying to be a jerk, so stop me if I am, but I need a friendly long term rate."

Kumar said excuse him for a second and Max stepped to the side and Kumar took over the computer and, Jeez, did you have to click that many buttons, type the equivalent of a manuscript it felt like, to figure it out?

But Kumar got off and said, "Sir, that would be 3 thousand for the month. Which includes tax. That's our smallest room, but you do get a King."

That sounded like an okay deal, not great. It wasn't as cheap up here as you might think, with the normal Super 8 rooms going for \$129 a night. No doubt the time of year had a lot to do with it, this apparently being prime season, and baseball spring training getting underway soon all over the place in the Valley.

Chris said, "I know you're working with me, but that's going to be a little tight. Thank you though."

And he left, and was most of the way back to his much dumpier motel, trying to think what would be a good plan B, when Max comes running up behind him.

"George," he said, "Mr. Kumar reconsidered. Please come back."

"Oh Jeez," Chris said. "I'm not a big fan of people reconsidering. I like to accept the news and move forward."

"Well he has another idea," Max said, and it seemed to be important to the kid, so Chris shrugged his shoulders and reversed direction.

"Mr. George," Kumar said when they were back in the office. "I had no idea you were an old friend of Maxwell's. I must tell you, he is an absolutely superior worker, a joy to have around."

Chris looked at Max who was looking away, and then back to Kumar, and he said, "Yeah well, that shouldn't factor into it. You did the best you could."

"Yes, of course, concerning the motel proper. What I neglected to consider, we own a condo on the other side. I'd be pleased to rent that to you for \$1500."

"Wow . . . just like that? It's empty and ready to go?"

"Not precisely, my brother-in-law resides there at the moment. That should require only a day, two tops, to raze him. He'll simply move in with us."

This was quite an extraordinary offer actually. A separate thought was, man there's always a brother-in-law it seems . . . both with Sharif and this guy.

Also the apparent loyalty to Max, and the change of heart, that was impressive . . . though who knows, maybe he was looking for an excuse to get the brother-in-law out of there.

Chris said, "All very nice of you. I'm going to pass."

And both Max and Kumar seemed disappointed as he left.

What it got you thinking about though, was *Jeepers*, just go over there to the Rancho Villas and find out what *other* condos might be for rent.

He was surprised he hadn't thought of that in the first place. It didn't feel right accepting the favor from Kumar . . . if he had actually *done* something for the guy, that might be different.

Yeah, he impulsively helped the kid out with the UFC thing, and then of course the kid lied to the boss about them being old friends, trying to reciprocate.

So forget all that, start clean . . .

He checked out of the Rodeway Inn, and even though it killed him, trekked it back over to the Rancho Villas. They really did need some lessons in urban planning around here, they expected you to walk over the overpass, where there wasn't even a designated pedestrian lane, just like a 6-inch cement ledge near the wall, and cars and trucks were honking as though you were a deranged homeless person who should know better.

But finally getting there, the community center was admittedly quite nice, and Chris thought if you really *did* have to work, this wouldn't be the worst place, and a few days later he landed the front desk job giving out the towels and bs-ing the residents coming in to exercise . . . and after that he was able to pick up the bartending shift in the onsite restaurant.

Right now he marched into the sales office, realizing dang it, he hadn't even shaved today, and his shirt tail was hanging out and he was sweating quite a bit from the ridiculous walk, but a Mrs. Gleason was behind the desk and she was friendly.

"Sales or rentals?" she said.

"Man, you get right to it," Chris said. "What do *you* think--judging me as I made my grand entrance just now?"

“I’ve given up trying to read people,” she said.

“Well where are you from?” Which Chris knew was a strange question, but it was part of his deal, he enjoyed hearing about people’s backgrounds, placing them, plus a question like that sometimes yielded a juicy story if the person was a talker.

“You’re implying I don’t have the Eclipse accent?” Mrs. Gleason said.

“You might. But no one’s *from* here, right? . . . Although that’s not true, I just met a guy who grew up here, goes to the community college now.”

“So does my daughter. We’re from Winnetka, Illinois, though. You?”

“Uh, LA,” Chris said.

“You seem uncomfortable,” she said. “Are you in transition?”

“Most definitely,” he said. “Y’all got anything for rent?”

Mrs. Gleason got right down to business, rattling around on the keyboard and matching things up against some index cards spread out on her desk.

“We have *one*,” she said. “It’s one of the older units, Phase 1, formica countertops and so forth. A studio. The owner is willing to let it go for \$1200 a month.”

“Dang,” Chris said, “an hour ago I thought some guy was giving me a great deal at 15.”

“Well the units do vary widely. There is a synchronicity to the outside structures, but even with the studios for example, some have terraces and twice the square footage. Yours is entirely no-frills.”

“*Yours.*”

“Would you like to see it?” She was already up, pulling a huge wad of keys out of a drawer, and a moment later was at the door waiting for Chris, ready to hit the light switch.

So he followed her on over, and he said he’d take it, she hadn’t exaggerated, not much to the place, but it was on the top floor, the third,

and it was partially furnished, which meant that likely was all he would need, the one missing ingredient being a recliner, but he figured you could deal with that, and if you absolutely couldn't, there was always Costco.

Out the window, past all the golf courses and fake ponds and artificial structures, you could see some actual open land in the distance, which Chris thought would be west, but he was pretty turned around so you couldn't be sure.

"I'm half-joking," he said, "but you're an attractive woman. If the marriage ever goes south, please let me know."

Mrs. Gleason was caught a little off guard, but she hid it well and said, "It already *has* gone south."

"Well then . . . that's kind of surprising that you'd admit to it."

"Why, because I don't know if you're a serial killer or something?"

"No, I didn't mean the part where you're supposed to let me *know* . . . I was thinking more, you're not the type to admit a *mistake*."

"Oh really? You're kind of a jerk, it's turning out."

"Shall we take care of that paperwork?" Chris said, and he was a little scared now that she was about to tell him to get lost.

Back at the desk Mrs. Gleason was handing him forms to fill out, and she said, "Are you sorry for putting your foot in your mouth back there?"

Chris put the pen down, which he wasn't planning to use anyway. He said, "Now you sound like my ex-wife."

"You actually had one of those?"

Chris had to think for a second, remind himself that he *hadn't*, except for the two-week shotgun mistake way back when, that person having readjusted years ago and settled in with a Nascar mechanic in Gainesville, Florida.

But the accurate part was, he *did* he put his foot in his mouth regularly, and then tried to butter people up like it didn't mean anything . . .

and therefore had often faced the ‘*are you sorry for*’ tone plenty, whether it was an official ex or not.

Anyhow he picked up and put down the pen, the credit check mention in the paperwork stopping him cold.

“No good,” he said, pulling out his cash. “I’ll pay straight if you don’t mind, that way we don’t have to waste time.”

Mrs. Gleason was no rookie, that was for sure. She said, “Fine, 6 months up front, that’ll be 7200 dollars.”

“Three,” Chris said, pulling out a hundred dollar bill and laying it on her side of the desk.

She studied it for a second, Chris thinking you don’t need to look at it like it’s some foreign object--and then she opened her top desk drawer part way and casually slid the bill across the desk and into it.

“So where were we?” she said.

“36,” Chris said, counting it out.

And there was some basic paperwork and a couple signatures and the keys got handed over, and Chris thought he made out pretty well, you couldn’t complain . . . especially since he didn’t even have to produce any ID, much less a social security number . . . and Jeez, even his *fake* name didn’t enter into it much.

Though she said, “Is there anything else, Mr . . . Worthy?” Looking down at the paperwork to get that straight.

Chris was doing a little quick arithmetic . . . let’s see, you had 36 flying out of your hand just now, plus that extra hundred to secure the transaction . . . then of course the 2 to the kid across the highway . . . a couple motels so far, cabs, bus ticket, meals, odds and ends, the throwaway phone he picked up at the convenience store in Phoenix . . .

Bottom line, 24, 48 hours, whatever . . . you’d just shot about half your savings.

“There might be, now that you ask,” Chris said. “There any odd jobs around here?”

“Hmm,” she said. “Long term, you mean?”

What he was hoping for, the dream scenario, would be *no term* . . . that he’d check in with Chandler or Ken or Mancuso or *someone* . . . and he’d find out the whole thing was a mistake, a bad dream, he wasn’t on anyone’s radar, and come back to Manhattan Beach and resume the good life, that this was an unfortunate--but fully resolved--bump in the road.

Even if it were miraculously straightened out in a few weeks, or a month, fine you’d wasted the extra rent--but compared to the big picture, who cares?

Right now though, he said, “Yeah, long term.” Since why would you ever say *short term*, and hurt your chances?

“I’ll keep it in mind,” she said.

“If I bought you dinner, would that help my cause?”

“Are you saying,” Mrs. Gleason said, “you’re trying to bribe me into pulling some strings?”

“Well I like to eat. I like to converse with people, especially women. That’d be killing two birds that way, is all.”

“I’m going to decline your offer,” she said.

Chris looked at her, cocked his head sideways, like here we go again as he pulled the substantially lighter money wad back out of the front pocket.

This time he got up and walked around the desk, and opened that top front drawer himself and dropped the hundred into it, and closed it back up.

“I got a whiff of your perfume just then,” he said. “It has a classy European scent.”

She took a moment. “If there *really* is nothing else this time, I have to pick up my daughter.”

“I thought she went to the JC.”

“She does. She got two speeding tickets, I suspended her driving privileges.”

“Now *that* I give you credit for . . . but what, you can just leave?”

“Yep,” she said. “Why, do you have a problem with that now *too*, I suppose?”

Chris said yeah he *would* if he was her boss, but he’s not, and he found his way back to Apartment 302 of the Rancho Villas, Phase 1, to try to begin his new life.

Chapter 6

Now it was two weeks later, Chris getting the hang of his job at the front desk of the rec center, and handing that towel to Mrs. Jimson, joking with her about the extent of her workout, and concluding that at least she *has* a workout, and her taking it good-naturedly . . . and Chris supposed that was one of the keys to longevity, wasn't it, which was being able to find a little humor in most anything.

You were at Wednesday, January 17th today, a couple weeks into your stint down here.

It wasn't bad. If you had to be on the run, Chris reminded himself more that once, you could do worse.

He'd developed a bit of a routine, maybe even lost a couple pounds around that midsection that the surf instructor Tammy chided him for, and one part of it was taking a walk after his front desk shift ended, which was at one o'clock . . . and yeah, it wasn't set up that way around here for the general population, but if you lived in a place like Rancho Villa you could do it artificially--which meant there were a total of 6.2 miles of manicured trails on the three phases of the property, and for some of it you had to watch out for flying golf balls, and doofuses crossing in front of you with their carts as well, but it let you stretch your legs.

Chris would typically knock on the door of the sales office before he started his walk, meaning Mrs. Gleason . . . and by now he'd gotten to know her as Pat, and when he pressed her a little more, did your friends call you Patti or Patricia, she informed him that her friends from back in the day called her 'Fish'.

That didn't seem like a great nickname, and Pat could see Chris was struggling with that one a bit, so she told him the story, about her dad and grandpa going fishing in Quebec one time and something or other causing her to pick up the name.

It wasn't very interesting and Chris decided *Pat* would work, and today she said she could use some air, and fine.

On the one hand Chris enjoyed walking alone, he could get lost in his thoughts, and try to set a decent pace and be ready to plunge into the pool, and then the hot tub, when he got back . . . and that, he had to admit had grown on him, the hot soak, after mistakenly assuming those things don't belong in Arizona.

But it could be dang boring as well . . . since he *already* spent plenty of time with his thoughts down here . . . and about every 3rd or 4th day he twisted Pat's arm and she joined him, though he had to slow down, she wasn't in great shape.

He'd learned a few things from Pat on these walks. Her husband was guilty of numerous indiscretions but she still misses him. Her daughter hates it here and wants to move to New York and try to be an actress. Pat thinks her daughter smokes dope and is full of it. And the final thing, there's plenty of friction between the Phase 3 people, selling the new-construction units and getting the big commissions, and Pat's end of it, where they're stuck with much less active re-sales and rentals of existing units.

Pat had a guy working for her part-time named Anderson, who wore a vest and had the look of an old-fashioned distinguished salesman . . . and there was apparently an altercation at the Christmas party, the Phase 3 people all there yukking it up, and Anderson had enough, plus the holiday spiked punch was probably kicking in, and Anderson plucked a toothpick out of his mouth after pulling an hors d'oeuvre off it, and aggressively pricked one of Phase 3 guys in the cheek with it, and Pat had to fire him.

You'd see Anderson around though, pretty nice guy, since he lived in the complex and they couldn't exactly throw him out for the infraction.

And that's the way it was down here Chris was learning, it was a limited little world, and not surprising if you ran into the same person in a different role.

Pat couldn't stand Donald Trump, and something must have happened today in the news that Chris wasn't aware of, and she was pretty animated, carrying on about how this never would have happened when Ronald Reagan was in the White House, that we've lost all connection to good old conservative values.

They were at the far end of the path, beginning to round the corner which wrapped around the 17th green of the golf course, and Chris noticed off the trail some glistening in the dirt at the base of these two shrubs that were sticking straight up, slightly yellow flowering, and had been curious about them before and learned were called banana yuccas.

Pat was wrapped up in her diatribe about Trump versus President Reagan, adding in Bush senior now, and then working Nixon and Eisenhower into the conversation as well, and even Barry Goldwater . . . addressing all of *them* with admiration . . . and Chris pointed to something going on on the golf course, the other direction of the glistening thing, and she looked over there while still talking and when she did Chris took a couple quick steps off the trail and scooped it up and put it in his pocket.

It felt like a ring, that was about it, and they finished off the walk and thankfully by the end Pat was talking about something different, a book she was reading where an amateur sleuth lady tries to piece together the puzzle of the Golden State Killer.

Chris was actually somewhat familiar with that case, some guy out of control in the late 70's, mostly in the Sacramento area, though it never hit home for him as much as the Zodiac did, but in listening to Pat get into it he thought, Jeez, I should have read this thing, I might have gotten some tips

on *finding* the guy . . . and he hoped he actually *had* found the guy, meaning Mel, the Zodiac, but you couldn't know for sure.

When they finished the walk Chris went back to the condo to put on his swim trunks, and he took a look at the ring.

It wasn't fancy, and he found himself admiring it for a moment, that it was elegant in its simplicity.

You basically had a solid gold band, little bits of an ornate design pressed into the gold, and spaced out in the designs, which he could see now were supposed to be stars, were three small diamonds dotting the centers.

Chris didn't know much about jewelry but he you had to assume this was a woman's ring. Either an engagement band or a wedding ring.

He tried it on to, his fourth finger and then his pinky, and the thing didn't come close to squeezing onto either one, which double convinced Chris this belonged to a woman . . . and how did it happen to get here?

Hmm . . .

They'd been having late-afternoon thunderstorms the last week, which Chris didn't mind at all, but everyone kept telling him those were out of character around here, almost like they were apologizing for them.

He did notice the dirt was wet when he distracted Pat and scooped up the ring.

So . . . maybe it had been there a *while*, conceivably several years, and got exposed by the unusually excessive precipitation . . . *or*, someone deposited it more recently and it was visible ever since, but no one walking that path happened to notice it until now.

In any case the pool/hot tub combination sounded real good, and Chris put the ring in a little dish in the back of his highest kitchen cabinet and headed out there.

The swimming situation here was a different animal of course than the *Cheater Five*, where you had a dozen apartments tops, and half the

residents, at least, never went near the thing, so you had to battle for water space with *no* one typically, or one doofus at the most . . . but of course that was how he met Marlene, she was floating around out there, so you couldn't fault it . . . and it had crossed his mind more than once should he risk whipping out the 7-11 Go Phone and give her a call? . . . But he decided no, what good would come out of it, and she'd obviously gotten the word from Ken what was going on . . . and it wasn't at all clear *they* had anything going anyway, relationship-wise, so let the poor woman get on with her life.

The pool thing here though, there were about a hundred people in there. Not for long, most of them just dipping, swimming a few strokes and popping back out and laying back down on their huge towels spread out on the plush green lawn, or stretching it out in their lounge chair . . . only a small percentage even putting their head underwater.

There was a whole other pool that may have had a different purpose at one time but was now designated for water aerobics classes, and those went on throughout most of the day, and honestly you didn't want to look over that way if you didn't have to . . . not their fault, and it was great they were in the water doing *something*, but the reality was the water aerobics seniors didn't look too great coming in and out of *that* pool.

Chris was thinking even the *instructors* didn't look great, if you had to be blunt about it, barely one-step away fitness-wise from the clientele, and maybe something like pickleball *would* work better for these people.

Then the 3rd pool, the opposite end of the spectrum, a 50 meter competition lap job, and here you didn't mind watching the good-looking men and women getting their workouts in.

This was the younger Rancho Villas crowd, single folks in their 20's and probably a few parents in their early 30's, and you could always pick out the elite swimmers from the rest of the crowd, the ones who were covering the pool with minimal effort and gliding into their flip turns like they were juvenile dolphins having fun in the sea.

Late afternoons a year-round junior swim team took over the competition pool, and their serious coaches strolling the deck and telling the kids what to do next, what stroke and how many sets and how fast, and the swimmers were supposed to be watching an overhead electronic clock to pace themselves properly . . . and Chris they decided the whole thing was too dang grim, that you needed a ball in there somehow.

Anyhow, Chris completed his little swim routine in the general-population pool, and he hung on to the side for a while trying not to think about anything too heavy.

In the two weeks so far that he'd been incognito he hadn't contacted anyone. Nor had gone online to look around.

It was tempting obviously--at least to find out if the Harrison episode was even in the news--and that was wrong, it obviously would be, since you had a serial killer on the loose who got captured--but the question was more, would he Chris, really be on the radar?

That was something also that he tried not to dwell on, the business of letting Mancuso help you out. The guy meant well, Chris was convinced, he'd been suspicious of the guy having ulterior motives but he honestly couldn't find one here . . . but the fact is, you break the mold of what's been mostly working for you, and maybe you get distracted or go along with something that's against your better judgment . . . and you leave some clue you didn't anticipate, and here you are.

All that could be true, but you weren't going to be an idiot and blame Ned now were you?

Get real here.

The other development that was tempting to check on, the middle of the night dumpster guy in Palm Springs.

Chris had tried not to consider the worst outcome, which was Jeez, could you have really put the guy to sleep back there?

This kind of concern though, this was exactly what you *couldn't* afford to beat yourself up about.

If a guy walks into a liquor store for example, and flashes a gun to get the guy to empty the cash register--even if never intends to *use* the gun--and the clerk shoots *him* . . . well that's an unfortunate outcome but the hold-up guy knew the stakes when he walked in.

For your own sanity, so you didn't lie awake at night, you had to look at situations like the Palm Springs one the same way. The guy was doing something he shouldn't have been, and he knew it . . . and on some level he was aware that the degree of price he might pay was going to be a crapshoot.

The Vigliotti brothers too, with the North Beach car break in guy . . . didn't Tony say he had him in a half-nelson and was on his way to snapping his neck when his brother intervened?

Fine, that would have been a seriously out-of-balance result for a guy breaking a window . . . but you know what? Then behave yourself.

Okay enough of that, and Chris decided no, you *don't* need to call anyone and no, you don't need to find out any news . . . since bottom line, the only news that would actually *help* you was learning you were in the clear and could go back to MB--and even then you probably wouldn't trust it.

So he got out of the pool, stood there for a minute dripping wet, letting the slight breeze that there was chill him a little so the hot tub would have maximum effect, and then he eased into it.

And they claimed it could seat 40, they loved to hit you over the head with that, and Chris noticed they mentioned it in the sales flyers for the new Phase 3 units as well . . . and the fact was he'd never seen more than 5 people in the thing at once.

Today you had a couple of women yakking away, recovering no doubt from their strenuous water aerobics session; you had another gal with a big

floppy sun hat, her elbows on the edge of the spa, working her device; you had a guy with his eyes closed not moving a muscle, looking like he might have expired; and fortunately you had Arty, Chris's new friend.

"My brother," Arty said. "You're the cynical guy that keeps saying hot tubs don't belong in Arizona. Then all I do, is see you in it."

"You keep calling me that, your sibling," Chris said. "Don't you think you're reaching?"

"You tell me," Arty said.

This guy was a character. Had to be in his 70's, so he could easily be Chris's dad, and Chris was thinking, in some cultures even his grandpa.

Arty was a lifelong New Yorker until he retired down here, he had the thick accent, didn't try to disguise the fact that New York was in his bones and he missed it.

He was one of those sharp guys who pulled himself up by the bootstraps, started as a runner in the garment district, wheeling racks of clothes up and down the sidewalks on West 37th Street, and worked his way up to where he owned a company.

Guys like that usually ended up in Florida, and Chris had asked him about that, and Arty said he got sent there every summer when he was a kid, to stay with his cousins, and he never got along with them and it left a bad taste in his mouth. So fair enough, here he was, and in a modest two-bedroom condo with his wife, even though he could probably buy half the complex.

The wife was a sweet woman named Kay . . . though Chris was pretty convinced by now that Arty was having an affair with someone else, right here in the Rancho Villas.

Chris was tempted to ask him about that part . . . in general terms . . . but like, does stuff still *work* along those lines at your age? . . . Meaning specifically the plumbing . . . Especially since Chris hadn't yet shaken off his

own intimidation he'd experienced while witnessing the activity at the Strand house.

Chris said, "No big deal probably, but my walk today I picked up something."

"Patti, right?" Arty said. "There anything there?"

"You know what? You don't miss stuff, I'll give you that, but you *project*."

"Pretty lady," Arty said. "Waiting for someone to float her boat."

Jesus. This guy really did get around if he knew the inner-workings of the staff. Of course he was probably half making it up, the kind of guy who'd be busting chops whenever possible, getting a big kick out of it, as he lived out his years.

"It's not like that," Chris said. "And I'm not looking for anything . . . I found a wedding ring, is all. Down by the 17th hole. A women's one."

"On the golf course? Or no?"

"Nah, in the weeds on the other side. Not exactly weeds, all that shit's planted I guess, but you know what I mean."

"Big rock or what?"

"I just *told* you, that cactus-like stuff . . . oh, you mean the *ring*, big rock . . . not really, no, 3 little diamonds from what I can tell."

"Well," Arty said, absorbing it, "what do you think happened?"

"If I knew I wouldn't have brought it up. I'd just be putting my head back, like other people in here, the way this thing's designed to relax you."

"I *never* put my head back, and don't let the water get above your waist, you can stay in longer . . . Your likely scenario is there was an argument."

"Jeez. A lover's quarrel you mean, they take a walk to resolve it, she flings off the ring? That sounds too extreme."

“Not if you’ve witnessed the human population around here the last three years like I have. I spot couples every day, it’s obvious their relationships are all fucked up.”

Chris couldn’t entirely disagree with that, based on his two weeks behind the front desk, and especially Thursday evenings, when he tended a little bar, and people would open up a bit.

But man, someone’s just going to toss away their ring? At least go back by yourself and pick it up later.

He said to Arty, “Or it’s been there a long time, and got uncovered by the rain.”

“Could be. The question is what are you going to do with it?”

“Exactly. That’s why I’m picking your brain, since it hasn’t gone senile on me yet, I don’t think.”

“Now the key to *that*,” Arty said, “is maintaining the testosterone levels. Plain and simple.”

You weren’t going to follow up on that one. Chris said, “So just turn it in then?”

“Yeah sure, you could do that, like a normal good citizen doing your duty would.” But giving him a cockeyd smile.

“And alternately . . .”

“Well you could have a little fun with it. Put it on eBay.”

“I was thinking more CraigsList. Even though I’ve been burned a few times. At least make the owner identify it. Probably a long shot though.”

“You never know,” Arty said. “There’s gotta be at least some story behind it. It would be interesting to hear it, before you returned it to the rightful owner . . . If that doesn’t work, like I say, you can be a Boy Scout and hand it over to the lost and found.”

“Uh-huh,” Chris said. “And that’d be the end of the line, and I can move on.”

“Which you don’t want to be doing,” Arty said. “I can tell.”

“You got a crystal ball then.”

“You’re one of these guys, I can’t put my finger right on it, but I’m getting there . . . you’re running from *something*.”

This got Chris’s attention, and he tried not to over-react . . . but what the *heck* . . . where did the old guy get off on coming up with *that*?

“Arty, I have to be honest with you,” Chris said, “you’ve got a little too much New Yorker left in you. I get where you’re coming from, I’ve lived back there for a while too, and pretty quick I learned to be suspicious of everyone, until proven differently.”

“I never said *suspicious*,” Arty said. “You’re on the move. Two different animals.”

Chris said, “A, you’re out of your mind, *b*, how’s about we don’t worry about *me* . . . Or I could just pawn the thing, right?”

“If you’re going that route I’d try a jeweler first. If they don’t make you an offer at all, then yeah, you probably have to pawn it . . . Have you asked a simple question around here, anyone lose a wedding ring?”

“Not yet,” Chris said, realizing that was awfully logical and obvious, wasn’t it, and you at least make the person identify it before you hand it over.

“I’ll see ya,” Arty said, getting out, looking at his watch. “You extended me past my allotment.”

Chris said to take it easy. Arty was fit, and obviously precise with his habits. Chris hated to think about the *other* guy, but Arty reminded him slightly of an older version of Maierhaffer. Both self-made, both street-smart, and right down to both of them screwing around on their spouses, apparently.

Arty was a nicer guy than Maierhaffer though, and more trustworthy. Chris had nothing to base that on, just instinct, and often that’s all you *did* have.

There was a large inside room with a big atrium skylight, where you could unwind after working out or coming out of the pool, there were patio tables and chairs and loungers with the rubber straps, and there were multiple TV's on, always tuned to sports of some sort, and Chris took his towel and went in there and stretched out.

One TV had a hockey game, one had what looked like a recap of the Arizona State football season, a third had a billiards event and the fourth had an interview underway with a baseball player.

That looked like Scottsdale stadium in the background, right where Chris was standing that first day, when he wandered over there after having to abandon the Greyhound bus and commit to Phoenix.

Again it was surprising how someone could get right up to the batting cage, the whole operation refreshingly security-free in January apparently, 95 percent of the players not here yet, but a few were, maybe guys that lived here during the off-season as well as veterans trying to get a jump on things.

The TVs were all on low volume but Chris found the changer for this one and turned up the volume and moved closer.

That's what this guy was, big rugged sandy-haired guy named Jonas Blaise, forearms like tree trunks the way he was standing there gripping the bat talking to the reporter . . . meaning, a veteran ballplayer, probably in his mid 30's, trying to hang on for another year, showing up a month early to take extra batting practice and special conditioning work . . . and hopefully beat out some 22-year-old upstart for a roster spot on the Giants.

The reporter was young and had a bubbly personality and attractive short haircut, and was probably a recent media-studies grad out of ASU, and Blaise was patiently answering her questions but at the same time playing with her a little bit, good-natured, but still, turning one or two questions around and asking *her* what she just asked *him*, and twisting it.

An example was she asked him, “If you make the roster, what are you goals for the month of April?”

Admittedly it wasn’t the greatest question, but Chris knew what she was getting to, that if you do succeed in making the team, what are the keys to getting off to a good start and *staying* there. Something like that.

But Blaise turned it back on her, big goofy smile, saying, “Before I get into that, what are *your* goals the rest of the *day*?”

And then a big laugh, too loud, kind of a snort to finish it, and then he thoughtfully tries to answer her question, as though him jerking her around and embarrassing her never happened.

The interview finishes, you see the guy go trotting off with the bat in his hand, the reporter stands there and finishes off the report, and sends it back to the studio where a sports anchorman is standing in front of huge projected screen that says **MLB Watch** (meaning Major League Baseball), and he picks it up and blah-blah, more about the Jonas Blaise guy coming back from off-season shoulder surgery, and having bounced around, the Giants being his 4th team in the last 6 years, but how if he can stay healthy he can sure bolster their lineup in the right-handed power-hitting department.

Then this guy passes it off to another host, on the other side of the studio, and that host says, “Well thank you for that report Frank and Melinda, and hopefully Jonas’s off-field issues are behind him, and he can focus 100 percent on baseball.”

And the host starts talking about the bullpen pitching, specifically who’ll be handling the set-up role this season . . . and that nuts-and-bolts sports talk always bored Chris to tears, and he muted the volume and went back to his lounge chair.

But what was that again? That the 3rd host was referencing? Putting the off-field issues behind him? . . . *What* off-field issues?

Chris didn’t like that guy to start with, to be perfectly candid.

When he was a little kid his mom would take him to the Giants games at the real stadium, Candlestick Park in San Francisco, and of course he idolized every single player like they were Gods.

Now, if anything, he resented these guys, every major-leaguer a millionaire now, at the minimum, and he didn't think most of them put on a good enough show to deserve it.

Not their fault obviously, they were benefiting from basic economics, and if the owners were shafting the public and getting away with it--30 bucks just to park this season, he'd heard, at the Oakland Coliseum--then so be it, the whole system kind of stunk.

And probably plenty of these guys, if you ran into them in line at the movies or something, they'd be fine . . . polite and respectful enough . . . so a blanket assessment was unfair.

Either way, Chris was going to at least find out what was up with this doofus Blaise, what all the commotion was about *off the field*.

He'd been avoiding them these two weeks, but there was a bank of desktop computers in a lounge area that was adjacent to the restaurant, which doubled as an overflow area for residents' birthday parties and other private events.

There were five computers lined up, little half cubbies separating them, comfy chairs with high backs and padded arms, and the computers got a fair amount of use, those almost all from seniors, who probably didn't own any significant devices and checked their mail and whatever else once a day on the public ones.

It wasn't quite the same anonymous situation as the library, where you could just click on it and start right in, you had go through a couple set up screens and Chris kept waiting for them to require you to enter something--and even giving them George Worthy wouldn't be any good, because now he's potentially leaving tracks--but all the thing asked for was the sign-in code, and Chris got up and asked the woman next to him, and

he realized she was about 95 and couldn't hear him, but he found someone else and they gave it to him, *Rock And Roll*, wherever the heck that came from . . . and he was on.

He kept it simple, went directly to the local newspaper website, *The Phoenix Sun*.

On the front page was the usual mixture that most of them had, Chris thinking you could almost be anywhere in the country and the basic news wasn't that different . . . you had national stuff taking up part of it--mostly Congressional infighting which made you crazy if you let it, the amount of wasted time and money, like a bunch of kids in a schoolyard who need to prove they're right--in fact to heck with the country, we just don't like your attitude on the other side of the Senate chamber. Idiots. In a perfect world you throw all 535 of them out on their rear end and start over.

Anyhow . . . Chris felt better, getting that thought out of the way . . .

So you had the mix of area fires, auto accidents, crimes, and human interest stories . . . and those could have been out of Kansas City or Columbus, Ohio, and they wouldn't have been all that different . . . and then you did have one or two strictly local items, such as the increased difficulty in transporting water to the northern suburbs.

Chris stopped there, didn't need to hear the nuts and bolts, but he was thankful he was merely a renter, water and everything else included, as opposed to a homeowner up here who might really *have* to start worrying about that . . . I mean Jeez, they developed the *desert* on you for Gosh sakes, think about it . . . you're living where there's no water.

Chris did feel a tinge of guilt, nothing *he* did but still, for all the water that was part of his everyday life up here in Eclipse. The pools alone were pretty conspicuous, not to mention the golf courses, not many yellow patches on those, that's for sure.

He was getting ready to search his way back to the sports section of the Phoenix Sun, but first, down at the bottom of the main page, there was a mention of the Golden State Killer.

If you could believe it. The one and the same monster that Pat was talking about on the walk today.

You just had a bit of the article, a couple sentences, and then you had to click on *Read More*, and when you did that there was a message requiring you to sign up or log in to the site . . . and Chris figured what the hay, try refreshing the browser, and boom, that worked and you could read the rest of the article.

It occurred to him that they may not be as sophisticated out here in Phoenix as in San Francisco or LA, where that would never have worked, where at the minimum you'd have to go into incognito mode and hope you could work around the registration . . . but then again what was wrong being able to simply refresh the browser?

In fact maybe they actually had *more* common sense here than in California, because they realized if a person really wants to read it, you *hope* they sign up, but if they don't, you don't *torture* 'em.

The gist of the article was Pat's book, and Jeez, yeah, it *was* hot right now . . . and one of the researchers who helped with it was doing a reading and book-signing this weekend at a Barnes and Noble in Phoenix, and they rehashed the story, that the woman writing it had put her heart into it for years, just like a police detective obsessed with a case, and she unfortunately passed away before she finished it, and a couple of journalists, including this researcher doing the book-signing, finished it off.

The article also implied that the woman writer became addicted to prescription medication during the process, which may have been a factor in her demise--and Chris could understand this, both from his own trying to *elude* the authorities but also the other way too, letting a mutant like

Harrison get to him to such an extent where he knew he wouldn't sleep well until that particular business was put to rest.

This shit can weigh on you, that's for sure.

But toward the end of the article there was an implication that was sudden and disturbing, and sat Chris up at attention.

The researcher was responding to a question about current developments and potential new leads, and the guy said there are some serious advances in DNA matching as we speak, and we may be looking at a new era, where we don't need to match the specific perpetrator in order to solve the case.

What the fuck did *this* mean now?

Chris re-read it a couple times, couldn't figure it out, and then he threw caution to the wind and googled the woman's name and the book, and added DNA to the search terms, and there were dozens of articles--as Pat had mentioned, the thing became a New York Times bestseller and had received press coverage up the wazoo--but he couldn't find anything else where they mentioned this 'new era' of DNA testing.

So either no one asked the guy about it before, or he responded differently to this interviewer . . . or, worse, this technique was so cutting edge that it just arrived on the scene.

Chris shut the computer down and walked back outside to the pool area. There was a woman he'd never seen before with a pretty dang perfect physique making her way out of a chaise-lounge and up and toward the side of the main pool, and normally this would have at least distracted Chris temporarily--but this alleged development was bad, he couldn't shake it.

Then again, like so much of this stuff, your mind runs away with you and creates worst case scenarios.

The kicker of course, in the meantime, is the uncertainty--that part was normally worse than the end result.

So Jeez, Chris thought, don't let a hypothetical ruin your day, especially from some guy who may have been throwing something out there to stir the pot.

So he went back into the computer room and dialed the Phoenix Sun up again, and this time went directly to what he'd been looking for, which were articles on this apparently idiot ballplayer, Jonas Blaise.

They made it easy for you, there was a link specifically to **Giants**, and there were sports stories ad infinitum, going back to the end of last season, and now detailing the off-season maneuvers, and salary cap issues, and free-agent signing hits and misses, and profiles of other teams in the division, and on and on.

It was quite impressive, Chris thinking much better than the coverage back home in the Bay Area, where the Giants actually *play*. . . but what was obvious was their spring training presence in Scottsdale was part of a long and storied tradition down here, and you'd have to figure a bit-time boost to the local economy as well.

So the Sun carried 10 times as much information on the team as you'd ever need, but there were the tidy sub-sections as well, including a *Player Profiles* one, and Chris started reading about Jonas Blaise.

You had the whole history of the guy, grew up in Lexington, Kentucky, but moved to south Florida and played high school ball there . . . a 2nd round draft pick in 2001 by the Baltimore Orioles . . . deferred and played college ball at Oregon State, was 3rd in the Pac 12 in 2003 in slugging percentage . . . left school after his sophomore year, signed with the Orioles who traded him to Houston . . . then bounced around, ended up last season with the Giants but hurt his shoulder on a play at the plate in June and missed the rest of the season on the DL.

All pretty ho-hum, and you'd consider the guy a journeyman, except that in 2015, with the Cincinnati Reds, the guy had a breakout year and hit

41 home runs, second only to Nolan Arenado and Bryce Harper who were tied with 42.

Blaise hadn't approached that level again, but the articles made it sound like he'd had nagging injuries since then, not just the shoulder thing from last year, and there was a quote from a Giants coach who said if the guy can muster up *even 20* this year, that could be enough boost to help them win the division.

Okay fine . . . so it looked like you had a guy with some big-time talent who'd never quite fulfilled it, but had shown enough flashes where he was still taken seriously.

Then came the personal part.

And you understood why he might have bounced around the league like a journeyman . . . and when Chris got done reading it he decided this guy shouldn't have been allowed in *any* league.

This was from a year ago, January 2017, when the Giants announced they claimed Blaise off the waiver wire, and signed him to a 2-year contract.

Giants Hoping Blaise Can Regain Longball Form

by Jenny Milton, PSS staff writer

The San Francisco Giants are hoping new free-agent acquisition Jonas Blaise can rejuvenate their corner-outfield power hitting capability, and can display some of the form in which he nearly captured the National League home run crown two seasons ago.

The 35-year old Blaise has had difficulty staying healthy of late, and only played in 42 games last year for the Seattle Mariners.

Additionally, the Giants signing represents a new off-field beginning for Blaise as well, following an arrest last spring and

another last fall, for allegedly sexually assaulting two women, one at an Atlanta party, and the other outside a Denver shopping mall.

Okay, now we're getting to it. *Jee-sus Christ.*

Giants spokesperson Fred Eichelberger says, "We're firm believers in second chances."

Eichelberger added, "Jonas's actions since the alleged incidents are entirely consistent with an individual committed to putting the past behind him."

Both of the women in question have subsequently dismissed the allegations following legal mediation.

Police initially filed criminal charges following the Denver incident, and those charges have since been dropped as well.

Blaise wasn't charged criminally in the Atlanta case.

On Blaise's end, he sees the new beginning with the Giants as a way to definitely put the past behind him.

"I took a good look in the mirror a couple times these past few years," Blaise said. "I came to grips with some issues, and I'm not ashamed to admit I sought some help. I'm happy to report I've 100 percent turned the corner, and I'm thankful to the Giants for believing in me."

Oh yeah? Guy talks a good game, smooth . . . let's see if there's anything else.

The rest of it was mostly spring training reports from 2017, the guy having a couple big games, struggling a bit against right-handed pitching, but overall rounding into form nicely according to the Giants coaches that they quoted.

There was one more slightly different report though:

**Giants Players Reportedly Tossed From Tempe Nightclub
Following Alleged Groping Incidents**

by Jenny Milton, PSS staff writer

March 22nd, 2017 - Three members of the San Francisco Giants were reportedly escorted out of a Tempe club last night by security, following a report of multiple groping incidents.

***Tuscaloosa Sue's* spokesperson Canice Reyes said the ejection of three patrons, later identified as Giants' players, followed multiple complaints by women that they'd been grabbed and groped against their will.**

The alleged incidents occurred in the Blue Light section of the club, and area in the rear with a self-contained bar and dance floor.

The Giants players were identified as Tyler Wilson, Matt Dossing, and Jonas Blaise.

No charges were filed and no injuries reported.

Spokesperson Reyes said the players were cooperative in leaving the club.

The women involved were reportedly ASU co-eds.

The Giants wrap up Spring Training on Friday and return to the Bay Area for the March 28th season-opener at AT&T Park against the Dodgers.

Nope. What a surprise. You didn't learn your lesson, Buddy, despite you sweet-talking it up two months earlier, that you've looked in the mirror and turned the corner.

Now that the door was open on this asshole . . . plus the fact that your day had already gone sour on the DNA speculation . . . you better look up what happened in Denver.

You could check on the Atlanta business too, but might as well start with Denver, since that's where they filed charges . . . and of course dropped them later, and Chris could only guess how *that* would work.

And it didn't take long at all, for something to pop up there . . . and we're talking April of 2016, and there's a baseball card signing at a mall, not right in Denver but suburban it looked like, a place called Littleton . . . and you'd wonder what this scum is doing *there*, except he's with Cincinnati at that point and they're in town to play the Rockies.

This was a bad one, and you didn't need to read it particularly carefully, you got the picture pretty quick.

The card signing was sponsored by a baseball shoe company, Under-K, and obviously Blaise was under contract with them, and the set-up person, who helped line everybody up to get the autographs and made sure everything went smooth was a 24-year-old newlywed, and they thankfully didn't get into any more detail of who she was beyond that.

When the signing was over and they were outside the mall and the woman was putting things into a storage compartment Blaise came up to her friendly, thanked her for everything, and then forced her into the compartment, which was attached to the side of building and not particularly roomy.

Ah Jeez, this got worse. The woman stated that Blaise began kissing her and pulled up her blouse and was reaching into her jeans--and that no, he didn't rape her but it took several minutes for him to finally leave her alone.

The woman reported being sore for a week from fighting the guy off, and required mental health counseling to get past the incident.

The article was obviously written after the fact, several months later, and the crux of it was two things:

A financial settlement was reached, and secondly Major League Baseball wasn't going to discipline this guy, even though he admitted in a civil court that he acted inappropriately.

Well, what else is new?

Jonas Blaise was at least on the radar now.

Maybe nothing would happen. There'd obviously been settlements, not just the Denver gal but likely some of the others too. And there were no doubt more where these came from, *that didn't make any newspaper . . .* or likely get reported at all.

Which is how you figured it worked with big-money defendants.

Especially stud athletes. That the DA's well knew they'd be tough individuals to prosecute.

The doubt inevitably being raised, did the female, appearing too much like an adoring fan, lead him on in the *first* place . . .not to mention the women having to face the scrutiny and suspicion of a courtroom and the surrounding circus.

So, hey, maybe everyone *had* moved past these things, one way or another . . .

But Chris didn't like the look of that TV interview, which was *current*, from *today*, 2018 now, where the guy was toying with the pretty interviewer, and appeared to be leering at her as well.

On a related note, how did he *miss* all this stuff, he was thinking?

The alleged sexual assaults and the spring training groping in the bar--those must have made *some* news, at least in the sports world, and since the Giants were involved, especially in the Bay Area.

This reinforced that Chris really *was* out of touch, pretty much *period*, and he especially wasn't much of a sports fan anymore. At least the pro stuff.

There'd been a holiday high school basketball tournament a month ago, hosted by Mira Costa in Manhattan Beach, and that was the last place Chris would ever end up, except he met a guy in the *Crowe's Nest* one night, pretty personable, and the guy said he was in town for his nephew's tournament, and somehow Chris got talked into going, and it was surprisingly good, the energy and the passion and everyone out there for the right reasons--at least you would hope.

Chris was ready to wind it up on the computer. That seemed like enough excitement for one day. At least compared to a *normal* one down here.

The not-so-good part was he let things get to him, got his blood pressure up--but a good nap should help . . . and then you had the evening ahead of you, nothing concrete in your arsenal *like* a trip to the *Crowe's Nest*, but you never know, there were plenty of people around, there could be possibilities.

One thing so far he had to admit--you weren't particularly lonely. Unhappy, depressed, embarrassed by having to pitch your tent here--sure those things factored in occasionally. But living essentially within a *community*, the loneliness factor was pretty much zip. There was always *some* kind of buzz, and he supposed he was lucky in that regard.

So Chris shut down the computer a second time, and remembered, oh boy, the ring.

You really *could* just turn it in . . . but like Arty said, that might not be as interesting . . . so he went online once more . . . and this time, dang it, he had to create a fake gmail account just to sign *up* for CraigsList, and he considered forgetting the whole thing . . . except, what if somebody really was missing the ring and was desperately looking for it?

That seemed slightly unlikely, but Chris went ahead and dealt with all the fake registration stuff, and under *nph* (north Phoenix), in Community - Lost & Found, he posted:

Ring. Women's. Likely Wedding. Found in Eclipse.
How'd you lose it?
email George

That was that, he did his job, and he went back to the apartment and put on some piano jazz and stretched out, but 5 minutes in he realized he wasn't going to be getting any sleep, since the DNA business really *was* bugging him.

Chapter 7

So the next day, after breakfast, even though he didn't particularly feel like it, much less think it was the wise move, Chris headed down to Phoenix.

The reason it wasn't the wise move was because of the remote but still valid possibility of running into Floyd, and no matter what spin you put on it, you'd be blowing your cover and you'd have one more thing to worry about.

The reason you could run into Floyd was because the easiest way back down there was the sales shuttle bus that went back and forth from that real estate office in Mesa--and Chris knew one of the drivers by now, the guy worked out in the rec center when he was in between runs, and Chris would hand him a towel--so it was no problem that he wasn't officially looking to buy a phase 3 unit.

In fact he thought of asking the guy to drop him somewhere else, not right in Floyd's back yard like that, but that seemed a little forward and suspicious.

But it worked out okay, 40 minutes to get into town, and Jeez even here they had morning traffic, but not the same animal as California so not even worth mentioning--and then you kept your eyes open and found a cab as quick as you could and rode it back to Scottsdale Stadium.

This was mid-morning on a Thursday, with major league baseball spring training not kicking off officially for another month or so, typically mid-February.

You'd have what they called 'pitchers and catchers reporting' a couple weeks before that, since theoretically it took the pitchers longer than the

hitters to get up to speed for the season--and the catchers didn't *want* to be there that early but the pitchers required someone to throw the ball *to*.

And *that* still wouldn't happen until late January, early February, so you had a couple more weeks before any of it . . . meaning the only reason to be in town already and working out at Scottsdale stadium and the other Giants facilities would be if you were rehabbing an injury or coming off a terrible 2017 season, and wanted to get an extra-early jump.

Guys like Jonas Blaise.

What Chris appreciated a couple weeks ago when he peeked in to the stadium, that you could evidently roam around freely, no security, no one asking you questions, nothing locked . . . That hadn't changed this time either, and he simply walked into the main gate, cut down through the lower box seat section and swung his leg over the railing, and after a slightly shaky landing and a small drop he didn't expect, he went over to the batting cage.

"What's up?" some player said, two bats in his hands, working something into the grips, waiting his turn, and Chris smiled and said not much.

There was a guy hitting, and today one of the other players was on the mound, lobbing in pitches, though the automatic pitching machine was out there too.

There was the what's up guy and two others waiting their turn outside the cage, and the one guy in it, who looked Hispanic.

None of the 4 guys or the guy pitching were Blaise.

Chris said to the what's up guy, "One thing that's always surprising, no one even has a hat on"

The guy laughed politely and didn't say anything. It was true though, they were all wearing long shorts, like basketball players, colorful t-shirts with writing on them, one guy with a ski scene advertising a resort in Utah for instance, no caps much less helmets, nothing at all that told you *Giants*.

Chris figured the guy tabbed him as a member of the press, maybe not a hard core baseball beat writer, but one of those fair weather *human interest* writers who invariably show up at Spring Training and try to dig up material for articles on what the players are really like behind the scenes . . . or the charity work that so and so proudly engaged in during the off-season.

Either way the guy accepted him and went about his business, pushing against the cage stretching something out now, and Chris said, “What about Jonas Blaise, I’d like to speak to him.”

“He’s inside,” the player said, as though Chris would be familiar with where to find him in there.

Chris said, “He talking BP today? That you know of?”

BP meaning batting practice, and you had to be careful trying to sound too much like a player, because they *might* scrutinize you.

“Should *be*,” the guy said, and it was his turn to hit, and the Latin guy came out of the cage and this guy went in.

Chris had no interest in roaming around the Giants inside facilities and trying to find the asshole--in fact why was he even here in the first place, when you took a step back and thought about it?

The answer of course was this guy rubbed him the wrong way. But beyond that--leaving the *personal* part aside--you needed to make sure that this Jonas deserved to be a productive member of society.

If others didn’t share your concern--well, too bad.

It looked like a bit of an organized session, the way Chris watched it unfold, even though it was so casual on the surface.

But there was a guy in left field who he hadn’t even noticed, and that guy was shagging balls, catching a few in the air and rounding up most of the rest of the stuff hit out there, and throwing them back in, so that they rolled right up to the pitcher’s mound.

And when you saw something like that, the guy's throws from way deep in the outfield, placing the balls in almost exactly the same spot every time, you realized these guys were pretty special talents.

In any case, it was clear now the batters were working on two things, bunting the ball, and swinging away and trying to hit everything to left field.

In the old days this was always easier for the right handers, you naturally pulled the ball to the left, but now with the swing technology so refined, even at the Little League level, left handers could just as naturally hit the ball to left field.

So chances were there'd be another session, 3 or 4 more guys plus a pitcher and outfielder, and maybe they'd be trying to hit everything to *right field* then, and you hoped Blaise might be part of it.

Chris had no real idea *what then*, but it could be interesting at least.

Meanwhile . . . something he'd been holding off on, but you might as well try to call Chandler, for a few different reasons, and Chris re-straddled the railing into the stands and found a seat down the first base line in the sun, about 12 rows back, the crack of the bats still resonating pretty loudly in the empty stadium, and he pulled out his phone.

"Yeah," Chandler said.

"Me," Chris said. One thing he'd remembered to do, and hopefully got it right, was adjust the Go-Phone setting to not yield any caller-number ID.

"Well I'll be," Chandler said.

"Don't tell anyone," Chris said, "I'm watching baseball." And was that a mistake, to have just blurted out that much? . . . It had become overwhelming to decide what you could and couldn't do, and to whom, and Chris knew you had to just let shit fly sometimes, if you expected to maintain any dignified life at all.

"I can hear it," Chandler said. "Sounds like roofers, using the air guns, nailing down fresh asphalt shingles."

“You’re so full of it.”

“How are you holding up Chris?”

“Now you calling me *Chris* . . . I can’t say I remember you doing that, adding it your verbiage. That’s a red flag right out of the gate, that you’re not going to have anything good for me.”

“I won’t ask you where you are, I’m just going through the motions though, making sure you’re in a decent spot.”

“You mean in life? Or physically, at the moment?”

“Both.”

“No, I’m fucked, what do *you* think . . . Right?”

“Well yes and no. They found some guy in a lion pit. You wouldn’t think anything like that existed around here, except at a couple of zoos.”

Chandler giving it to him deadpan, like this was news Chris wouldn’t know about and would be interested in.

“Is that right,” Chris said.

“Yeah. Now no idea what in hell he was doing out there, some God-forsaken place in eastern Riverside County--but they’re liking Ned Mancuso for it pretty strong.”

“Hmm.”

“And course Neddy, he’s taken off apparently, gone incommunicado, so I have no way of corroborating any of it.”

Chris should have been more focused on the substance, but he couldn’t help it, his first thought was the *Neddy* . . . he seemed to recall the cocktail waitress, Cindy, pretty cute-looking herself, calling him that the first time he and Ned sat down together in the *Crowe’s Nest*.

Chris remembered commenting on the extra syllable and Ned shrugged it off, but logic told you Ned played a highly expanded field down there, and who knows where else.

Chris shook loose of that thought and got back to business. “And where’s he *taken off to*, do you think?”

“Between you and me? I’d say The Big Apple. He’s got the means to get lost back there. That or Florida. Also maybe Cleveland. But we’ll see.”

It was starting to hit Chris though, what Chandler might really be telling him. “But . . . so you’re saying . . . they’ve fingered Ned . . . and that’s *it*? Or what *are* you saying?”

“It’s gotten a bit complicated behind the scenes. The angle they’re working--you know this guy Harrison Beckenworth, in the pit, he was an emerging serial killer, right?”

“I think I read about a couple of them, yeah.”

“Okay. So what we’ve got, possibly, one of the victim’s family members wants revenge in the worst way. Are you familiar with the first one, the artist in Culver City?”

“Just enough where it made me sick, you want my honest answer.”

“Well her brother, it turns out, is a rough customer. Familiar to West LA law enforcement. The angle they’re working, he tracked down your Harrison fellow.”

“*Your?* . . . Why do you have to say things like that?”

“I’m just saying,” Chandler said. “But that aside, the brother’s gone missing as well.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Why would that be a surprise?”

“I don’t know . . . it’s not, I guess.”

“All right, the kicker, they’re looking at Ned as an accessory.”

“Wow.” Chris had to take a couple deep breaths and process this one. When he said the brother’s gone missing, you assume that means he’s laying low, same as Ned and unfortunately *him*, *Chris*. *George*, whatever.

But . . . could Mansusco have possibly . . . *made* this guy go *really* missing . . . to re-direct the attention from the Harrison thing?

Meaning . . . it would look like the *brother* killed Harrison . . . and then some friend, or even accomplice of Harrison's, who didn't like *that*, then wasted the brother . . . and disposed of him somewhere?

That would admittedly be pretty clever on Ned's part, to put all those pieces in motion and screw up the cops who'd be chasing their own tail.

Except, didn't Chandler say back in the beginning that they're liking Ned for Harrison in the pit?

This was the trouble with thinking too much, you'd create elements that didn't belong.

And that was exactly what you ran into on those Zodiac message boards when he was tracking down Mel--you had the amateur detectives who loved to construct complex scenarios--and Chris was convinced after a while that most of them didn't want to actually *solve* anything, they just wanted to inflict more confusion onto the matter.

You'd have a guy who'd been studying the case religiously for 10 years put forth a new theory, for example, that Paul Stine, the cabdriver slain in Presidio Heights, Gloria's neighborhood, was secretly the *Zodiac himself* . . . except there were two *other* Zodiacs working in *tandem* who carried out the deeds.

That kind of head-scratching shit . . .

So no, let's not overcomplicate it with Mancuso playing it like a chess grandmaster, 6 moves ahead, and acting out like that.

Even though, Jeez, that might not be the all-time worst hypothetical scenario.

"Is what you *are* saying," Chris said, picking it up again with Chandler, "and let me put this correctly . . . but the brother might have *hired* Ned, to see off the Harrison person."

"Yeah, that's what they're leaning towards," Chandler said.

Wow. Just like that. Laying it on the table.

Chris said, "And you . . . do think that's viable?"

“Again confidentially? It absolutely *is* within the scope of conceivability.”

“Ah Jesus come on,” Chris said, “don’t talk like that.”

But the implication now was what Chris suspected since Day 1, when he first met Ned down at the beach. That maybe Ned did that kind of stuff.

And which Chandler knew about . . . and heck, Chandler may very well have *used* Ned *himself*, to beat that fake motorcycle salesman within an inch of his life . . .

You could tell Chandler didn’t necessarily buy into the way he said the cops were working it--in fact Chris was pretty sure Chandler put *him*, Chris, smack dab in the middle of the scene too.

But did that matter?

“Let me ask you a direct question then, if you don’t mind,” Chris said.

“Shoot,” Chandler said.

“If I showed up tomorrow back in MB, went about my business, my usual routine . . . would anyone bother me?”

“The police? I don’t think so. Other than picking your brain, anything you could add to their person-of-interest profile.”

“Meaning *him* . . . not *me*.”

“That is my understanding.”

One thing about Chandler by this point, Chris didn’t like to give the guy credit, but his information, multiple times now, had been pretty dang on-the-money, and you questioned it less.

Though it could be like the guy who lives on the San Andreas Fault and claims his dog has predicted every earthquake the last 10 years, and howls out the appropriate warning . . . and then the dog screws one up keeps sleeping and the house slides off the foundation . . . though you couldn’t have controlled that even if the dog *did* howl, but still.

The point being, you had to put your trust in *something*, and Chandler’s information was a decent bet.

“But,” Chris said, “if I *did* happen to be involved . . . and I found Ned and killed him *off* . . . then what?”

“Well that’s interesting,” Chandler said, and again, the guy earned some begrudging respect in these situations, it was hard to say anything that truly threw him off. “You’re saying, make sure Ned never speaks to the police.”

“Yeah. About an alleged accomplice . . . And I’m not talking about the brother of the poor artist gal.”

“Meaning . . . if Ned did end up in police custody, you’d have to depend on him keeping his mouth shut.”

“Yeah. My thought would *avoid* that.”

Of course Chris *wasn’t* about to do any of that, he was just playing Chandler’s hand a little bit, seeing if anything else was there.

“You’re not serious though,” Chandler said, seeing through him anyway.

“No. *A*, I like the guy, and *b*, who knows, as we speak, he might be thinking the same way about *me*.”

“Track *you* down, eliminate *your* speaking ability if it *comes* to that. Interesting.”

Chris did find himself looking around behind him for just a moment, sitting there alone in the Scottsdale Stadium stands that supposedly sat 12,000 when there was a full house. A couple new players had worked into the batting cage rotation, but Chris didn’t recognize either of them as Blaise.

“Okay we’re starting to get crazy here,” Chris said. “I appreciate your basic evaluation, and I’ll keep it in mind.”

Chandler said, “And by that, I take it I won’t be seeing you on the tennis courts for a while yet.”

“Nah, let’s see how it plays out.”

“Not the worst approach.”

“At any rate, thanks,” Chris said, and he hung up.

It was a little after one o’clock, that dang sun straight overhead and pounding down like a mother, so direct, and he tried to consider, did fog and marine layers make that much difference? If you had two 80 degree days with the same exact sun overhead for instance, one in Manhattan Beach and one here, was it his imagination that the 80 degrees felt a lot cooler back there?

Obviously you weren’t going to kill Ned.

Even in the unlikely event an opportunity like that presented itself, that just wasn’t going to happen.

It was interesting about the scenario with the brother, and that might actually fall into place for a while and keep the cops busy, since it sounds like both those guys *were* on the radar, Ned *and* him, and law enforcement might not see it as a reach that the brother sought revenge and used Ned as a fixer.

One reason they’d hang onto it for a while, was why *else* would a guy of Ned’s pedigree be out there at that lion pit on Christmas weekend?

But that kind of case, it would eventually break down, they always did . . . and then Chris could be in a heap of trouble.

Ned did show you so far he had some character, and might not volunteer your name right off the bat, but if it came down to a plea deal, hard to bet on you not being involved.

And yeah, a little more clarity now, the right way to handle it *would* be to find Ned and kill him off . . . but nope, you couldn’t go through with that, it was unjustified . . . even though admittedly it might save your ass.

Ah darn it. Chris had forgotten to ask Chandler about that DNA stuff.

And right then a player came waltzing out from under the stands in the right field corner, not too far from where Chris was sitting . . . and he had a clean image of the guy in his head from that TV interview yesterday, and yep, this was Jonas Blaise for sure.

Emerging into the bright sunshine like he owned the place, though Chris was probably projecting . . . but maybe not.

Chris realized this *was* a pretty sophisticated stadium, not that different from the major league ones except smaller, since Blaise coming out that door under the stands likely meant there was a huge underground facility below the field as well, just like at AT&T in San Francisco, where there were a dozen batting cages and even mini fields down there for the players to work out on when it rained.

Blaise walked 10 yards onto the grass and went down into a hurdler's stretch. He did look big and strong, even from a distance, compared to the other players Chris had seen up close, and he had the long hair in back and scruffy day old beard that was fashionable, and he was the only guy out here so far who had an actual baseball cap on.

And not surprisingly, a guy as likely full of himself as this one, it wasn't a Giants' hat, but instead it was a Yankees' cap, if Chris could make it out correctly.

Either way it was navy blue, and not black and orange like the Giants caps, and it *was pre-Spring Training* and all, fine . . . but wasn't that an insult to the team that currently was taking a chance on you, and paying you \$4.25 million, if Chris remembered it correctly from the newspaper article, for a measly two years of service?

Blaise had a black bag he set down while he was working his calisthenics, and you figured those were his personal bats, and that he'd be out there a while, if the other guys were any indication, Chris seeing now that they rotated between the cage and the outfield and doing a little pitching, no one in any hurry to be anywhere else.

So he'd have a chance to say hello to Jonas . . . and one thing you hated was waiting on someone you *already* didn't like, letting their timetable affect you. You'd rather miss the idiot altogether than let that happen . . . so Chris called Chandler back.

“Yeah.”

“Same cold answering method. You sound quite clinical.”

“You forgot to ask me something, I’m *guessing*?”

“I did.” Chris figured don’t mention the guy actually giving the talk right here, which would identify *here* as being Phoenix, if Chandler felt like pursuing it, so he said, “There’s a book out. Someone’s quest to find the Golden State Killer.”

“I’ve read it,” Chandler said. “Don’t forget now, he was known by other names, the writer *gave* him that one.”

“Fine, whatever. My concern, one of the other authors involved, he implied it’s around the corner for them to catch the guy through DNA.”

“That’s true. They’re close.”

“*Jesus . . .* You sure about that? And how do you happen to hear all this shit?”

“Easy. I keep my eyes open, and I listen to the right people . . . what they’re doing, is using those private databases like Ancestry.com.”

“Oh, great,” Chris said.

“What’s wrong with that? You’re going to see dozens of cold cases solved in the next few years, would be my bet.”

“So they put the guy’s DNA *in* those things, and it gives a profile? More exact than a police composite drawing?”

“It can do that too, right down to the eye color and degree of receding hairline. But that’s not the main thrust . . . What they can do, is enter the code from the perp’s DNA that he left at the crime scene, and then boom, they click search, and the magic happens, and someone in the family often pops up.”

“You mean if the guy’s brother committed a crime or something, and was in the database?”

“You’re getting mixed up,” Chandler said, and the truth was Chris *wanted* to be mixed up, this was not sounding good, *AT ALL*.

Chandler said, “This has nothing to do with the FBI or law enforcement. This is regular Joes who’ve signed up with these sites, looking to find out are they one-eighth Croatian after all. And then be able to search their family tree. The technology is so amazing, that they can match a perp’s DNA all the way to a 4th cousin, and even deeper.”

“Amazing indeed,” Chris said, starting to feel a little sick.

Chandler kept going, obviously excited about the development. “Just last month, they almost had a hit up in Oregon, a nursing home, the guy you’re talking about, the Golden State person. Wrong match, it turned out, but it shows you they’re getting close.”

“Really. Well whoopee.”

“It’s kind of bittersweet for law enforcement, and even for defense attorneys. I probably got out at the right time.”

“What are you talking about? Don’t they want to catch these guys?” Even though Chris hated to admit it, looking at it the *other* way, what *was* the problem?

“Oh yeah,” Chandler said. “But the fallout is, old-fashioned gumshoe detective work is becoming obsolete. It’s all about science and the power of computers now, and the algorithms. No one wants to hear it, but a sharp high school kid can start solving these.”

“That’s . . . good and bad, I guess. What about someone like, say me? Potentially though?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well let’s say *I* left some DNA near a crime scene . . . Nothing I had to *do* with obviously . . . but could they figure me out . . . and maybe false charge me, until they realized it wasn’t me?”

“Oh they absolutely could. If you had even a distant relative who plunked down their \$79 to find out what’s up on Ancestry.com, or any number of similar sites. DNA doesn’t lie, that’s the one thing.”

“Well that’s just great then,” Chris said.

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason . . . When I heard the guy interviewed, it raised an eyebrow was all.” Chris could tell Chandler was jerking him around, not about the reality of the scary forensic developments--*unfortunately*--but poker-facing him, Chandler having to know that Chris had legitimate concerns.

“Okay, well,” Chris said. “That really *does* about wrap it up.”

“Keep your eye on that Golden State thing,” Chandler said. “When they catch up to him, it’s going to blow you away, how simple it was.”

Chris said he’d be sure to, and put the phone away.

Chapter 8

There'd been a few situations like this, the first one was when Detective Cousins showed up at the apartment on Broderick Street and questioned him about Donny Shelhorne.

Chris had cheerfully walked the guy to his unmarked cruiser and made a little small talk at the end, and wished him well the rest of the day-- and then made a beeline to the nearest bar.

As he remembered it that was Joe's Place, a neighborhood dive that he'd never choose to go into, except it was three blocks closer than Weatherby's or the Booker Lounge, and he needed a stiff drink quick.

Now, after getting off with Chandler the second time, Chris decided that would work fine right now too, and he exited the stadium and put his hand up against his forehead to block out the glare, and he tried to get his bearings.

In other words forget about the asshole Blaise for the time being, get something in your system.

Chris looked around. Scottsdale Stadium was at the junction of East Osborn Road and North Drinkwater Boulevard, and the main drag area would be East 1st Street and East Main, but something closer would be even better, and he found a place a half-block the other direction called the Money Penny, and that should suffice.

And of course he'd meant to swear off drinking altogether when he moved to MB in October, ostensibly to re-invent himself, and neither of those concepts lasted long.

Either way this wasn't what you wanted to be doing, piling on booze in the middle of a weekday afternoon, but yeah, he needed a drink.

It was a happy place actually, or maybe that was all relative, but Chris took a seat at the bar, and they started him off with a scotch on the rocks, and that was a little better, and the guy next to him started talking like they were old friends, picking up in the middle of a conversation, and the guy was telling Chris how just last week he ran into some kid he went to elementary school with.

Chris didn't really want to follow up with a question, but this was admittedly better than sitting there in the stands like an idiot and watching Blaise go through his stretching routine in the outfield.

So he said to the guy, "Where'd you run into him? Your friend."

"Okay let's not go that far," the guy said. "He was never a friend. We played handball in the yard a few times. I never needed to say much else to him."

"What kind of handball?"

"Not the small ball stuff they play back east. Big rubber playground ball. You remember those all-purpose ones."

"Yeah. Kids are better off with those. Very versatile. I was just thinking the other day, how a lot of these so-called sports now, this is no ball."

"You got that right," the guy said.

"But you're talking, the handball where you have to hit the ground first with the ball, get the bounce, and then it hits the wall?"

"Exactly. I always thought that was kind of a regional version. I lived a couple other places growing up, never saw it."

"Where was that *first* place?" Chris said, probably regretting the question.

"Frisco. San Fran."

Chris was afraid of this, but the liquor was starting to do its job, he had that warm familiar feeling that would develop in the veins of his forearms, so what the heck, might as well go a little further. Plus the guy

calling it by those names, natives never used those, they either called it San Francisco, or if they were already in the Bay Area having this conversation, they said *the city*.

So Chris said, “What school?”

“Argonne. Out in the inner Richmond. You know Frisco then?”

Chris said, “I lived there for a while. My dad was in the army, we were stationed in the Presidio.” He was making that part up of course, and doing some loose calculations . . . that probably wouldn’t add up, since the Presidio closed as an army base in the early 70’s, and Chris wasn’t born until ‘74.

But the guy was fine with it. “Where’d *you* go then?”

Chris always liked to answer with Marina Junior High, which was the truth, and his fondest school years, despite the issues with Ray and the gang kids back then.

But he answered the guy, “Roosevelt.”

“Oh yeah? That’s where I would have gone after Argonne, except we moved to Fresno.”

“Your friend remembered you though?”

“I was in line at the supermarket, Basha’s. It’s crazy, but this guy had a cough back then, as a kid, and I thought I might have just heard it duplicated, the guy two-behind me. So I turn around and take a good look at the face, and I couldn’t discount it, so I spoke up.”

“Gee. I enjoy these little coincidences. You both *live* here? You gonna stay in touch?”

“Nah, no way. I didn’t even ask him *where* he lived, I just said have a good day.”

Chris got a kick out of that, and sat back on the stool. They had these half supports back there, pretty lame, didn’t come up much higher than your ass, but he’d loosened up enough and it didn’t matter.

“So . . . you follow baseball?” Chris said.

“Never did much, but since I’ve been down here, a little more. I guess you could label me a Diamondbacks fan.”

“Not the Giants?”

“Oh Hell no. The whole spring training circus, what a pain. Even worse, my wife makes me take her to a couple games, because you can get decent seats. She has a thing with all sports, she won’t go unless she’s close to field. Or court, or whatever.”

“Well I tend to agree with her,” Chris said. “How about Jonas Blaise, you know *him*?”

The guy shifted a bit and his expression soured. “Oh yeah. Cocksucker should be doing time. Probably when you dig deep enough, a *lot* of them should.”

“Wow. Quite a blanket statement there.”

“You can have your own opinion. Can’t be assaulting women, and then be playing ball in front of my wife and kids, sorry . . . I don’t *have* any kids, but that’s not the point.”

“He did that, though? It was actual *assault*?”

The guy was getting worked up now, and Chris thought, Jeez, he’s liable to *really* turn on me and throw a punch or something.

“Buddy,” the guy said, “whatever they tell you he’s been doing, it’s that and more. Trust me.”

Chris figured he better quit while he was ahead, but the guy was juiced up enough that you could put something else out there, why not.

“Are you saying,” Chris said, “the guy left his DNA around or something? Other places?”

“I’m *not* saying that,” the guy said. “But when you put it that way, yeah fine, probably some of that too. Technology’s creeping up on these fucks, they either better be lucky, or very careful.”

“Ah.”

“You mark my words,” the guy said. “10, 15 years from now, any low life leaves behind his DNA, they’re gonna have a shot at nabbing him.”

With that the guy tapped his shot glass on the bar and left it there, and told Chris he’d be seeing him, and Chris waved the bartender over for a refresh, and twenty minutes later he made his way a little unsteadily back into the afternoon sunshine.

There was a mom and pop store down the block from the bar. Not the kind of place you saw much of anymore in a non-franchise, except maybe at gas stations. There were a lot of these when Chris was growing up, in those days you picked up comics, magazines, scoops of ice cream, toothpaste, shoelaces, umbrellas, hero sandwiches, work shirts, school supplies, 36-inch licorice whips--all that good stuff under one roof.

You had to figure these guys had a very old long-term lease, otherwise it couldn’t make financial sense around here anymore. At any rate, Chris was looking for one thing, a small pad where you flipped the pages from the top, and he found something acceptable and paid and got out there quick, since the mom and pop running the place were both smoking, not worrying about any laws obviously, and you did have to give them credit for sticking to their convictions in their own establishment.

He walked back over to the stadium, you never knew what might happen, and he thought about the conversation with the guy in the bar.

Even though the guy had turned belligerent, Chris found himself mostly agreeing with him. Blaise for starters, he was scum by all accounts, and yeah, the guy was onto something there, where he said *trust me*, that Blaise likely left his mark a lot more places than had surfaced publicly.

Which kind of fed into the other thing too, the DNA again . . . and, Christ, you got some random guy in a *bar* now on top of it and essentially agreeing with Chandler.

Pretty sobering unfortunately.

If fact the only part Chris would challenge the guy on was the timeline . . . the guy predicting that bad guys in the next 10-15 years better really watch out . . . when Chris was pretty sure they needed to watch out right now.

How could you *not* leave DNA at a scene? Jeez, you did your best, gloving up as often as possible, long sleeves, wiping shit down . . . but then again that's exactly why you sent postcards instead of letters in envelopes, wasn't it . . . that you didn't risk not only saliva from licking the darn things, but a hair falling into one, even a tiny eyelash that you wouldn't notice.

It might be worth doing a little more research on how you really *could* leave your DNA behind . . . but Chris was pretty convinced by now that that'd be impossible to control, you do everything right but maybe some spittle flies off your lip, and some eager new tech person, fresh out of a 2-year program at a JC, picks it up.

He didn't want to go back over his whole list in his head, because then unpleasant elements tended to jump out at you . . . but if you closed your eyes and picked any one of them, chances were your activity was imperfect, and they could match you to *something*.

Or . . . hearing Chandler explain it now, some-*one*.

Chris knew he could probably find out innocently enough if either Floyd his sister Bonnie had joined any of the ancestry sites and submitted a sample--and that was the thing, it was so dang easy, you deposit a drop of saliva into a plastic jar and send it in, and they even pay the postage.

Knowing them both, Floyd and Bonnie, it seemed unlikely they'd be interested in family genealogy, but even then you never know, they're watching late night TV and there's an ad, and they have an impulse . . . even Chris himself had been tempted once or twice, not to look for family tree members, but to find out what countries he really came from, way back in the middle ages.

So thank God he *didn't* do that--but . . . was he that much better off?

Let's say . . . fine . . . and what was the guy's name again, he was mixing him up with the Harrison person . . . but the guy in Daly City-- Jeremy, there you go--not quite, Jeramiah . . . Towne, now you had it . . .

At any rate, that guy, you had to struggle with, make contact, and you're in a car, a controlled environment . . . pretty unconvincing that they didn't come away with something of *you* there, and they could be primed to run it through the computer, just like Chandler and the book-writer guy are implying it's being done as we speak with the Golden State Killer.

So yeah, you're no better off, are you, than if you joined Ancestry.com and submitted a dab of your spit like any other doofus.

Wait a second . . . you *are* better off, because if you had done that, and they submitted the piece of a hair you likely left in the Daly City vehicle, they have your name, and that's the end of the line.

But . . . taking it a little further, the way it stands now, with you *not* submitting anything, what would happen?

Well, they'd enter the material, the computer would spew out a match of some distant family member somewhere who was dumb enough to get suckered into plunking down *their* \$69 bucks--and it could be someone you never met or didn't even know existed--a 4th cousin in Pawtucket--and then you're screwed the same way.

It would take longer, but now they're in your family tree and they whittle it down, probably the first parameter being the ones that live in the vicinity of Daly City . . .

Bottom line you're fucked either way . . .

The only positive now, and that was insane, there were *no* positives when you digested this unreal amalgam of information and probabilities . . .

So don't call it that, but at least Chris was in a real bad mood when he went back into the stadium to see if Jonas Blaise was still around.

In person the guy had a mid-western accent. Chris was a little thrown off by it, at first not sure he had the right guy, since he hadn't heard the accent in the TV interview, but of course that was in the slightly noisy lounge of the Rancho Villas and he hadn't been paying close attention anyway.

Right now the guy was in the batting cage, and hitting the ball wherever he felt like, not worrying about bunting or directing balls to right or left field, just swinging away.

And even with Chris being a layman, it was clear he had more power than the other guys in the cage earlier, and probably more overall raw talent as well.

Chris supposed it wasn't that surprising that Blaise was still here, he'd been moving at a relaxed pace when he surfaced from under the stands an hour and a half ago, and who knows how long he'd been in the cage, but he certainly didn't look like he was slowing down or getting worn out.

There was only one other guy out there now, and he was older, so a coach or a trainer type guy, and he *was* wearing an actual Giants hat, the first and only guy today.

The older guy was on the mound, not doing any throwing but simply feeding balls into a pitching machine, and he was tucked securely behind a screen in case Blaise happened to send one right down the middle.

Blaise was driving most of the pitches to the deep parts of the outfield, either that or over the wall, and they had a hundred loose balls out there right now and you figured these guys weren't going to worry about picking them up, that would be someone else's job.

So Chris had the outside of the batting cage all to himself, if he wanted it, and Blaise looked over once or twice and acknowledged Chris and said what's up, friendly, and he was clearly one of those guys that could draw people in, male *and* female, whenever he decided that was okay.

After twenty minutes Chris said, “How much longer you gonna be? I gotta get out of here.” You couldn’t pinpoint it precisely, but he didn’t like anything about the guy by now, but even so he probably would have put it more politely if he didn’t still have a pretty serious buzz on.

Blaise put up his hand to the coach, as in hold up the balls for a second, and he said, “Do I *know* you, my friend?”

“Just want to get a couple quotes,” Chris said. “That is, if it’s not going to inconvenience you.”

“Got it,” Blaise said. “Give me five.”

And to his credit, the guy did wrap it up, not 5 but more like 12 minutes, but still he got out of the cage and came around next to Chris and put his palms on the thing and started doing more stretching, and he told Chris to go ahead.

Chris pulled out the notebook he’d picked up, and he had to dust of his journalist skills a bit, which admittedly he *had* been one of at one time, which included some sportswriting too, for the Chronicle.

He came up with some reasonably credible questions, he had to admit, and it got him thinking for a second, Jeez, maybe I really *should* go back into journalism.

But that’s when the guy’s Wisconsin-Minnesota-Dakotas accent really stood out, when he started answering in paragraphs--and you could tell how full of himself the guy was, for one thing, by the fact he was using *we* instead of *I*.

Regular people did that too sometimes, and you didn’t beat them up about it . . . but this guy’s answers were like: “We’ll evaluate that when the time comes. *We will* say, we feel our off-season conditioning work has been the best ever, thanks to our trainer, the best in the world.”

Chris said, “Y’all run Camelback Mountain? That part of y’all’s deal?”

The guy looked at him funny, but kept right on going. “We do that *indeed*, you bet, and we time ourselves. Our RTI’s this spring have been off the charts, if you mind me saying.”

That was about the first time the guy used *me*, but what did it matter, Chris was only faking writing things down anyway. Whatever those RTI’s were, he wasn’t going to follow up, no doubt some training measurement that Blaise was going to brag about . . . Also it wasn’t *spring* yet, unless they’d re-worked January into it and didn’t tell Chris, but he let the guy call it what he wants.

Chris said, “Sounds good then. How’s the female population down here? In your experience?”

The guy came off the fence now and paused whatever deep tissue stretching exercise he was in the middle of,

He seemed amused as he studied Chris for a moment, and he said, “Bud, are you for real?”

“Sure, why not?” Chris said. “You have any tips? I hate the early gig, if you want to know the truth.”

“The *what* now?”

“When they send me out here early . . . Having to kiss up to you guys at *official* spring training, that’s bad *enough*. When I gotta do the early bird thing, that’s off the hook.” When Chris finished he realized that was probably the wrong expression, and wasn’t even sure what *off the hook* meant, but whatever.

Anyhow he threw in a big smile for good measure, make the guy wonder if he’s serious.

And of course you weren’t going to have to invent anything else to back up your fake story, what city you were from, what newspaper or magazine, or internet sports blog, or whatever the heck, because *your* situation would never be on a guy like Blaise’s radar, ever.

“*Population*,” Blaise said. “I kinda like that.”

“No, *female* population,” Chris said, “exclusively. That’s our deal.”

“Our?”

“Well yours, technically. Except you keep calling yourself *we*.”

“Yeah, well, how bout this then, you little runt, you’re starting to get on my nerves.”

Chris wasn’t actually that much smaller than the guy. The guy was twice as strong of course, would pin Chris in about two seconds in a grappling match.

“Wait a second,” Chris said. “Your teammates, the ones that were out here earlier, I think I’m bigger than *all* those guys, honestly. My covering the various sports, I’ve concluded baseball teams have the *most* runts.”

No idea where he was going, and he had nothing against small guys, or big ones either--but a) he was pissed off, b) he was drunk, or close enough and c) it was fun trying to jerk this scumbag around.

The guy said, “Studies I’ve seen there bro, *we’re* the best all-around athletes, the major sports.”

“Again--*you*? . . . Or *we*, meaning all your boys in the league?”

“Both. They run studies, is my understanding, over at Vanderbilt University--hand speed, reaction time, motion-strength--we come out on top.”

“When I was growing up,” Chris said, “the real athletes played football and basketball. They didn’t play baseball.”

“Well you got your head up your ass then.”

“They *started* with baseball, we all did, little kids. When you hit off the plastic T, with the daddys all helping out with practice . . . I see *you guys* still hit off those T’s too . . . I guess you’re honing your technique . . . but I have to tell you, *not a great look*.”

Blaise shuffled around a bit. He said, “What I’d do? I’d take your four-eyes little face, and stuff it through one of the two-inch openings in the cyclone fence . . . the only problem being, you’d find a clever Jew-boy

lawyer and sue my ass . . . Even then, I'd still beat it, but it wouldn't be worth the time."

"Why do you call me four-eyes? I'm not wearing glasses, far as I know."

"Yeah, well, you're one of those pseudo-cerebral fucks, who does wear 'em, I'll lay odds."

"Fair enough," Chris said, and here the guy's words were getting pretty musical, the tone and the diction and the delivery, which apparently was what happened when people with heavy regional dialects got worked up, they reverted back to what they were trying to put *past* them. He noticed the same thing with Ned a couple times, all of a sudden going real Yonkers on him, when he was aggravated.

Chris said, "I was picking up Tallahassee, Florida, when we started. Now I'm getting Fargo, North Dakota."

"You're thinking of the movie," Blaise said.

"You sound like the *guy*, the car salesman, who orchestrates the botched hit on the wife."

"He was a loser. A *dumb-shit*."

"Most definitely . . . *Your* case, though, what I'm hearing, you've got some potential on the air. They don't want to listen to Fargo though."

Blaise considered what Chris was telling him. He wasn't going to win a Nobel Prize for intelligence, but he wasn't stupid, and he caught on pretty quick, that Chris was suggesting he could end up in a broadcast booth after he retired, commenting on the games.

"I can fix that part," Blaise said, meaning the accent. Chris had no idea if that *would* bother anybody, but stick the needle in anyway.

Chris said, "You really are from Fargo? Or thereabouts?"

"Eagan, Minnesota. Until I was 11. Same deal though, same people."

"Never heard of Eagan . . . a town that like, how would it be if someone wanted to . . . kind of get lost, go anonymous for a while?"

Even *this* mope, Chris couldn't resist picking *his* brain on the subject . . . the more options you could throw in the hopper, it never hurt . . . especially with this God-awful new DNA development.

"I wouldn't recommend it," Blaise said, barely giving it a thought, and certainly not raising an eyebrow as to why Chris would be asking, since again, it wasn't part of his make-up to wonder about other people.

Chris said, "Well like I say, I'm slightly impressed. You may the have the right stuff, a TV gig . . . when you're ready, talk to me, I'll make a couple inquiries."

"You don't have any pull with anyone important in this business, pal."

"Fine, *don't* let me help you then . . . What you *should* listen to me on though, I've scouted enough of the over-the-hill crowd to tell when someone's losing it."

"How about this? Whyn't you go ball your mother?"

"Denial is a tough nut," Chris said. "Even last season, before you got hurt, word around the league is pound you on the fists."

Ballplayers typically didn't like to think they could be pounded on the fists, which meant the pitchers threw the ball inside, close to the batter's body . . . the idea being when a guy's reflexes slow down just a touch, he has trouble hitting that pitch.

You could feel the steam coming out of the guy's ears, and admittedly Chris was being a bit direct, certainly more so than the guy encountered with the *real* media, who had to deal with these guys continually over the course of the season and didn't want to rock the boat.

But Blaise kept his mouth shut now, ignoring Chris, and was putting his bats back in his bag, handling them carefully the way ball players do, since superstition about your equipment was a part of the game.

So Chris said, "One thing though, you *do* land one of those broadcast gigs . . . watch out for the stands."

Blaise looked up, not wanting to continue any involvement with Chris, but clearly wondering what *that* meant.

“You know what I’m talking about,” Chris said, “how when a game gets boring in between batters? The camera pans to the stands, picking up fans who are having fun . . . And depending on the producer, if he likes to chase tail as much as you, the dominant focus of those pan shots can be on the attractive female population.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Blaise mumbled. “Worry about keeping an eye on your boyfriend.”

Chris figured the guy was trying to insult him or call him gay, but it wasn’t a real clever comeback.

Chris said, “I remember a Giants game on TV a couple years ago, and the set-up was, they found some old guy in his 80’s who was at every game and liked to get up and dance when the music started up during a pitching change. Around the 6th inning they have one of those, and they zero in on the guy, and he’s dancing around in the aisle pretty nimble having a good time, and then this woman joins him unexpectedly . . . and you would have appreciated it, she was Dolly Parton in her prime, and everything bouncing around majorly and there was a bit of a see-through aspect, and when you thought about it, likely an exhibitionist element as well . . . anyhow bottom line, the producers took a little too long to react, and they finally cut away, and the announcers Kruk and Kuip stumbled around for a second and then said something to the effect that the old guy looks like he’s having fun . . . You’d need to control yourself the same way. What do you think?”

“I gotta go,” Blaise said.

“Sure, knock yourself out . . . Just one other question if I might, backing up a sec . . . that ethnic lawyer you’re referring to, the one who you say would sue *you* if you put my head between the fence . . . that the same guy that paid your women off, and kept you out of jail?”

By now Blaise *had* had enough, and he laid down the bat bag and grabbed a hold of Chris by the back of the neck, which included the hair, and pulled him in, and Chris flashed on a bad dream-like scenario, right out of an old Saturday morning TV wrestling show, where the one guy does that exact thing, and when has the other guy's head lined up right, he delivers about 50 short blows to the center of the face, rat-a-tat style, and the guy goes down with fake blood all over the place . . . or sometimes even real blood, Chris learning years later that they used hidden razor blades to cut themselves for effect.

It wasn't clear if Blaise was going to extend to Act 2, the pummeling of the face, but he sure had Chris in a serious lock, and Chris couldn't help thinking that serves him right for letting his grow a little long in back to match the MB lifestyle, that if he had it buzz-cutted right now he'd have a better chance.

So he braced for the worst, and it was all happening quick, and a voice yelled out "Joe!" and Blaise turned and took a second and let go.

It was the coach, the older guy, who'd been feeding balls into the pitching machine, and he'd left the field a few minutes ago through that same door down the right field corner, but he must have heard some commotion and was standing in one of the dugouts now . . .

And Chris had nearly run his mouth just a *little* too far today, and he got lucky in the end, and he left the stadium and wasn't going to screw around trying to save money and work that Phase 3 sales shuttle bus to get back home, and it didn't take long to flag down a guy with a Lyft sign in the passenger window.

The guy was about 35, from LA originally, and liked it here okay but missed being able to surf, he explained to Chris . . . and of course Chris *didn't* surf, and wasn't going to try it again . . . but he knew exactly what the guy was talking about, and he missed it too.

Chapter 9

The Friday morning shift behind the check-in desk in the Rancho Villas central fitness center was business as normal . . . meaning Chris was stuffing his face, on account of an older grandmother type, Mrs. Morphy, very sweet lady, you couldn't complain, but she'd been bringing him baked goods on her way in.

He'd made the mistake the first time, some kind of orange flavored scones, of complimenting the heck out of them, figuring it was a one-shot deal, and from then on, whenever she showed up, which was most of the times he was working, she joyfully added something new to the occasion.

Chris surmised she was taking a cooking class somewhere, or at the very least trying new recipes out of a cookbook, and they had the hit-and-miss quality of untested efforts, but the problem was he gobbled everything up *anyway*, and it was a lot of starch, that's for sure, and he feared that little gut that Tammy the surf instructor had commented on was getting worse.

Either you weren't going to hurt someone's feelings by telling them to stop.

So he was in the middle of washing a buttery morsel down with a sip of coffee when someone asked if he knew who it was that had the heart attack this morning.

Chris had vaguely heard something, a siren in the distance it sounded like, close to sun-up, but he was in a deep state and his pillow was over his head and and he didn't connect with it. He was worn out from yesterday, the trip to Phoenix, the paranoid stress of making sure you don't run into Floyd, the excessive liquor, and then of course pretending to interview the

idiot and working up your nerve to insult him, and then almost getting your ass kicked.

Chris told whoever asked, that no, he hadn't heard, but by about 9, a half hour into the shift, there were whispers that someone was doing something they shouldn't have--meaning in someone else's apartment--and that was a red flag, thinking about Arty and his suspicions that *he* was making the rounds . . . and wouldn't *that* be an embarrassing way to have a heart attack . . . but a few minutes later someone confirmed the name, Harvey Harding, and, yeah, Chris recognized it but couldn't place the guy, but the important part was he didn't make it.

So the rest of the morning was kind of subdued, since a lot of people did know him apparently, at least the older crowd, and he'd been here a while, one of the original owners, and was popular.

By the time Chris got off at 1 it was mostly back to business as usual around the fitness center, and Chris supposed that was instructive, that if you're a senior and retired and want to keep going strong, you don't let stuff get to you beyond a point. Meaning you can shake your head something's unfortunate, but it's never *that* unfortunate to where you alter your daily routine.

In fact Chris used it as an impetus to work harder today, the life's too short angle once more, and he dove into the main pool and without stopping swam 12 laps, though he was dragging pretty bad the last 2.

Then he sat around for a while and when he saw Arty show up and head for the 40-person spa, Chris joined him.

"A little fireworks around here apparently," Chris said.

"It happens," Arty said, leaning back and closing his eyes, and for all Chris knew he could have been committing stock tips to memory that he just picked out of the Wall Street Journal.

And which was kind of funny, since last time he'd lectured Chris to never put your head back because then you can't stay in as long.

“Unh-huh,” Chris said. “Buddy of yours though?”

Arty opened his eyes, but you could tell he wasn't thrilled having to alter his relaxed state and go into it. “Part of our bridge-foursome. Not in the regular rotation, though, he was a sub.”

“Ah.”

“Decent person” Arty continued. “Standup guy. He was a steel executive in Pittsburgh. Interesting part of that being, he could have owned this whole development, but there he was in a modest ground floor unit, like anyone else.”

Yep, just like *you*, Chris thought, and he remembered his earlier similar evaluation of Arty living way below *his* means. “Wife and all?” he said.

“Indeed,” Arty said, not missing a beat.

“But she wasn't around . . . when it happened.”

“No. He had a girlfriend,” Arty said, not lowering his voice or otherwise trying to be discreet. Which was kind of surprising, the candor, since *he* was likely doing the same thing . . . except Arty was one of those straight-shooter guys, no reason to go through life tip-toeing.

“Anyhow . . . everything okay on *your* end?” Chris said.

“Me? Fine. Why wouldn't it be?”

“Just one more thought, on poor Mr. Harding . . . What, he spent the night in another *apartment*? That *blatant*?”

“Nah. What he did, pretty sure, he always started his normal day at 5. Got up, showered, kissed his wife, went for a walk . . . Took him a couple hours, he's back by 7, coffee with the wife, plus a half a grapefruit and a poached egg--and he's ready to start his day.”

“It takes that long, for you guys?” Chris said.

“Huh?”

“Couple hours of activity? At your age?”

“Depending, why not.”

“If the . . . equipment doesn’t work though? Then . . . no, *forget that*, don’t give me the plan B.”

“You almost asked,” Arty said, starting to laugh.

“Okay let me shift gears on you for a second. How would someone avoid leaving their DNA somewhere.”

Arty stared at Chris for a moment and boosted himself up on the edge, to where only his lower legs were dangling into the hot tub. “I’m getting close to my limit,” he said, “but I gotta stick around and hear this now.”

“There’s nothing to hear,” Chris said. “Basic, generic question, is all.”

“I’m not sure. Ask someone who works in a lab, the way you see ‘em on those forensics shows, all suited up like they’re ready to operate on a heart transplant patient.”

Chris was picturing the get-ups unfortunately. It occurred to him you’d even see pictures of factory workers like that too, if they were manufacturing a delicate product.

He realized what he was thinking of--Hazmat Suits.

Those things they used for toxic cleanup where you were entombed like an alien in a space suit.

Were we down to that? Is that what it would take to commit a simple crime now?

He said “What about eyelashes. Do *they* automatically count, or does it need to include the root? You know what I mean, what’s the word . . . the follicle.”

“Jesus Christ,” Arty said.

“What? . . . I’m wondering this stuff, because they got this serial killer in California, there may be a breakthrough.”

“Not the *Zodiac* guy, you’re talking about? *He* was cagey. A lot smarter than they gave him credit for.”

“Different guy. A little later. Started in the east bay, then Sacramento, some southern California activity too, sadly.”

“Okay I know who you’re talking about . . . What *kind* of breakthrough?”

“Not sure. Just that they got a different way of testing it now, than the cops use.”

“Extends into the family tree you mean?”

“*Dang*. How’d you learn all that?”

“An educated guess. That’s plenty of science fiction like that--did you ever see Minority Report?”

“No.”

“Doesn’t matter. The point is, you knew it would happen sooner or later. When you think about it, we learned enough in high school physiology, the chromosomes and shit, to understand they should be able to connect your family tree. Surprising actually it’s taken this long.”

“Oh,” Chris said, this conversation not helping anything, that’s for sure. “Well just thought I’d run it by you for kicks, what the heck.”

Artie tugged on his earlobe and watched a reasonably well-endowed dark-haired woman in a bikini pass by and head toward the pool.

He turned back to Chris and said, this time quieter, “You’re in trouble, aren’t you.”

“No . . . I mean not in those exact words. More a pre-emptive *concern*, is where I’m at.” He’d lowered his voice considerably now as well.

“Unh-huh,” Artie said. “You want to tell me about it?”

This was a bit of a crossroads all of a sudden. This guy was book smart, but plenty down-and-dirty street smart as well. Chris did like Arty, and felt like the guy had some benevolent uncle in him.

Still, you didn’t have to come clean, open a big can of worms, to work some advice out of him, did you?

Since, for better or worse, the guy already had you pretty much pegged anyway.

“Let’s keep it simple for now,” Chris said. “Hypothetical . . . If I *had* to do something is all, it would be nice to know they couldn’t immediately throw me into Ancestry.com.”

“*That’s* how they’re doing it?” Arty said. “The *breakthrough* you’re talking about?”

“Sounds like it. Guy commits a crime, made the mistake of clearing his throat and spitting, or gets in a little tussle with the victim, leaves a drop of blood . . . or Jeez, maybe just sweats from the nerves of it all, drips, doesn’t it even realize it . . . and they pick up a trace of that . . . Can they get DNA from microscopic *sweat molecules*, do you think? . . . I hadn’t even thought of *that* one, Holy smokes.”

“Keep going,” Arty said.

“Fine. So they run the DNA, and like you say, find the guy’s family tree, and they have their starting point . . . Almost too God damn easy, something a kid could have come up with . . . Excuse my language.”

“I think I got it. The family tree members were innocently checking out their own heritage. And their DNA is on file, or at least one of them.”

“Yep, and my understanding is all it’s gonna take is *one*, and the connection can extend *way* down the line.”

“As opposed to the *standard* way the cops have been running it.”

Arty didn’t miss much. Chris said, “It’s becoming increasingly clear, the cops’ method is back in the 20th century. They can only find you if you’re already in there, a registered convict . . . or maybe, your immediate brother is. That’s as far as it goes.”

Chris felt stupid going on and on about this.

The problem of course, the reason you couldn’t help obsess over it, was because of his initial instinct, unless proven otherwise . . . that you *really might not* be able to go back and live a normal life.

Arty had mentioned science fiction movies--Chris felt like this was the middle of one.

Arty was silent for a while, and you could tell the wheels were turning. "So get your *own* checked," he said. "Or if you want me to rephrase it, it may behoove a bad guy to get *his* checked."

Though he was giving Chris the look, and they both knew he didn't *need* to rephrase it, that they were talking about Chris specifically.

Chris didn't quite follow him though.

Arty said, "If I was worried I might of done something--and I was aware of the latest crime-catching technology--I'd stick my own self in the system."

The guy was pissing him off, not coming right out with it, probably secretly having a little fun here . . . and Chris *still* wasn't sure what he meant, but then it clicked in.

"Jeez," Chris said. "You're saying . . . get my own DNA tested, privately. Then enter *that* into Ancestry.com, as Bill Smith or whoever, and see what the results are? . . . That's not bad, actually."

Chris was aware of himself using *I* now, dispensing of the pretense of asking a *general* question on behalf of a *hypothetical* criminal, but it didn't matter.

Arty said, "If it were *me*, I'd feel like an idiot if I didn't at least find *out*. Then you take it from there."

Chris wasn't sure about that part, what there would be to take from *where* at that point . . . but okay, he got Arty's drift.

Which is, you're essentially doing what the police would. Except you got *yours* willingly from a lab test, and they got it *unwillingly* from a crime scene. Again, such as the inside of the Towne vehicle in the Original Joe's parking lot. Or Jeez, even off of that Harrison guy somehow.

And that was another thing--Chandler had implied something about that exact *thing*, hadn't he--and Chris realized whatever it was went over his head, there was too much to process.

"So, fine, I get the same results *they* do, or would," Chris said. "*Then* what?"

"Well one scenario obviously, not sure of the percentages, but there are *no* matches. So you have nothing to worry about. For now."

"Gee thanks," Chris said. Arty was a realist of course, and you could tell he wasn't real confident in that outcome, or put it this way, he wasn't about to go to Vegas and place a bet on it.

But yeah, what did you have to lose really, except a few bucks for a lab test--and more bluntly, what else did you *have*?

The other crazy thought, say you do all that and you discover one lone 5th cousin you never heard of, Ida from Texarkana . . . could you then just get ahold of her and ask her to please remove herself from the database?

Chris was pretty positive that was do-able, that it would fall under some civil rights stuff, that people had the right to change their mind about being matched up.

But that was nuts, right? Trying to explain to someone that they needed to get *out* of there?

It all made you sick, honestly, the range of scenarios, but Chris figured okay, at least do the first part, get the test and let the computer go to work and see where you stand.

"At any rate," he said to Arty, "thanks for hearing me out. Even though you most likely didn't help anything."

"What happened with the ring?" Arty said. "You hear back from anyone?"

Chris had forgotten all about that, the ad he put on Craigslist, and of course he'd used not his his normal fake email address but a new *fake-fake* one, which was even easier to lose track of.

Arty told him to let him know if there's anything juicy, and he towed off and left, and Chris sat at one of the outdoor tables and started to open his phone, but safer would always be the public computer, so he went inside and took a look.

There were 3 messages.

Hey, my wife lost that down there walking around. We were renting a time share for a week. It sounds goofy but it slipped off her finger. She was on the Atkins Diet. Please return my message.

I am responding about the FOUND RING. Please hold on to it for me, I am pretty certain it is mine. My husband lost it in the vicinity of the Rancho Villas Planned Community.

Yeah I need that ring. I'll make you a deal for it. This is Ronald Haymaker.

Chris processed the three.

Okay fine, interesting, whatever. The *husband*-losing-it scenario was kind of weird, but forget that.

If you had one reaction, you'd have to say it was curious that none of them told you *where* exactly they might have lost it.

The one person came close, the vicinity of the Rancho Villas--though that narrowed it down to about 5 square miles. Probably more if you included the golf courses.

Then again if they *knew* specifically where they lost it, it wouldn't have happened, Chris supposed.

He'd try to address this stuff tonight, touch base with these people. It couldn't be an emergency, since the ring wasn't going anywhere.

What felt more urgent right now was taking some kind of action, on the DNA issue, at least getting the ball rolling.

So he clicked onto the Ancestry.com site, and there was also another one, pretty similar, 23andme, and from a rudimentary search those two were the most popular for the average doofuses who needed to trace their roots.

Which meant that's where the police would logically go, wouldn't it? The ones with the most people in them?

The problem was those sites both required a saliva sample. Chris had been shell shocked enough by the concept that he hadn't thought that part through, that you *didn't* use an actual lab, as Arty suggested.

No, you had to register, shell out your \$79 bucks, and they gave you a kit, and you either spit in it, it sounded like, or swabbed the inside of your cheek--then you stuck that in the mail, and boom--maybe--a few weeks later they'd spew out your results.

Chris didn't have a great feeling about this at all, giving these guys an actual physical *piece* of yourself.

And in fact, as you thought about it, wait a second . . . if the law enforcement forensics unit collects specimens from a crime scene--say the guy got cut battling it out with the victim--they're not going to be able to ask him for his saliva to submit to Ancestry.com--because that's the whole point, there *is* no guy to ask, *because they're trying to find him*.

Jeez. Now you had spend some serious time on the computer . . . but fortunately there was a detailed article from the Atlantic Monthly a few months back that spelled it out better.

Yada yada . . . a lot of skimming, but the key things were clearer . . . there was a site called GED Match which was *open source*, which Chris was pretty sure meant free for everyone, like something you'd search in a library catalogue . . . and on that site you just entered your personal DNA code as a text file. Probably a massive one, but who cares, you get the job done.

GED Match seemed to overlap the two paid ones and had a larger database than both of them . . . and what Chris liked best about it was right upfront, in your face on the home page, it told you you could withdraw your sample at any time . . . something that wasn't clear in the fine print on those other two sites.

So . . . Arty was right, though he probably didn't realize why . . . but yeah, now if you wanted some piece of mind you did need to find a lab, get the goddang test, and come out of there were your personal code.

Then you'd be a step away from confirming that you probably couldn't ever go home again . . . since spelled out right in front of you was one of your great, great grandfathers in Scotland, or somewhere, the whole family tree linked to it . . . but for God sakes at least cross that bridge when you come to it.

So now you looked for labs . . . and that was a maze in itself, and you had no idea who did what, or which ones were connected with hospitals and may not deal with the general public . . . but eventually Chris put his finger on one, nice and simple, **Lab Core - walk ins welcome.**

They listed a massive range of tests on their website, and Chris couldn't help thinking, do humans really need many of those to continue existing normally . . . but don't worry about it, they had one in the middle of the list that said **Paternity & DNA**, and that should *work* . . . now the only issue was how to get there, since this lab was in Glendale which was about 20 minutes northwest of Phoenix.

It looked like from Eclipse you'd go straight back down 17 to 60 and then back up to Glendale, or you'd get off 17 about 10 minutes sooner and take the side streets.

Either way, it looked highly *unpromising* to try to navigate it by bus, and an Uber was going to run you what, probably 35, 40 bucks each way and then you had the lab test, probably asking you for a hundred and a

quarter to pin prick your finger tip . . . so no matter how you cut it, it was going to be a 200 dollar afternoon.

That didn't include getting something to eat down there in Glendale, which was typically a fact of life.

Chris took a couple notes and shut down the computer, and there was Pat coming out of her sales office with someone who looked like a client, and she gave Chris a little wave.

He figured what the heck, and went over there and butted in and asked if he could speak to her for a sec.

"I'm thinking I caught you in a good mood," he said. "What are you renting another unit, possibly?"

"This might be a sale," Pat said, discreetly crossing her fingers and whispering. "This gentleman is back for the third time. There was a previous issue with the noise level coming off the patio, but the owner went ahead and installed a new double-paned sliding door. I'm showing it to him again now, we might have turned the corner."

"Yeah I saw you over there, and that's what I was thinking, you looked potentially *upbeat* . . . so would you mind if I borrowed your car for an hour?"

"Sure," Pat said, pulling a set of keys out of her purse. You know where I park it, right?

"Un-huh," Chris said, reasonably shocked that it unfolded like that, but not asking any more questions, and Pat wasn't going to either, wanting to get back down to business, and Chris found the car, and headed down to Glendale.

Except it wasn't quite that simple.

Chapter 10

Saving some money never hurt, but the important thing was being in *control*, which Chris hated *not* to be, so this was great, cruising along in Pat's early 2000's Toyota Avalon, which could use a little bodywork here and there, but who cares, these things would go 300,000 easy, if you just pretty much changed the oil once in a while.

Yeah, he thought he'd get a bite near the lab, that was the plan, but halfway there that wasn't going to work, there were too many highway road signs pointing you to various restaurants, and Chris knew this was probably going to happen and he should have eaten first.

That was another thing about the Rancho Villas, the food was tasty and it was convenient. The restaurant had good hours--and this is the place with the little evening bar where Chris worked his one shift a week--and you could actually *sign* for stuff and they sent you a bill at the end of the month, and Chris had to admit when he ate a sandwich there and signed the check he felt kind of like a big shot at a fancy resort.

So the point was he screwed that up by not taking care of it, and he liked the Famous Star burger at Carl's Junior, which he rated the best of the fast food joints, and there'd been a sign for one and he ignored it, but another one popped up, right near an off-ramp, and he hesitated for a split second and went with it.

Then of course when he got off he had misgivings. There was a logjam at the traffic light, and worse than that, you didn't see any sign of a Carl's Junior.

These were important lessons you learned while driving, but then too often neglected to file away. One of the them was never pull off the freeway

unless you can visually spot the place *itself*, right there, in an off-and-on type plaza that involves the absolute minimum of extraneous driving.

This was getting worse by the block, the Carl's Junior it turned out was inside a darn mall, and Chris would have made a U-turn and hightailed it out of there except you couldn't, you were the committed, the two left lanes turning into the thing finally, and then you parked and had no idea where to go, except into the mall and roam around.

He did feel better after wolfing down a couple burgers though, ready to take on the rest of the day, and it wasn't going to be an hour like he told Pat, but it was 3:15 now and he should still get back to Eclipse before she got off work, so hopefully there wouldn't be an issue.

It was one of those malls where you could enter the stores both from inside the main deal and also from outside, off the giant parking lot . . . and Chris was strolling around out there looking in a few of them, digesting his lunch just a tad bit more before getting back in the car and heading to that lab . . . when a shoplifter comes running out of The Gap.

The reason you knew it was a shoplifter was an employee flew out of there a second later yelling and pointing, but you had the idea anyway, the thief looking pretty dang frantic . . . a little overweight though, not moving all that great, and the employee who was pretty skinny might have been able to catch up to him, but *then what*, so the guy was using his common sense and just calling out instead.

Chris considered himself a logical person as well, for the most part, but sometimes the adrenaline kicked in, plus a little instinct . . . and Chris broke into a sprint, in the back of his mind wondering if he was about to have a heart attack from the mound of greasy food he'd just consumed, combined with the two refills on the large coke.

The guy had a vehicle, he wasn't on foot, and he got to it well before Chris, but then you could see him fumbling with his keys, and that was

pretty dumb--you're going to steal something but you lock your car first for safekeeping?

The guy had a late-enough model car that he had the *transponder* key where you pushed the button, and that was pretty surprising as well . . . but you didn't want to sit here analyzing the sociological aspects of it, you had a guy holding a Gap bag about to get into his vehicle.

You wouldn't expect *that* either, the shoplifter to have something all bagged up, but likely something happened at the end, maybe a fake credit card after he was all set.

Chris was ten feet away from the guy now and asked him to please put the bag down. This sped the guy up, and there was the beep of the door and the guy opened it and was halfway in, moving a lot quicker now for a large person Chris decided, and the guy had the door almost closed when Chris got his right hand over the top and held it open.

The problem was, it wasn't *that* open, just a fraction . . . and the guy kept pulling it closed, and Chris tried to pull it the other way . . . and there was a stalemate, the thing still *nearly* closed . . . and Chris was trying to think what to do, and this is where it would help to have that employee working with you, doing some extra yanking.

And unfortunately it was starting to get away from Chris, the momentum, like one of those group tug-of-wars at summer camp where you have a heck of an even battle, and then all of sudden the rope and all the people holding onto the one side go flying the other way.

Despite Chris's efforts, you could hear the latch starting to engage . . . though not quite . . . and right at that moment the guy put his shoulder into the door, full blast, and pounded the thing right into Chris, and there was an unpleasant thud, and Chris went down and the guy threw it in gear and drove away.

Now you had three Gap employees kneeling there trying to help Chris, plus another guy who just parked his car, and he was laying on the

warm asphalt looking up at all of them thinking this is exactly what they call *too little too late*.

He was getting the ‘*Sir! Are you okay, sir!?*’ from all four of them it seemed, and then one of the Gap employees, a young gal, stood up and appeared to be running back into the store.

This got Chris to at least *sit* up, and he asked where she was going, and one of the others told him, “Sir, you didn’t respond at first, and we’re concerned, so she’s summoning EMS.”

“An *ambulance?*” Chris said, the words not coming as quick as his lips were delivering them, it felt like, but these people should get the idea.

“Yes,” one of the others said. “Why don’t you lay back . . . Jim, I need a jacket or something.”

“No, no, I’m good,” Chris said, “just help me up.” And he extended his hand, like a guy in a football game where a teammate is pulling him up after a tackle . . . except *that* guy’s just saving some energy, whereas Chris was pretty sure he really *couldn’t* get up without some help.

But the guy did as he was told, and Chris once again told everyone he was fine, and thanks for the concern but it’s unwarranted . . . and he walked away toward his car--Pat’s--trying to make it look like nothing was out of joint, though it was one of the harder things he’d done in a while.

When he got close to the car he took a look back, and the little crowd had disbursed, apparently he’d duped them that he was hunky-dorey, and that was a decent sign, since he wasn’t crazy about getting in the car--meaning *designating* it in case one of them was nosy enough to call it in for some reason--with anyone watching.

So what he did, he waited to get in until he has convinced the coast *was* clear, and then he drove to an adjacent mall, not as extensive, one of the linked jobs with a Target and a multiplex movie theater, and then he parked again and shut down the engine and took stock.

The guy cracked him in the mid-section, that was what was bothering him the worst, and Jiminy, he realized now that for an instant back there he *did* feel like he was having a heart attack . . . pretty ironic since it crossed his mind a minute earlier that *running* after the guy might do that exact thing.

But taking a step back and thinking straight, what the guy did with the door was obviously knock the wind out of him. He'd had that happen a couple times in weekend football games as a kid, *touch-tackle* rules, but there was still a lot of contact . . . and it's a very distinct and highly scary feeling, because you feel like you can't breathe . . . and you probably *can't* for a minute, since your diaphragm has gone into full spasm mode.

The encouraging part--now--the wind-knocked-out part had passed, and it could be a lot worse, the guy *could* have cracked a rib or two, but Chris was pretty sure those were intact, though everything in that region was pretty dang sore, yeah.

He also had a cut over his eye, like boxers get, that bone right under the eyebrow structurally pushing against the skin, so never much cushion there. He took a look in the rear view mirror and it was a reasonable gash, and there was a trickle of blood into his left eye, and that's exactly why they stopped fights, the boxer couldn't see well enough because of the blood mixing in . . . it wasn't that the boxer was necessarily hurt that bad, but it was unsafe to continue.

Another not-good thing would be to get a lot of blood in Pat's car, and Chris rummaged around the glove compartment and found some Burger King napkins--Jeez, her *too*, with the fast food--and he applied pressure and waited a while, and concluded it was letting up, the bleeding . . . and one thing for *sure*, you weren't going to walk into one of those Urgent Care places and get a couple stitches.

Chris wasn't sure why he was so scared of EMS or an ER-type deal . . . after all, he was on his way to a medical lab. And yeah, you had the fake ID

and were going to pay cash either way . . . but it just seemed risky to get treated for something, and they start pulling out equipment, and who knows, maybe fingerprinting you for insurance purposes.

As opposed to the lab, where you're the boss, most likely . . . and if they pull something *there*, you just leave.

Plus there was always the likelihood the ER doc would want to know how it happened, and if you were *vague*, they might report it to the cops for that alone. Chris figured they were required to keep an eye on that shit, and would err on the side of caution.

The only thing with the lab now, you should at least cover the thing up before you walk in there, so it's not a source of conversation, and Chris was wondering if there was a Rite-Aid around here somewhere before he got back on the freeway . . .

But he was a little late, he was in the middle of driving back to the I-17 onramp when he thought of it, and then he was pretty sure he saw a Walgreen's off to the left and moved over a lane . . . but the whole thing was a disaster, you couldn't turn in anyplace and unfortunately he'd merged into the lanes for *northbound* I-17, and he was pinned, there was no extricating yourself . . . and Chris re-entered the freeway going the wrong direction, back toward Eclipse.

After all that, now this . . . *Ho-ly Toledo*.

And this wasn't the best stretch of freeway to be able to turn around on, either, since he remembered in reverse, coming *down* here, that there weren't any exits for a while until you got to the one with the mall and the Carl's Junior.

So he had to continue north, part of early rush hour traffic to top things off, and there was finally a highway sign that let you know such-and-such road was in 3 miles.

So when the dust settled you'd be wasting 6 or 7 miles *this* direction--and then you turn it *around* to go back south, your original plan to take

care of the lab business in Glendale--that of course doubled it so, *unreal* . . . you get your ass kicked trying to be a good samaritan and now you're taking on an extra 15 miles just to get back to where you *were*.

In fact it was tempting to forget the whole thing, maybe you were moving too fast on this DNA stuff anyway, why not go home sit by the pool, throw a little peroxide on the gash over the eye that's not feeling real pleasant at the moment, and forget about it for a while.

Except Chris hated to totally waste an afternoon, especially on account of some moron stealing a shirt from a store, not something you should let derail you from your original goal.

So now you had another follow-up sign, **Raritan Springs Road 1 1/4 miles.**

You had three lanes going north at this point and Chris was in the far left and moved over one.

He checked his mirrors and blind spot and was set to get into the slow lane, since he liked to give himself plenty of time to exit, why cut it close . . . except there was a guy on his shoulder not exactly letting him in.

Chris eased up on the gas and dropped back a ways, and now he saw something else he didn't like, why the guy probably hadn't let him in, which was the guy kept straddling lanes.

Both on the right . . . and then he'd stabilize it for a second, and then he'd hang his wheels over the dotted *left* line.

And now the guy had moved back into the *middle* lane, but was making sure to straddle *those* lines as well.

Chris considered this. If it was at night, you'd probably look at the guy as a drunk driver--though even then, Chris thought this guy wasn't behaving quite like one.

Chris had witnessed a couple of those guys--in fact he had called 911 in both situations, trying to keep the guy in view as he spoke to the dispatcher, and he thought he did an adequate job describing the location

and even providing the license plate--and one of them he followed for a good 20 minutes, and no CHP ever showed up.

Which was pretty disappointing, you'd think they wouldn't have that many more pressing issues at that moment than a guy who might cross the center meridian in an alcohol stupor and kill a bunch of people.

At any rate, this guy right now, even though he was driving assholically, seemed to have more control. Meaning he'd straddle *one* of the lines and just stay there for a while. No swerving.

So Chris was pretty sure you had Evaluation B here, which was that this fucker was on the phone or texting.

They were about a half mile from that exit now and Chris pulled up alongside him--separately, the guy was driving an impressive vehicle, a silver Camaro, and Chris was a fan of those cars, knew a little bit about them, and placed this one as a 3rd generation, meaning late '80s, early '90s.

The Camaro didn't appear meticulously maintained, not like the type of vehicle guys trotted out at the informal car get-togethers at a Foster's Freeze on a Saturday night, where everyone propped open their hoods and people oohed and aahd.

But Chris always gave guys credit when they owned a relatively classic car, but simply drove it, enjoyed it day-to-day, as opposed to showcasing the thing.

But forgetting all that . . . Chris pulled far enough forward and looked across out the driver window and sure enough, you had an idiot with his head down, one hand on the wheel--barely--and completely absorbed in whatever was so important on his dumb device.

Chris tapped the horn. The guy didn't look up, so Chris leaned on it. Now the guy *did* look, curious, and Chris opened the window and stuck his left hand out, with the palm up, the old *what are you doing?* routine.

There was no reaction from the guy for a second, and then he took both his hands off the wheel and turned both palms up the same way, and he calmly mouthed something to Chris.

And Chris was pretty sure the guy wasn't saying thank you, but placing something *else* in front of the *You* . . . but thankfully the exit was coming up and you could get out of this mess, and all Chris had the energy to do at this point was look back at the guy and shake his head, and hope some part of his point would resonate, and the guy'd at least be more conscientious the rest of wherever he was going.

Chris put his blinker on. The only problem now--something he needed today like a hole in the head--the son of a bitch put *his* on too . . . and moved back from the middle lane, into Chris's, right behind him . . . *and are you kidding me?*

You couldn't have scripted this worse, Chris was thinking, as he took the exit ramp and started slowing down for the stop sign.

There wasn't anything out here, in particular, maybe those springs the sign referred to, several miles one way or the other, and it was hard to understand why the interstate people would have bothered to create an exit here at all.

Chris supposed you had these situations--farmers, ranchers, working their land way out here, pretty tough to get around if they couldn't jump on the interstate at *some* point, so maybe that was it . . . though if you had to guess, some developer had a hand in it, making sure there was an exit here in case they decided to stick in another planned community.

In fact it was a little surprising that you had to go further north to Anthem and Eclipse and the others, meaning why wouldn't they have built those communities around here, which is closer to Phoenix, but there were obviously reasons.

Either way, this was pretty darn desert-y right now, where Chris hit the stop sign at the end of the off-ramp and had the option of either left or right on County Road 36-B.

It *was* interesting to conceive of that this was probably what the Rancho Villas *did* look like 20 years ago, before anything happened--the condos, the tennis, the pools, the 18-hole golf courses, plus the spin-off commercial stuff-- the whole shebang--meaning Jeez, they didn't start with *much*.

Forget that right now. This dick was on his tail, both of them stopped, Chris deciding right or left, and he went left . . . and you had a glimmer of hope that the guy actually had something to *do* out here and would go left . . . or if he went right, just speed it up and pass you . . . But nope. You had a problem.

Meaning the guy wasn't going anywhere *you* weren't, and Chris was *not* in the mood for one of these, that was an understatement. His head was starting to throb, and those ribs that he was confident the guy hadn't actually broken but had only knocked the wind out of--those were starting to ache pretty strong now too, one of those deep inside you things where you fear something really *might* be wrong.

And man . . . could that guy have affected an organ or something? Like lacerated your liver, or a kidney?

Nah, you had to stick to logic, but either way an updated decision was being made for you . . . meaning Chris decided, *screw it*, when I resolve it with this Camaro guy I'm going home after all, and if nothing else, lay the heck down.

So the thing to do, Chris figured, was just *talk* to the guy, explain yourself nice and simple, no hard feelings, you just were concerned he wasn't paying attention and thought you should let him know.

Complete BS of course, but you did what you had to.

There was an area about 50 yards down the county road, not exactly a pull-out but where you could see that the shoulder got wider, and Chris stopped the car and got out, and waited for the guy to do the same.

And it seemed tame enough at first, the guy easing the Camaro in past Chris, stopping a few car lengths in front.

Then the door flew open, and the guy came tearing around the side of his vehicle, and Chris knew enough not to wait around, and he hopped back in and floored it--and very fortunately he hadn't turned off the ignition, which might have saved him.

The guy didn't say anything as he was racing toward Chris, and you didn't notice a weapon in his hand or anything . . . but there was an intensity to him, a savage look in his eyes, which Chris knew you could get carried away and over-state about guys sometimes . . . but not here.

It was crazy, but Chris felt like he was his prey, leaning there on the car, and this guy was a wild animal who got unleashed.

As he sped away down the county road he had no business getting distracted thinking about it, but you were reminded of Mancuso on the other end of Harrison, and the swinging him one-two-three, and into that pit.

Chris's--or rather Pat's--car had been pointing away from the freeway when he got out, which was east, and that's the direction he was going now, fast, out into the country or middle of the desert or however else you wanted to classify it.

The afternoon wind had picked up and there were a few tumbleweeds bounding across the road, and wouldn't *that* be something if he got disabled by one of *them*--which Chris remembered might have happened to a driver one time on Highway 5, the guy pulled over with a big one sticking out of his front grill, looking like it screwed something up.

You could also, the other option, hang a U somehow and head back to the interstate and get back on, and see what happens.

That was the better *common sense* option, that with all the other traffic the guy should lose interest after a while . . . plus that way the guy would come to his *real* exit eventually, the intended one, and that would likely be the end of it.

But you didn't always follow your best instincts, did you . . . and Chris decided he didn't like this guy, he didn't want to confront and hurt him or anything, but today had gone haywire, not much redeeming element to it at all . . . and you at least wanted to win *something*.

So *outdrive* the fucker. That would be a challenge. Not to mention the guy had a fast car. But Chris thought of himself as a pretty good driver.

So let's see what happens . . .

And a mile or two into it the road started to turn, and it got narrower, and you *did* have ranches out here now, since you were crossing some cattle guards . . . and you saw horses here and there and the terrain started to change, and it felt like you were coming into some rugged hills and volcanic formations, and there was a sign for Monument National Park, and Chris had read about it, it was pretty big.

So maybe that's why the exit existed back there, to service what looked like a bunch of dude ranches now, and to get people into the national park.

All that said, they were the only two cars on the road at the moment, and the guy was keeping pace with Chris, though he was a ways back. Hard to know if that was the best he could do, or if he was biding his time.

They were starting to lose the light, it was early but it was January, and they were gaining some elevation, and Chris stepped on it, and the road got more windy and challenging.

He was pretty skilled at applying the breaks as little as possible, naturally slowing down enough for the turns so he could power out of them, and after ten minutes you couldn't see the guy in the rear view mirror.

He remembered as a kid one time riding a bicycle from Bolinas to Stinson Beach, and he had a regular 10-speed, but his friend Mike Capocelli was with him, and Mike only had a simple one-speed stingray . . . and this other rider comes along, all decked out in racing garb, fancy road bike, cleats, the whole 9 yards, and Mike feels him coming and decides he's going to hold the guy off . . . and it was one the more amazing feats Chris had seen on a bicycle, Mike managed to stay in front of the guy all the rest of the way to Stinson.

Mike used other means of course, he kept cutting the guy off, but still . . . it showed you, it wasn't always about the best equipment.

So Chris had proved his point with this mope . . . and in a perfect world if you just turn off somewhere now where he wasn't going to see you, and then take some *other* road to loop you back to the interstate, all would be good.

But there *was* nowhere to get lost and there *was* no other road . . . and Chris started to get that same tightness in his throat and slight trembling in the forearms that happened a few *other* times over the past year . . . and he thought he felt some palpitations coming on as well . . .

And the savage vision of that guy coming toward him back there, that wasn't going away--and Chris had a decidedly sick feeling this wasn't going to end well.

The distance he thought he had on the guy was either wrong, or short-lived, because going around one of the switchbacks as you kept gaining altitude, son of a bitch, there was the *guy*. There was an open expanse going back down the mountain, and Chris caught it just right in the rear view mirror and you could see the silver Camaro, not far behind at all, as the crow flies.

This was awful for a couple of reasons. It meant that guy was a *determined* motherfucker, wasn't he, he was *on this* . . . and it also meant

whatever supreme driving lesson Chris was schooling him with, it didn't matter, you weren't going to lose him.

You hated to think of your ultimate options now. There'd been the pick-up driver of course, the east side of Pocatello, and Chris had to refresh it for a second--what *was* that even?

He was pretty sure it'd been as simple as a couple idiots, him being one, flashing their high-beams at each other.

The key difference *there* though, you were armed. You got what you needed out of the glove compartment, and at the last moment you were able to navigate your defense.

Chris couldn't help think now, you should have brought the thing along, the firearm--it was an off-brand you'd never heard of, fine, it had the strange name *Czechpoint* on the middle of the barrel--but it worked okay the few times you needed it, didn't blow up in your face or anything.

Wasn't that part of the reason you took the Greyhound? That they don't check anything?

What was your brilliant reasoning there?

So things could morph into this exact type of situation, like you knew they might, sooner or later?

Because you can't let stuff *go*, can't even keep your mouth shut on the *freeway*?

And--Chris thinking, *pardon my French-- but . . .* so you could end up with your dick in your hands . . . your *current* predicament, for example, some maniac bearing down on you in the mountains as it's getting dark with no one around?

Unbelievable.

Chris gunned it as best he could another couple miles and around one of the turns, off to the right there was a dirt road that fed off of the county road they were on. It was beat-up and full of ruts, and you weren't going to be able to drive 10 yards on it without a heavy duty vehicle and major 4-

wheel drive, and Chris figured it might be an old fire road that they'd let go and didn't bother with anymore.

But the one thing you *might* be able to do, was use it to turn around.

This was one of the those judgement calls you better move on *right now*, if you trusted your instincts, and Chris executed a pretty dang quick 3-point turn, which sort of became an 8-point turn, but the bottom line was he was able to get the Avalon reversed and pointed in the other direction-- where this scumbag was coming *from*-- and Chris worked it right into the center of the county road.

He was hoping to leave it running, but he needed to check the trunk, and he couldn't find the lever that popped it for you, and time was moving and he shut off the engine and pulled out the keys and hustled back there.

There was all kinds of loose junk in the trunk, and it occurred to Chris he'd read Pat wrong, that she seemed pretty organized and fussy. There were old magazines and newspapers and a boogie board, whatever you might need *that* for in Arizona.

There were clothes--Jesus, come on--there was a suitcase, but it was soft and light, and you could feel through it that there was nothing useful there.

There was a pillow, there was an old record album--the first item in the whole damn trunk that was potentially sharp, but no way you had time to mess with that, and you were really going to take on this psychopath with a half-ounce piece of soft vinyl?

The problem was you could hear the guy now, the Camaro rumbling up the pass, pretty imposing sound, Chris thinking those things typically had a V-6 but no doubt they gave you the V-8 option . . . and maybe it was because he was pretty terrified at the moment, but that thing sure sounded like a monster of a motor.

A minute later the guy pulled up and and slowed down to an idle, right in front of the Avalon, middle of the narrow road, both vehicles

pointing opposite directions, meaning directly at each other . . . and the concern wasn't blocking traffic, because there hadn't been a car *anywhere* in at least 10 minutes.

What Chris was thinking though, was oh no, this is already a mistake, because if I somehow extricate myself, *am I going to be able to drive out of here?*

Fortunately the guy made a decision, which was he pulled the thing around and out of the main road, and parked it on those first few feet of the old fire road, and he got out.

The guy was probably 40 yards away at this point. Chris said, "Yo' man, what's up?"

Chris thought he'd gotten a decent look at the guy back on the interstate when they were jockeying for lanes and the guy laid that maniacal look on him, but now he looked different, not what you'd expect.

He was about 30, clean-cut, in fact a pretty meticulous-looking head of hair, like a guy who gets it trimmed just right, the same time every week.

He had on khaki slacks and a nice-quality short-sleeved shirt, Hawaiian. Shoes looked like loafers, kind of dressy.

Chris noticed he did have a small, colorful tattoo on one his forearms.

The guy didn't respond to Chris's *what's up* salutation, he just kept coming. Slowly, methodically. And as he got to about the 30-yard mark you could see the animal-like expression again . . . maybe someone else would give him the benefit of the doubt and label it *purposeful* . . . if they were an optimist . . . but Chris was not, and labeled it *insane*.

The worst part actually, was the guy not talking. Just coming. Not varying the pace in the slightest.

It reminded Chris of a YouTube video he'd seen, some hiker up in northern Montana runs into a grizzly bear on a trail. The guy's filming it himself with his phone. He's pretty casual about it as he starts to back up,

giving you a running commentary, likes he's filming something no more concerning than a loose piece of cattle.

The bear just kept coming, methodically, not moving real fast, no sign of threatening the guy, and the guy doesn't seem particularly scared, and finally after about an eighth of a mile there's a fork in the trail and the guy keeps backing *one* way, and the bear goes the *other*.

In the YouTube comments below the video you had some idiots laughing about it, but then one or two wiser people chime in, who you could tell had outdoor experience, and they pointed out the guy was real lucky because that was a very dangerous bear.

The point being, there'd been no threat, with the bear growling or rising up or varying his pace, and that was much much concerning, meaning he was all business.

The guy was 20 yards away now and Chris gulped and tried it again, "Hey bro. I didn't mean to give you a hard time back there. *Capiche?*"

But nothing from the guy, just the continued dull vacant stare, and the sound of the dirt and pebbles under his feet.

Nothing in his hands at the moment, but that could change . . . or maybe he didn't need anything else.

Chris was still standing there behind the open trunk, and the guy had reached the driver's side of the Avalon and slowed down just a tad as he took his final steps toward the back of the vehicle and Chris.

What could you *do* at this point?

The guy got as far as the left rear fender and Chris swung the bowling ball and hit him in head.

The guy stayed on his feet but reacted with some shock . . . and Chris thinking, Jeez, *finally*, the expression changes.

But you didn't stand there and admire your work--Chris had enough go-rounds to learn *that*--and he smashed him again, and then again . . . and

the guy did drop to a knee, and he was hardier than you'd expect, three fairly solid blows and he's not all the way down.

But that would change pretty quick, the head in a favorable position at this point, and the back of it exposed . . . and Chris wound up a little like a softball pitcher--not *exactly* that, but either way working a backswing into it that was going to carry plenty of momentum, and there was a distinctive crack, like a branch snapping off a big pine tree following a couple years of drought . . . and this guy was toast.

Or that was your best guess . . . you weren't going to waste time looking for a pulse, that's for *dang* sure. The thing now was move him, and yeah you had the god dang DNA on the brain, but so what, you're not leaving him in the middle of County Road 36-B unless *you're* insane, and Chris put the bowling ball down and dragged the guy over to the Camaro and got him into the rear seat--a royal pain in the ass with the 2-door situation, but he made it--and he wedged him down and out of view back there . . .

And unfortunately a shoe had come off during the drag process, and Chris hustled over and got it and threw it in the Camaro too, listening carefully now for other cars.

That was about it. Chris slammed the trunk closed and scrambled into the Avalon and sped on out of there, and the first car he did run into, coming toward him, was a good 6, 8 minutes back toward the interstate . . . and he supposed he was fortunate this was still technically winter down here, plus it was late on a Friday afternoon, that otherwise the National Monument and the dude ranches too, would be more alive and there'd be more traffic.

The guy going the other way may or may not be suspicious of anything when he gets to the cut-off for the fire road and sees the Camaro sitting there. Probably not. Even less likely for someone passing it the other

way, as Chris pictured it, since the Camaro's not visible from that angle unless you happen to swing your head around.

Of course one thing most people don't realize--which would be lucky, if whoever passes the Camaro the next few hours is *most people*--but the truth is, if you see a vehicle sitting in a situation like that, it's usually not a good sign.

There was another YouTuber he liked, the guy was named Christian actually--and that's what *Chris* used to go by too, and still did once in a while--but this guy drummed it into you a few times. He'd be driving out there in the desert, a couple hours north of the Vegas Strip, toward Area 51, and he'd point stuff out.

You had to give the guy credit, he put on a good show, he found you these obscure back gates to Area 51 that he'd have to deal with tough terrain to get to--and of course those were the top-secret gates where a simple sign told you if you crossed the line you'd get shot.

Anyhow Christian would show you a lone car sitting out in the desert someplace, off a main road, and he explained that when you *see* that, it's normally not good.

But logically, the Camaro shouldn't attract undue attention until it was there for a while, which hopefully meant overnight, and some state trooper or forest service person who worked the area passed it a few times and saw that it hadn't moved.

So let that go for now . . . today had turned *seriously* sideways, Jeeminy Christmas . . . but there was still a bit of urgency, unfortunately, and that was the getting rid of the bowling ball part.

Back there in Pat's trunk, the idiot working his way up the switchbacks, bearing down on you--and you hoped for the best outcome, to work it out like a couple of men--but you knew that wasn't likely, and Holy Smokes, the best you were going to come up with was a piece of *record*

album, which Chris noticed was The Seekers Greatest Hits, and what was *that* all about.

Finally under all the clothes and a couple blankets and whatnot, there's this hard case . . . and Chris wasn't positive *what* it was, but it looked one of the bowling ball deals you saw at Goodwill sometimes, and that had potential.

Right about then the guy parks and gets out, and son of a bitch, the zipper doesn't work, and Chris is thinking the best you can do is try to use the *whole thing* somehow, case and all, but then a lucky change of angle or a bit more elbow grease and it *does* come open, and you feel around in there.

Chris thought initially you'd use the surprise element and *throw* the thing at him, maybe enough to stun him, and jump back in the car and hope for the best--but then, last second, the guy having marched up to the front of the Avalon and proceeding toward you . . . the finger hole concept came into play.

Those holes were dang tight, and especially fitting yourself in there past those first knuckles was going to be questionable. But then it worked out to a highly uncomfortable three-finger grip . . . the only good part being, the ball was stuck on you so tight that you could probably utilize it however you needed, and it wouldn't fly off.

Luckily it was Pat's ball, or someone else with small hands . . . and heck, maybe it wasn't anyone's ball, she might just be a hoarder, or someone who sells junk at a flea market somewhere on Sunday mornings to make a few extra bucks.

All that aside, you needed to *a*, get rid of it, and *b*, replace it.

Chris mentally reprimanded himself at this point. That was the risk you took in these matters, borrowing someone else's car, wasn't it--now you had *them* involved.

Meaning you couldn't just casually deposit something in Lake Merced, how you did it once upon a time, and went home and took a nap.

Now you had to *reconstruct* shit as well . . . and where were you going to find a bowling ball at this hour?

The additional issue was--when Chris had used it on the guy, then he put it back in the trunk, and without thinking too hard, that meant back inside the case.

That was just instinct, and now you'd have blood, and you didn't like thinking about what *else*, but likely some bone and brain matter as well on the ball . . . which meant on at least the inside of the *case* as well.

So do you get rid of the whole shebang?

That wouldn't be impossible, but the tough thing might be finding a matching case, so Pat doesn't freak out and wonder what the heck's going on here.

The reason being, it's an old one, not something you saw every day, so where would you even start?

It took forever to get back to Interstate 17, it seemed, and Chris was tapping pretty steadily on the wheel and bobbing his head too when he finally did get there, not like he was enjoying himself listening to a song with an incessant beat, but more like *we need to get off this county road before someone has a conniption fit*.

Finally he was on the thing and heading south again, no clear-cut reason to be going *that* way, except that the bowling ball replacement issue wasn't going to simply dissolve, and something told him you'd have a better shot at procuring one of *those* in Phoenix than in a planned community such as Eclipse.

And sometimes, why complicate things. So, much as he hated to deal again with the congestion of the stoplight, and the traffic and the stupidity of whoever designed the access, Chris got off at the same ill-fated exit as

before, where the shoplifter smacked him with the door, and parked once more in the lot and went back into Carl's Junior.

The first reason was very simple, he was starved out of his mind. So he ordered about 5 things, and wolfed it all down and then gave it a couple minutes.

The *second* reason why this made sense, though? He couldn't think of one now. There must have been something . . .

He went through it in his mind again, deciding to exit, making the right at the light, getting over the two lanes, turning into this monstrosity of a mall.

Nope. Nothing ringing a bell.

It might have been a notion as silly as they have plenty of garbage containers here.

Chris was thinking, how when guys get together and rib each other, locker room talk, one guy might kid another that they're thinking with their groin. So Chris chalked it up to appetite trumping all other rationale.

But he had another idea now, a bit of a reversal, the bowling alleys business, and he went back to the car, got the ball out of the trunk, back into Carl's Junior, ordered another side of fries . . . and while he was waiting for them he went in the men's room and washed the ball under the sink, and then he filled the case about a quarter full as well, and threw a little soap in there and it took about twenty paper towels but he got the ball and the case reasonably dry, and more importantly, visually clean of matter.

You weren't particularly worried about sitting there eating your fries with a bowling ball case next to you, it wasn't like you brought in a gun, or even an unlikely piece of rebar, or let's say a hammer, like you'd had to use on Jerry Smith--and it wasn't as though the police had put out an All Points Bulletin to be on the lookout for a *guy with a bowling ball*.

So that took a little pressure off . . . and Chris even felt okay asking the kid at the counter, hey where can you go bowling around here, and the kid rattled off one place he knew in Phoenix but Chris said what about the other way, and the kid politely pulled out his phone and told him Purple Rock Lanes in Anthem.

Chris thanked him and got back on the freeway once more, this time driving north with conviction, though it was still a little tense when he passed the exit for County Road 36-B, but a few minutes later that went away . . . and pretty soon you were coming up on Anthem, and it was getting familiar now, the bowling alley, he'd seen the sign before, though he never paid attention.

And Jeez, the sport was popular down here. They had about 30 lanes, and there were only a couple open, and where did all *these* people come from?

Though Chris figured you got dialed in to indoor activities like this down here, on account of the air conditioning. Even though now you didn't require it, they had their routines.

The extremely unfortunate part now, you were actually going to have to *bowl* a game, weren't you.

Chris never cared for bowling, not to mention, after the conglomeration of bad luck today, if you had a list of 100 things you *didn't* want to be doing at the moment, this would be on top.

And Jeez, now the raw fingers back in the holes too, that was going to kill him as well.

But you had to, and he went through the motions and rented the shoes, and found his lane and got squared away and made the most of it, he even kept score . . . and when he bowled his 10 frames he casually did a little switcheroo, Pat's ball from the trunk went into the racks, and one that looked and felt a lot like it went into the bag.

As he was taking care of it, he did notice the replacement ball was more *navy*, and Pat's was pretty solid black, but at this point you had to settle for good enough--and you know what? She'd might get a little confused, but she'd live.

He got back in the Avalon and started toward Eclipse, and everything was pretty good, you'd be home in 20 minutes . . . and then whatever way you might need to mentally go back through your day, you could at least do it in comfort and privacy.

But the only thing, the original gash over his eye, from the mall incident, that was starting to bleed bad now.

Chris could feel it coming down his cheek, and when he caught a glimpse of it in the mirror it was kind of scary.

He'd been able to control it with the bunch of napkins out of Pat's glove compartment, in fact he'd gotten the bleeding to more or less stop by applying a lot of pressure, even continuing it for a while on the two-lane road with the guy behind him, and by the time they had their little confrontation it was a non-issue.

But here it was now, and you probably *did* need a few stitches, but still you could handle it at home, with ice and some gauze or something, which should be available in the fitness center . . . except Chris was thinking it wasn't the greatest idea in history to parade through Phase 1 of the Rancho Villas on the *way* to the condo, *or* the fitness center, a whole lot of people seeing you do *that*, and wondering what happened.

There was a Flyers gas station the exit before his, and Chris wanted to handle it the quickest way, just find some band aids for now, so you look half-way respectable, and when he went to pay the woman was concerned and pointed to his face.

Chris said thanks but don't worry about it, I'm good . . . but it was clear she was unconvinced, plus she apparently didn't speak much English.

She called something into the back room in Spanish, and a younger family member came out and took over the register, and the woman motioned for Chris to come back, and she sat him down and turned on a light and went and got some alcohol and cleaned him up, and dried everything off, and she went back in the main store and returned with butterfly closures instead of what he had . . . and she took her time, and she took care of him like a pro.

Chris couldn't help it, when he stood up he gave her a hug, and he felt tears coming on, and when he got to the door he looked back, and she gave him a little wave but he could tell she was still kind worried about him . . . and he went home as convinced as ever that you can't script stuff.

Chapter 11

There was a local place in Eclipse called AOKoffee, sort of an anti-Starbucks, wi-fi discouraged, but they had books and magazines and board games up the wazoo, and you had a friendly hands-on husband-and-wife owner, at least one of them normally behind the counter, and sometimes a customer would bring out a guitar and start playing and no one minded.

This was Saturday morning, and Chris had a tough night, struggling between *absorbing* what the hell had just happened Friday afternoon, and trying to *block it out*.

So at least get a change of scenery, and a couple extra shots of espresso in your coffee while you're at it, and Chris walked over to AOK. No small distance, probably a mile and a half, though not surprising by now that once you got outside your planned communities everything was spread out, and all bets on even finding a sidewalk were off.

Or course *within* the planned communities, people walked like mad on the organized, artificial trails, no problem . . . but you wouldn't see them walk to an outside convenience store for a quart of milk if their life depended on it.

Chris felt a little more alive after he ingested that first half-cup of coffee, and he hated to violate the unwritten *please stay off the damn internet* code of conduct, but he supposed he really better follow up on the ring business.

Three more responses had come in re his Craigs List lost and found posting since he'd checked last.

You had the original three so far--the guy claiming his wife lost weight on the Atkins Diet and it slipped off her finger--someone who says

hold onto it, their hubby lost it in the vicinity of the Rancho Villas--and someone who says they'll make you a deal, and supplies the name *Ronald Haymaker*.

The first *new* response read:

It's ours. Give it back immediately. Where do you get off holding others people's rings?

The second read:

Yes, please, what is the condition of the item?

If it as described I am extremely interested.

Please forward your bank information, along with final price including shipping charges, and I will wire transfer you the money ASAP

Thank you ever so much.

(My name is David Walker, ESQ.)

The third read:

Dear George,

My man and me are eloping to Vegas Thursday.

We don't got the money for a nice ring.

Could you please donate it to me?

Yours Sincerely,

Francine Mirankson

Chris figured in a perfect world this wouldn't be a tough choice. Even if Francine was scamming him slightly, and was intending to take it to a pawn shop . . . at least he/she was polite.

David Walker was polite too, of course, and that kind of individual was a candidate for his original list.

This guy was more old-school as well, asking directly for the bank account *number*, whereas nowadays it was more common for them not to bring up a bank account initially, but just tell you they'd be sending a cashier's check. So they'd be shafting you in more *disguised* fashion, since for starters the cashier's check would always turn out to be fake.

A few years back when Joyce was painting some (in Chris's opinion) pretty lame weekend art but trying to sell it, Chris helped her out by taking photos and listing some paintings on Ebay and Craigslist.

They'd receive responses on the CL listings, but 9 out of 10 were scammers.

Meanwhile Chris aggressively listed Joyce's paintings in multiple CL cities at once, and he'd get warnings from CL that he was in violation of their terms and if he continued his account would be suspended.

This was amusing, when he thought about it, that they're lecturing *you* but they have no problem with the bad guys responding to everyone's ads with a criminal scheme.

At any rate, he had the urge to track one particular scammer of Joyce's down, and luckily he'd convinced himself forget it . . . but here now, just trying to return a piece of jewelry to the rightful owner, *this* guy's in your face?

Chris took a deep breath and some common sense kicked in--*you need another project like a hole in the head*--and he deleted the scumbag's email.

So that left the five, and Chris wasn't in the mood to beat around the bush today so he emailed them all back the same way:

Hey There

I'm not convinced I should return (or give) the ring to you.

Sincerely
George

That might at least separate the men from the boys. One expression Chris hated when it was used on *him* was ‘Hey There’.

And since he was in a chippy mood, he figured might as well lead off with that.

It was after 2 when he got back to the Rancho Villas and then he remembered, *Oh No*, that’d he’d neglected to give the *keys* back to Pat last night, and he hustled over to her office but she wasn’t there, but the part-time assistant was, Kit, the new guy she hired after she had to fire Anderson following the Christmas party, and he said she was on lunch and probably doing a workout, and *how’s everything with you?*

Chris said fine thanks, and thought about leaving the keys with the guy, but decided you better show a little more respect, so he looked for her on the machines, and peeked into the yoga room they had, and checked the lounge, but zip, and he finally found her in the pool.

“Hey stranger,” she said.

“Really sorry about this,” Chris said, “I screwed up on it. My fault 100 percent.”

“On *what?*”

“Oh . . . you’re not missing your car keys yet?” Chris pulled them out.

“That’s fine,” she said, “I’ll lose track of them out here. Catch me later, no biggie, that’s an extra set anyway.”

“Ah.” Chris could relax again, since he hadn’t created an incident after all--the keys part, but also the taking quite a bit longer yesterday than the simple *hour* that he told her he needed.

Of course part of him was thinking that he subconsciously hadn’t *wanted* to give them back *period*, because that meant giving the *Avalon*

back, which included the replacement bowling ball that an astute eye would notice didn't quite match the original.

Plus the general disruption of the trunk contents.

Plus the possibility--probability--that a forensic search would turn up traces of blood and other human matter in the trunk and main vehicle compartment.

That was the thing though--and wasn't it always the case?--you hoped, and in fact for the first few days *prayed*, that you hadn't unwittingly exposed yourself to anything--or anyone--that was going to *lead to a forensic search*.

Meaning some guy coming around the corner who you didn't hear, who happened to notice you bowling-ball the guy. Which seemed unlikely.

"How'd it go for you yesterday?" Pat said.

"Fine, you?"

"That's it? Didn't you have errands to run?"

"Errands are over-rated," Chris said. "I started to run them and figured why bother, enjoy the scenery. So I did a little driving around, came home thinking straighter. Thanks again for letting me borrow it."

"I hear you," Pat said. "The backroads sometimes, you clear the cobwebs . . . What happened to your eye?"

"That? Well I tried to stop a robbery. I'm not physical enough. I get reminded, I'm not the specimen I once was."

Pat took a little time. If Chris had to guess, she didn't *completely* disbelieve him, only about 90 percent of it.

"Well we need to accept our limitations," she said finally.

"You still . . . have sex, and stuff?" Chris said. "Obviously I'm just winging it, feeling kind of punch-drunk if you want to know the truth, sorry to get personal."

Pat didn't say anything, she continued hanging on the wall of the deep end for a minute, and then she pushed off and swam the length of the pool back to the shallow end and came up the steps.

Chris thinking, well I blew that one big-time, couldn't have *come up* with a better way to be stupid there.

Pat had her towel and was walking toward him now . . . and yeah, she was late 30's, early 40's and she was wearing a modest one-piece suit . . .

But she looked pretty dang good actually, and you'd have to say the overall presentation had a sultry element to it.

Except Chris was wondering: If I get slapped lower down on the face, could the impact still re-open the gash over the eye?

But when Pat got close she put her hand on his shoulder and said quietly that that would be fine.

Which wasn't what Chris was expecting, that's for sure . . . her taking him literally *period*, much less being *okay* with it.

"Jeez," he said. "Not much internal debate then, on your part."

"Is that a problem?" she said.

"I don't think so. Why, are you anticipating one?"

Trying to maintain the upper hand, why not . . . but Pat leaned in more, her lips close to his ear. She said, "I need it so bad."

"Holy smokes," Chris said.

"There is a problem then."

"No, not at all . . . it's just . . . are there like, any *requirements*, that type of thing?"

"*What?*"

He was being an idiot, admittedly . . . but the fact was he hadn't gotten over what he'd witnessed taking place down the Strand that particular day, on the top floor of the house--and the honest answer would be, yeah there *was* a problem . . . *it* being that he was still pretty dang intimidated.

But that was life. You dangle a possibility out there, you can't just back down now.

Chris said, "Well how's your schedule?"

"I'm good," she said.

"Oh. Were you considering *my* unit then? Currently?"

Pat giggled for a second but said she definitely was.

It was a Freudian slip, and Chris felt it coming out that way and could have adjusted it but didn't, and frankly he *was* kind of asking both questions.

So they went back . . .

And she wasn't overstating it, out there by the pool. She *was* very hungry, and he felt a little like he was auditioning for something, but he kept his focus and did his best.

Laying back, he said, "Nothing you need to understand, but you kind of restored my manhood there."

"Well, you *are* a real man."

"Oh."

"By that I mean, you're not afraid to be in touch with your emotions."

That was okay too, Chris supposed, the *second* interpretation, though it was always good to be considered a real man the *first* way, without any qualifiers attached.

Since Joyce had been on the radar earlier, the paintings business, Chris thought for a moment of *their* experience that one time at the old iconic motel in the Sausalito boat basin, and how he thanked her for making him feel relevant, or otherwise boosting his confidence.

That was a different dynamic though, since he'd received his supposed death sentence in Billy's office a few days before, so at least for the moment back then, he hadn't deteriorated *yet*.

Now, ironically, getting pretty dang close to the one-year mark of being okay, Chris was frustratingly off his game in other ways . . . not being

able to stand up properly during the surfboard lesson being one example, then of course yesterday in the mall parking lot being another.

“You ever have a year where you feel okay,” he said, “except you get older?”

“That’s a silly question,” Pat said. He enjoyed her tone right now, interpreting it as kind of a contented purr.

“Yeah forget it,” he said, “I’m not phrasing it right . . . Off-topic, but this is a big complex, all these sections to it, and all your connections-- you don’t have boyfriends here?”

“Sometimes.”

“Good then.”

“That I *do*?”

“The sometimes part, I mean.”

“Now why is *that* . . . George Worthy? That’s not your real name, *is* it.”

“You and that guy Arty *both* now, you’re challenging me on that.”

“Why the *sometimes* though?”

“Because boyfriends get in the way. You need to limit it.”

“Well thank for the unsolicited advice.”

“But you know I’m right. Logical.”

“You’re also an asshole,” she said, but still with the fairly contented purr to the delivery, Chris felt.

“I appreciate it,” he said, and she lifted her head and looked at him funny for a second, and then laid it back on his chest . . . not in a big hurry to be anywhere apparently, and that was fine, neither was he.

At 5 he started his shift in the Rancho Villas restaurant, mixing a few drinks though not that many, since the clientele leaned toward beer and wine with their meals, though you did get a few heavier drinkers that didn’t bother with eating and sat at the bar shooting the breeze with Chris.

This was Chris's replacement shift which he switched with one of the other bartenders, Rollie, since he had those couple of things he wanted to do in Phoenix on Thursday, his normal evening.

The gig gave him maybe 1 percent of the experience that Shep or Booker enjoyed up in San Francisco, the Marina district watering holes. There was no pressure, you just stood there most of the time, there were no incidents with customers arguing where you thought something might escalate, there were no provocatively dressed women, no pick-up game-playing going on.

And if someone ordered the occasional cocktail that stumped you, you had plenty of time to isolate the problem and look up how to put it together.

Tonight though a guy kept trying to talk to him about sports, it didn't matter which one, the guy just wanted a little give-and-take. Chris wasn't a big fan anymore of most professional sports, but he tried to humor the guy and fake some enthusiasm, and the guy started to zero in on baseball, and the upcoming season, and who should be in the playoffs when it all shook out in October.

Chris didn't even know the divisions, or who was in them. He could have talked more studiously about baseball 30 years ago, when they had the leagues aligned differently and it made more sense. But not now.

Luckily another guy came along and took a stool who knew a lot more than Chris and was highly opinionated, and the two of them stayed busy arguing the most ridiculous points, which was fine by Chris because he was no longer required.

You did have to listen to it though, and they gravitated to the Giants, and the outlook, and the pitching and the outfield depth.

So eventually Chris couldn't resist throwing in, "How's that Blaise guy this year? All healthy, ready to contribute?"

The first guy didn't miss a beat and started breaking it down . . . well if he can hit x number of home runs and x RBI's off the bench, and then

start a game or two a week, platooning with so-and-so, that could be the infusion they need at the corner-outfielder position.

“He’s a prick,” the second guy said.

“Huh?” the first guy said.

“Yep. A *complete* one. Shouldn’t be in the league.”

Chris said, “Gee. It sounds like you may have had some dealings with him then.”

“Not personally, *technically* . . . but I’ve witnessed his act. It ain’t pretty. If he weren’t a stud pro athlete, and all insulated the way they are, the picture would be different, you can *bet* on that.”

Chris unfortunately had a decent idea what the guy might be talking about, since it wasn’t rocket science, the guy’s attitude toward women--not to mention toward *himself*, his own off-the-charts *ego*--all of that pretty apparent during the TV interview the other day with the poor, pretty gal helplessly holding the microphone.

You didn’t have to stretch it real far to figure what probably happened when the cameras shut off, the idiot putting his hands all over her, playful, joking, but making the moves nonetheless, and her having to fend him off . . . or in the end maybe *going* with it, because it was easier that way . . .

Even then . . . you might look at that a *little* differently, not speculate as *much* . . .

If--you weren’t also aware of the two incidents where the women pressed charges.

Again, Chris was thinking, 2 of them go to the trouble and endure the embarrassment of dealing with the police . . . which probably leaves you 10, 20 . . . 50, 100? . . . who *didn’t bother*. At least those’d be your reasonable odds.

And now this guy sipping his scotch, *witnessing* something . . . that too, you might chalk up to *boys will be boys* if you were inclined to look the

other way, which most people were . . . except you add the history on the back end of it . . . and *Nope, I'm afraid we can't have that.*

Just as there are some things--say a really bad book or movie--that shouldn't be released on the public? Same with people . . .

Some *people*, no matter how you spin it . . . simply should not be *inflicted on the world.*

Part of Chris didn't want to know, but you had to ask the guy. "What did you witness?" he said.

"Ah, the usual garbage you'd expect. Bar scene over in Scottsdale. Anything under 40, that moved and had tits and an ass . . . this fucker had his hands on it . . . Or *in it.*"

"What were *you* doing there?" the other guy said.

"I *shouldn't* have been. Buddy of mine's in Omaha, they came down for spring training, he and the wife. So I took 'em around."

"This year, you mean?" the other guy said.

"No, *last year.* What do you mean, it hasn't *started yet this year.*"

"Your friend," Chris said, "he agreed with your evaluation?"

"Oh yeah. Not at first. He didn't want to, you could tell. And they were enamored of the place, stars all over. We're talking Bumgarner, Hunter Pence, Belt . . . a bunch of 'em. But they all behaved themselves, polite, nothing out of the ordinary."

"But Jonas Blaise didn't," Chris said.

"No. My buddy's wife's a big fan, she has those harmless crushes on a lot of these guys too. She's an attractive lady. We're there like 20 minutes, it's crowded, Blaise brushes against her chest, says oops sorry, big ol' ugly-ass grin on his face."

Chris said, "Do you think though . . . as I'm hearing *that* part now . . . maybe your opinion of this guy was skewed?"

The guy didn't like this, and said, "Pal, you're insulting my intelligence all of a sudden, to be perfectly frank."

Chris figured he better leave it alone here. The other guy said, “Which bar?”

“You know the couple blocks I’m talking about, there’s 3 or 4 they rotate around. That night, we were in the Welsh Chatterbox, but believe me, the venue didn’t matter.”

“Interesting,” Chris said. “Either of you fellas like a refill? It’s good to have a little lively conversation around here. It’s on the house.”

They both accepted and Chris took care of them and the second guy said, “I didn’t mean to get *on* you there. This guy hit a nerve is all.”

“That’s fine,” Chris said. “Not in sports, not really my deal . . . but I can understand how someone can push the wrong button, and you carry it around.”

“Big-time,” the first guy said. “The other day there’s a stall and traffic is stopped, and some clown on a Harley comes right up between lanes, had to be 50 miles an hour, felt like my eardrum was going to explode.”

“Now road rage, that’s a little different,” the second guy said. “You can do something *about* it . . . I mean we *don’t*, but at least in your head, there’s the *option* . . . *This sick fuck, I’m* talking about, he’s getting a free pass.”

“Okay whatever,” the first guy said, “let’s move on. What about the Dodgers?”

And they picked it right up, whether they’d improved themselves or not during the off-season, breaking everything down, same as they did the Giants, and Jeez, they were getting into it, and one of them pulled out his phone and started looking stuff up . . . and Chris was pretty sure *he* was going to head down to Scottsdale tonight when his Rancho Villas restaurant shift ended.

Chapter 12

Chris got off at 10, meaning they stopped serving drinks at 9:45 and it didn't take him long to wash and dry a couple of blenders and neaten everything up.

10 o'clock on a Saturday night - that would be child's play for a tough guy like Jonas Blaise, clearly just getting *started* with his activities about now, maybe not *even*.

Chris figured, if nothing else, at least take a look. He had his own suspicions, that despite humans turning over new leaves, it rarely works that way.

What the guy on the bar stool told him, his *own* experience, that was not surprising, but you still wanted to reinforce it.

Chris figured maybe it was morbid curiosity on his part, nothing more . . . plus he could mingle with the early-arrival major league stars . . . He didn't honestly *think* that was his motivation, but hey, it could have been.

The thing now was how to get down there. Old Town Scottsdale.

Hmm . . .

Chris still had that spare set of keys to Pat's car. Even when they'd enjoyed each other's company back in the apartment this afternoon and Chris reminded her to take them, which she hadn't wanted to when she was in the pool, she still forgot.

Doubtful that Pat was going anywhere tonight if she hadn't yet. She'd mentioned her college-age daughter, that she had to drive her around sometimes, Chris couldn't remember why but he thought it might be punishment for getting a couple of tickets.

Now he remembered something else . . . that the daughter was in Tucson for the weekend, Pat said, which is why Pat's apartment (or *unit*, as they were calling them) was an option when they left the pool together.

So you had to make a judgment call, and the clock was starting to tick, and Chris decided if the car was in the parking place he'd take it . . . and it was, and there you went.

Traffic was light, and he shot down there no problem in 40 minutes. It was admittedly a little strange being back on I-17 so soon after yesterday, though everything looked quite different at night, with long stretches where you only saw pitch black off to the sides.

The parking was a little tricky when you got close to downtown, meaning roughly North Goldwater Boulevard and East Main, and rather than circle around which Chris hated in *any* situation, he found a spot about 6 blocks away, and it was a nice evening to be walking . . . shirtsleeve weather at 11:30 at night on January 20th . . . and it gave him a chance to think.

One thing, when the bar guy was telling the story, running into the scumbag in the Welsh Chatterbox right here in Old Town, Chris forgot momentarily about the incident he read about, also from last year's spring training . . . which was the unfortunate business over in Tempe, near ASU, meaning likely a college club type scene, and what would Blaise need to be in the middle of *that* for . . . but either way, he and two other players got tossed out of there for allegedly groping the coeds.

And since they left peacefully . . . and of course played in the majors . . . it was apparently a *no-harm, no foul* ending.

And yeah, you had three of them--except you'd bet your rear end on Blaise being the point man.

Another random thought was, some subject he'd been tossing around with Pat today got him thinking again about his own timetable . . . and he never completed the thought . . . but *had* he actually passed the one-year

mark? And then it got lost in the shuffle with everything being turned upside down of late?

Chris went through it again, that 49ers-Seahawks game as the barometer, and telling Billy the doctor fuck you (which he apologized later for, but still) came a month after that, when he received the fateful diagnosis . . . so . . . Monday February 6th, and no you're not quite there yet and you didn't miss it by accident.

And Chris was thinking God dang it, why did he keep going *through* this, so much trouble committing it to memory . . . and he scratched his head, that maybe it was some weird defense mechanism.

At any rate this put you pretty darn close--just a little over two weeks away--so *Wow*.

There was the three-block stretch where the Welsh Chatterbox was located and where it looked like you had half a dozen similar bars.

Noisy bursts of laughter from inside of them, mixing with the street noise, patrons spilling out into these little tables on the sidewalk. Music thumping away. Most of it edgy-type hip-hop, one place though sounding like they were featuring George Strait.

Essentially you could flip a coin. There were plenty of ASU kids here too, a lot of them wearing school paraphernalia, which Chris supposed made sense, the campus no more than 15 minutes away, and the student population gigantic from what he understood, at least 50,000 of them . . . and clearly a certain percentage of those whipping out the fake ID's tonight and heading over to Old Town to see what's up.

Of course you had no guarantee that Jonas Blaise would be within 100 miles of here right now, much less be boozing it up in one of these 6 or 7 joints--but you might as well at least pop in to the Welsh Chatterbox and find out.

Once you got deep inside, past the throng, it wasn't a bad place. Not quite in the cozy category of a Weatherby's, but Chris could see how if you

lived here year round this could become your place . . . *your* particular seat at the bar, *your* server, and so forth. A smiling face with the name tag *Jeri* brought his drink, and she was about 22 and cute and had probably already seen a lot in here . . . and if Chris had to guess, if the Blaise idiot had touched her inappropriately once or twice--which was highly probable--she'd likely not make a big deal about it.

It was hard to tell if any baseball players were in here, and Jeez, why would you think they'd stand out anyway, they weren't exactly going to be wearing their uniforms . . . but Chris knew that even so, a pro athlete looked a little different, stood a certain way, conducted themselves a little different too.

Right now no sign of any of that, and when Jeri came around again he asked her about it.

She told him, her understanding currently--throwing in with a spunky laugh that it changes week to week--but that right now before the rush they're mostly at the Village Bugle and RC Campagna's.

Chris asked if that included the Giants, and Jeri said it can, but they have a connection this year with Freako Carty, so there might be some carryover there.

Chris thanked her and gave her the tip now, since he wasn't going to be interested in seconds, and worked his way back outside which wasn't that easy, and headed up the block to the last place she mentioned.

That was something he hadn't been keeping in mind, there were 14 *other* major league clubs that conducted spring training down here, though they were spread out around the valley. The Giants, Rockies and Diamondbacks were the only three that played in Scottsdale, but the Giants had the deepest roots here by far.

And of course by 'before the rush' Jeri meant January, when only a handful of guys total were around off *any* the teams, since it was technically still the off-season.

But okay, *try* the Freako Carty place first . . . but that place had an odd vibe, and it honestly felt a bit like a gay bar, or at least a more artsy establishment than you'd expect . . . no rhyme or reason though why the ballplayers may or may not frequent a place like this . . . and yeah, there the guy was, in the flesh.

So it hadn't taken long, and these guys were awful predictable weren't they--but really, what else were they going to be doing tonight, if you had to lay odds--and Jeri was on target, this apparently was the new Giants place.

Whatever that meant. Maybe it was as simple as the Giants' players got comped in here, free booze and food . . . and even though they were all millionaires, they *loved* that shit.

Chris remembered once years ago when he was covering a Warriors public relations event for the Chronicle, and most of the Warriors players were there, and they typically owned multiple homes, all mansions, and drove exotic cars and blew money in ways you wouldn't believe--but they were all excited at this PR event because if you picked one of the winning fortune cookies you won a 9-hole golf pass to the Olympic Club.

So the players were gobbling up the fortune cookies just as eagerly as the dumb fans at the event, trying like heck to win that \$100 round of golf.

Blaise was standing against the bar, a big forearm laying on it, turned sideways toward the action, which included some dancing but mostly a lot of people staggering around with big grins on their faces . . . including several provocatively dressed women.

It didn't take long to figure it out, that some of them were groupies and they were here because the players were, which at the moment was four or five of them at the bar, if Chris had it pegged right, plus another couple of them playing pool, the way they were being catered to, different than anyone else in the joint.

About every ever five minutes a few of the groupie women would make a giggling, swooping pass by the bar, and the players would make a

comment or two, and of course Blaise would stick out a hand and grab something.

Chris saw it the first time, but with the lighting and chaos he wasn't sure . . . so when it happened the second time, five minutes later . . . one of the women parading by and Blaise's right hand encompassing her left breast . . . and, his left hand meanwhile turning palms up and working itself firmly in between her legs . . . what could you say, really?

Both times--different females--the woman would squirm away and say the equivalent of *hey come on*, and she'd still be smiling but looking a little confused, and the second time one of Blaise's teammates said something to him which Chris couldn't hear and Blaise let go.

Chris got a bottle of beer and observed the action for a while.

These were women who were here to flirt with the players, and possibly go home with them . . . so that being established, the rest of the patrons in this place were obviously cutting Blaise the slack of a good old fraternity boy asshole . . . who yes, is a bit out of control, but when you get to know him he has a good heart.

And this was the line this motherfucker walked--successfully except for a few glitches--his whole career, wasn't it?

Like a cartoon character traipsing through a thunderstorm holding a metal pole up in the air, and it was all la-di-da, nothing ever went wrong.

Blaise had to get up and go to the men's room, which was back past the pool tables, and it looked for a moment like he was pulling some shenanigans back there too, and he came back to the bar and Chris waited a couple minutes and went back there where he'd been, passing Blaise pretty close as he did, and Blaise looked up for a second and there was not one iota of recognition.

And Chris didn't expect any, so he wasn't particularly worried about the guy spotting him in here, since the Blaises of the world had *one* radar screen and it was *their* face alone smack dab in the middle of it.

The Giants players who were playing pool were gone now, and there were four young couples at the two tables who looked college-age and Chris asked one of the guys waiting his turn if there'd been some trouble back here a few minutes ago.

The guy said, "*You're* not kidding. This baseball player guy, he's all joking around and stuff, but he comes on to my girlfriend, just walking *by* us."

"What do you mean, *comes on*?" Chris said.

"It's okay, it didn't go anywhere," the guy said.

"Jeez," Chris said. "That's good then, because it looked from out there like he was touching her." Chris couldn't see well enough to determine that, but let's see what the guy says.

"Piece of *shit*," the guy said, though being careful not to say it too loud.

"I can handle it," his girlfriend chimed in after finishing a shot. If you had to guess, she was the alpha one in the relationship, and the guy wasn't the type to challenge anyone in a bar, much less a pro athlete.

Also if you had to guess . . . Blaise had his hands on her.

"Well these ballplayers," Chris said, "boys will be boys? Or is it, crossing the line?"

The girlfriend answered. "The second thing. I'm not going to scream a civil rights violation or anything though."

"We're here to have fun," the boyfriend said, though there wasn't total conviction behind it.

Chris excused himself and told them to stay safe, figuring they could interpret it however they wanted.

This was the reality though, wasn't it.

Meaning . . . Say Blaise helped himself on his way to the men's room to a feel of her backside or one of her breasts.

Then what?

They report it to the nearest waitress . . . a few minutes later the manager shows up and asks them what happened . . . and then what, the police come?

Hard to see that necessarily happening . . . but let's say they do . . . then for the next hour the poor gal and the boyfriend are sitting outside in a squad car telling their story, and then maybe waiting another hour while the cops go back in and ask questions.

Then they're told if they want to make a report they need to come down to the station . . . and so on and so forth . . . and they've just blown off their Saturday night . . . and for what?

For something that will probably never come to anything, when it all shakes out . . . criminally or otherwise.

Chris admitted he may not know what he was talking about, except he was pretty sure he was right about the *initial* thing . . . people figure okay, yeah, that *shouldn't* have *happened*, but do I want to blow off my whole evening now . . . or *shake* it off and move on.

A bunch of the ASU college kids who Chris had seen earlier in the other place, the Welsh Chatterbox, came through the door all at once into Freako Carty's, and there was an energy and a presence to them that Chris couldn't help envying, and he noticed Jonas Blaise perk up as well . . . and he'd be no doubt doing his thing.

Chapter 13

Sunday morning there was a tapping on the door real early, and Chris stumbled out of bed and opened it, and it was Pat, telling him in no uncertain terms what she would like, which was a quickie before she had to go to work.

Chris was rubbing his eyes trying to get his bearings. He told her to please come in and make herself comfortable, that he couldn't promise anything--but that there was coffee all set in the machine if she wanted to hit the button.

"Well . . . you at least *look* interested," Pat said, staring directly at his crotch.

"Oh," Chris said, but the unfortunate fact was, what she was pointing out was on account of him needing to empty the old bladder first thing in the morning, nothing more.

Chris came back, and she *had* put that coffee on, and they sat on the couch for a while, and she said, "It smells like alcohol in here."

That would be another thing now--hopefully the *car* didn't smell like booze as well, and give it away that he used it again.

But . . . the truth was, he wouldn't mind one more crack at it, the vehicle, today, though it was probably unlikely. He said, "So . . . you have an outing planned, or you go to Costco on Sundays, or church, or what?"

"Normally that's exactly what I do," she said. "Not church, but get organized for the week. Today they need extra personnel in Phase 3. There's a group of investors coming up from Dallas, if we're lucky we can turn over some units."

“Pull some serious commissions, is what you’re saying. Well that’s good. But let me ask you a dumb question, why don’t you muscle your way in there *anyway*, as your *regular* gig--Phase 3, if you keep saying that’s where all the action is?”

“It’s complicated. There’s politics involved, for one.”

Chris was thinking this is where a guy like Ken would come in handy. Chris couldn’t pinpoint the approach, but if he were around . . . *somehow*, Pat would have a job in Phase 3.

But forget that, this meant that she was tied up today, didn’t it.

He said, “You go out at all, you think . . . I mean if you get a break, during work?”

“Oh Gosh no. It can be a zoo. Even on a normal Sunday, *without* the investors.”

“Ah. So . . . what time do you think you’ll get off. Typically.”

“How *sweet* of you,” Pat said.

“What?”

“To be thinking about dinner. Unless you weren’t.”

“Oh yeah . . . I *was* . . . that sounds good, for sure . . . What *time* though, roughly?”

“I work ‘til 5. Then I’m out of there, on the spot, no matter what.”

“Now that I admire. You mean even if someone’s getting ready to maybe sign a contract though?”

“Yes, even then. You have to draw the line.”

“Probably the best way to operate period,” Chris said. “You put it out there that you don’t *care* about making a sale, you’ll probably sell *more*.”

“Come here,” she said . . . and Chris tried his best to get in the mode, but he was having trouble fully waking up, plus he never *was* great with time pressure of this nature.

“Sorry about that,” he said finally.

“That’s all right,” Pat said, but the way her voice went high and low on the syllables, you knew it wasn’t.

“Not to downplay it,” Chris said, “but maybe it’s for the best.”

“Now how is *that*?” she said. Chris was thinking if she was standing up, she’d have her hands on her hips, and be glaring at him.

“All I meant, you won’t lose your edge. You’ll drive a hard bargain out there, because you’re a little ticked off.”

“*Fuck* yes,” she said, and no smiles or hugs, she was off the couch and out the door.

Chris put his head back and tried to get another 20 minutes of shut-eye, but it didn’t happen so he dragged himself up and threw on his swim trunks and did a few laps in the pool--except nothing like most of the others in the water were doing at this hour, Holy Toledo, you had bunch of Michael Phelps and Natalie Coughlins in there . . . and Chris realized there was a whole other dimension to this place, wasn’t there, when he normally was snoring away pretty lamely in bed.

Anyhow, the gravitation to the hot tub was very nice, you really couldn’t beat the thing at *any* hour, and fine, he *had* been a cynical idiot in the beginning, questioning why would you need one of these in Arizona.

They put out fresh donuts in the lounge on the weekends, and they were sitting there in the old-fashioned pink boxes and Chris had resisted up to this point, but today, screw it, he ate 5 by his count, including an apple fritter which was about as heavy as a battleship.

Chris could feel the lard and grease latching onto his arteries, but he kept going anyway, though when he finally put his paper plate in the recycling he thought he better take a little walk, *something*, don’t just go back and sit.

It was close to nine, and he had his loose agenda for the day, but he decided to walk over to the Super 8 on the other side and take a chance that the kid might be working this morning. If not, well, you got some exercise,

maybe even burned off 1 of the 5 donuts . . . and of all times to be having to be a pedestrian down here, with the non-existent sidewalk situation, you'd assume Sunday morning worked the best.

Chris coming up on the motel was thinking *Jeez, it's been a while now*. Which it was, with Chris stopping in here that first day in Eclipse, which would have been . . . well you beat it out of MB the middle of the night on the 2nd, then the 1 overnight in Phoenix, then the overnight here at the bad Rodeway Inn, and the next morning you inquire about a long term situation at Max's place . . . so that would have been January 4th . . . and where we now, man the *21st* . . . so yeah, 2 and a half weeks, you were somewhat of a *local* around here now.

Well not quite, but it was good to catch the guy at work, and Max was checking someone out but raised his hand like this'll just be a minute, and when he was done he came around the counter and told Chris how great it was to see him.

Chris said, "Let's not get carried away. Listen, you have a second?"

"Sure. All day," Max said.

Chris intended to ask him something else, pick his brain on part of the DNA thing, but standing there now . . . and considering the few issues he'd already been having . . . not on anyone's radar, you would pray, but still, no point piling on.

So he changed his mind, and didn't bring it up to the kid.

But an idea had been swirling around in Chris's head the last few days.

What he was going to ask was: if Law Enforcement picked up someone's DNA from a scene, and ran it through one of the awful databases that *finds* you . . . could someone pre-emptively hack into that system, so you'd at least be *notified* if it happened?

No specific reason why he singled out Max to ask--except he was sharp, and young, meaning in touch with this kind of shit . . . and Chris had a hunch he would know the answer.

The thought there, going a step further, was it would take some time for Law Enforcement to narrow down a match-back to your DNA.

Meaning . . . *you just might be able to live a normal life at that . . .*
. . . and then scramble the heck out of there and go back underground, *if* you got notified that someone submitted your sample.

Wow.

That would probably require getting your own DNA tested after all, and then your hacker enters your DNA code as a text file, along with however the heck else they are working the system . . . so there's some kind of *trigger*, if the *cops* ever plug in the same DNA code?

At any rate . . . why open the door and make the kid Max raise an eyebrow, even if he could give you an answer on why that might or might not work, since he wouldn't be doing the hacking for you anyway.

If you run it by anyone, run it by *that* guy . . . and that would be the tough part, *finding* one of those guys. Though when you thought about it, Chandler might be able to toss you a referral . . . as would likely Mancuso as well, if he were still in the picture.

Either way you had a glimmer of hope, your future prospects not quite as single-handedly bleak as they seemed a few days ago.

Chris closed the door on the subject for now, and said to Max, "How's the UFC training? Any good?"

"Ah man," Max said. "I'm learning so much you wouldn't believe it. I don't mean to brag or anything, but I feel like a different guy."

"Well that's nice," Chris said. "Take it slow though, get your feet under you. And have some fun."

"Oh I *love* it. I'm there 6 days a week. They have organized sessions with the main guy, he fought at Mandalay Bay once, Mr. Stockton."

“Wait . . . *Booth* Stockton? I think I heard of that guy. Back in the infancy of the sport, when they were just getting the rules straight.”

“He’s great. And when I can’t make the organized ones, they have drop in hours, where you spar.”

“Jesus,” Chris said, “you’re talking a mile a minute.”

“Sorry. I’m excited, you can tell. The best part, I’ll be taking care of my business soon.”

“Whoa, hold on now . . . You’re talking, that guy that’s been riding you all these years, sort of bullying you?”

“Not *sort* of,” Max said.

“Okay fine. But these things normally--especially when you gain the confidence like you seem to be--they can be worked out diplomatically.”

“Not in this case. There’s too much history. I know what you mean, a guy learns some techniques, presents a certain image, the issue may go away. This one needs to be addressed though.”

“Well Jeez, I mean are you going *official* on the guy then? A ring? A ref?”

“I wasn’t. I’m thinking more, find the guy, handle it that way. He’s around.”

“Ooh boy. And you sure, you’re like, ready?”

“Not quite. Almost though,” Max said.

Chris remembered an incident growing up, in Julius Kahn playground, where two guys had an ongoing beef, and one of them, this guy Matson, starts taking karate.

There’s a basketball game one day, and naturally the pushing and shoving starts, which it always did, even if you *didn’t* have a beef with a guy, and the two enemies Matson and Clark exchange words.

Next thing you know, Matson is in the deep karate stance, squared off sideways to the target, his hands in just the right position, pretty dang fearsome all around, like a guy off the cover of a martial arts magazine.

Clark takes two steps forward and without wasting any time throws a wild right hand, and it connects with Matson's chin, and he goes straight down and is completely unconscious for a good 2, 3 minutes.

That put a serious damper, at least for the playground guys, on the benefits of karate and kung fu and the Bruce Lee movies and all that.

But admittedly, what the kid was doing, Max, was rooted in jiu jitsu, and that was the one discipline where the moves were 100 percent legit.

If you put an arm bar on a guy, and you locked it in right, you were *going* to break his arm if he didn't cry for mercy, there was no grey area.

Chris said, "Well okay then. Glad to hear you're making some progress. Hopefully you can still keep it non-violent. Always the better long-term approach."

And Chris shook hands with Max and started to go, and Max told him how much he appreciated the *loan* . . . and Chris figured this was a good kid and he was going to take responsibility and *look* at it as a *loan*, rather than a gift . . . and Chris hoped he'd be the heck out of here before the kid tried to repay it.

Last night cinched it, that you needed to confront this guy, and as Chris barrelled down the interstate toward Phoenix once more, he was tossing around *how*.

He'd brought his fake reporter's notebook again, just in case, and he wore a shirt with a collar so you could play the part and you didn't look like a total bum--though he had a clear picture from his *real* reporter days of the sportswriters hanging out around the various pro teams, and a lot of them looked like homeless people . . . baggy t-shirt, nothing ever tucked in, and a mustard stain somewhere on it being common, from the free hot dogs the reporters scarfed down at the little clubhouse media buffet tables.

But *how* to confront the guy remained to be seen . . . you'd have to figure it out on the fly, is what these things came down to . . . and of course your main question, would the idiot even be here?

The reason Chris was willing to take a chance and waste the afternoon on it, was that interview on TV in the lounge, the one that kick-started his interest in this Jonas Blaise--where he explained to the gal reporter that most ballplayers this time of year worked out 4 or 5 days a week--but that *he* worked out the full 7.

He not only fed her the old line, *you have to at my stage*, but added that if he misses a day it affects his self-esteem, so he uses that as motivation.

Chris thought this was actually a pretty honest thing for a player to say . . . or he could have been using it as a mental trick, announcing *publicly* that you work out every day so you shame yourself into it even when you don't feel like it.

Either way, as ugly and undisciplined--and in Chris's view, *criminal*--as the guy was in a bar setting, Chris had a hunch he was going to make good, and be there today.

And it was quiet at Scottsdale Stadium when he got there. In fact maybe too quiet. Players apparently really did take Sundays off, at least this early on, before the other 95 percent arrived and things became official. Then you'd *never* have a Sunday off--all through spring training and the regular season as well, until about *October*--so why over-do it yet.

Worse, the Stadium was locked. And there was a sign posted, it was printed on a piece of copy paper but otherwise pretty makeshift.

Field to re-open Monday 1/22 9 am.

Media: Direct inquiries to Sam Skinner.

Players: Use Jim Ray Hart facility only.

Hmm. What the heck was the Jim Ray Hart facility?

Hart played in the 60's, before Chris's time, and was popular, a power-hitting third-baseman. He was one of those old Giants who Chris admired, even though he never saw him play.

The only thing that made sense as a *facility* was the long, box-like structure with the black and orange sides about a half mile behind the stadium, the Giants' headquarters down here, where you no doubt had offices for the executives and meeting rooms and a giant cafeteria and the latest in high tech workout and training methods up the wazoo.

He noticed the other day, a couple players headed over there from the stadium, and they were on golf carts, which Chris supposed made sense.

But *he* didn't have one of those, so he started walking that way, past the three practice fields outside the stadium, none of them complete to where you could play an actual game, meaning they either were missing something or the outfield fences were too short . . . but that was intentional, they were designed for the players to work on specific stuff.

And there was a little noise coming out of one of them, the second, muffled laughter and the impression of a couple guys horsing around, and Chris got to where he could look through the fence . . . and yep, there were two players in there, half-uniforms, yukking it up, rolling out a batting cage . . . and by the body language alone you could tell that one of them was Blaise.

Chris figured they were breaking rules being out there, no surprise, but then he noticed a banner flapping around off a flag pole, and that thing let you know this was the *Stu Miller* facility. Also an old Giant.

So you called a grassy field a *facility* now, you had to accept that, but the point was the players were more or less doing what they were told, except they were on the wrong field.

But at least they weren't indoors . . . and Chris took a seat on a little cement ledge, and the vantage point was pretty good, you were way out

there, sort of between all three fields, but you could make out the two players through a couple of fences. No need to get any closer at the moment.

What killed you, similar to last time, was being at the mercy of these guys. They take turns hitting for a while, all of a sudden suspend the activity, sit down on the grass and start texting. Then they'd talk and joke. Nowhere to *be*, no *pressure*, postcard sunny day.

That was something else, too . . . it was around 2:30, and more important than anything you were likely to accomplish *here*, was getting the damn Avalon back to the Rancho Villas and safely into its designated parking slot by 5, when Pat evidently tore out of the office no matter what.

You almost felt like yelling across the field to these guys, '*Come on, let's get a move on!*'

They did eventually get going again, round 2 or whatever, and they probably *hadn't* over-done it on the break time, but to Chris sitting there like an idiot it felt like watching paint dry.

Then when you didn't expect it, the one guy says pretty distinctly, "I'll see you back there," and he pulls off his cleats and slips on some loafers and throws a bag over his shoulder and pushes open a big wide gate that Chris hadn't noticed down the first base line . . . and Blaise apparently has more work to do, and reloads the ball machine.

Chris hadn't noticed the gate before, in fact he hadn't thought about how they got onto the field, since you did have high green fencing all around . . . But you might as well go over there and take a look now.

The other player most likely jumped on a golf cart, since the stadium not being open included the locker rooms, and whoever *was* around would be changing and showering in that main building that was the half-mile away.

Once the guy left it felt kind of eerie quiet. Chris likened it to being in a remote corner of a college campus, at an extreme off-time, such as a late

Sunday during the summer, when there's no reason for anyone to be around.

There was a slightly depressing element to that, he always thought, the whole shebang dead to the world, in contrast to a normal Monday during the school year where it felt like Grand Central Station.

Chris came around the outside of the field to the gate the guy had opened, and there was one more golf cart sitting there, and that would be Blaise's.

Blaise was on the ground again, near what would have been the on-deck circle on a full field . . . and Jeez, the guy sure spent a lot of time in that position, limbering up every which way, though you had to give him his props, it was unlikely he'd be pulling a hamstring any time soon.

Past the golf cart and the gate was a metal building, and you could picture piles of dirt in there, and turf amendment products, and big rollers and extra bases and chalk for the lines and all that . . . and off to the left, part of the whole deal apparently, was a substantial vehicular machine . . . telling you on the right front fender in gold cursive writing:

Aggregator Buck 2

It was the same way proud owners of yachts and sailboats and race cars might name their vehicle . . . but in this case Chris wondered if that was the brand name, just applied all fancy.

In any case, what *was* this?

If he had to guess, it looked like a slightly smaller version of a *Combine*, meaning those classic John Deere farm machines that you see all over the place when you're driving cross-country. The idea being that the one machine allowed you to switch it up and take care of multiple operations.

The operator would be sitting up there pretty high, just like a farmer would on a John Deere . . .

So Chris figured, why not, what the heck . . . the only individual I'm seeing who might yell at me to get *off* this thing is Blaise, and he can't even see me over here . . . and Chris climbed up.

There were hydraulic levers and even a computer screen, but it looked like you still had the old gas pedal and brake, and maybe even a clutch off to the left, if he was interpreting it right.

So Jeez . . . was this thing actually driveable?

There was a wide, flat extension down below, near ground level, strange looking thing, and Chris tried to figure it out, and decided it was a device for picking up balls.

Meaning drive around the fields every morning or whenever, and kind of suck up all the loose baseballs, which would be mostly in the outfield, the result of the batting cage sessions that didn't include players out there shagging balls.

So that was one part of this thing. Chris assumed you controlled that ball sweeper with the hydraulics, lowering it when you needed it. Otherwise, you could likely cut the grass, and through a different operation probably work the dirt infield and warning tracks as well.

So wow . . . a major league baseball *Combine*?

Again though . . . if you felt like test-driving it, how *would* you?

More relevant, how would you *start* the sucker?

There were no keys naturally, and ah man . . . now Chris noticed a key *pad*, like one of those security gate things . . . and that wouldn't be good.

So it was probably a longshot, but Chris pulled out his phone and googled:

how start Aggregator Buck 2

Sure enough, *wow*, a lot of information here. It was almost all sales related though, hard to find anything technical, and one thing that *was* clear was this machine was pretty dang standard these days in most major league parks, and plenty of minor league ones too.

So you learn something new every day . . .

There were a couple of diagrams, schematics, the electronics of the vehicle broken down, and forget that, you'd need an engineering degree to get to square one. Finally there was one posting, in some kind of mechanics' forum, of a *start workaround*, and Chris perked up, but as you kept reading that involved some tools, and opening something up.

So what the hey . . . at least you had a nice view from up here, and there was Blaise on his feet now, out near the mound, loading the pitching machine himself . . . and it was stupid to wonder about, but Chris had it clarified now, there was a pitching machine where a coach stood there and loaded one ball at a time, and *another* type where you put in multiple balls at once, which the batter could then control with a remote switch.

You assumed the solo-ball one was superior somehow, and Blaise finished loading *his* and picked up a bat and headed toward the cage.

Chris was thinking it was pretty comfortable up here, they really paid attention to the details in these things, such as the seat-back hitting him in just the right spot, which could be one of his pet peeves.

He lifted up so he could get his phone back in his front pocket, and as he did he noticed an innocuous little blue piece tape under the steering wheel and to the left, where your hood release might typically be in a car.

It looked like the simple painter's tape you saw at home depot, and the edges were ragged, someone hadn't bothered with a pair of scissors . . . and on the tape written with a sharpie were four numbers: 3679.

Hmm.

Without thinking too hard, Chris reached down to the keypad and punched in the numbers, bracing himself slightly on the last one, in case anything really did happen.

There was a second and a half where nothing *did* . . . and then the thing started up like there was an explosion.

Chris's first thought was an unlikely one, that they sure must rotate drivers quite a bit, if someone had to write down the code. And the other part--that can't be great for security--except really, who's going to steal the thing?

Now that the Aggregator Buck 2 was roaring away, how would you throw it in gear and actually *go* anywhere . . . and Chris noticed Blaise in the batting cage looking up this way for a second, reacting to the noise, but then getting back to business and hitting line drives.

Chris tried that left pedal which he wasn't sure was a clutch, and yeah, it felt like you were releasing something with the transmission, but he still couldn't move what he thought was the stick shift . . . and it was a little crazy and unlikely but he remembered driving an old jeep one summer as a 13-year-old around his uncle's ranch in Grass Valley, and the jeep required you to double-clutch.

Which was . . . and Chris was trying it now . . . Clutch on, shift to neutral, leave clutch, accelerate to bring up the revs, clutch on, throw it in gear.

The thing started forward.

Chris had to make a bit of a left to angle it toward the gate that the other player had left open.

And then he was good. Right down Broadway in fact coming onto the field, plenty of room on both sides.

Blaise was in a good rhythm, leveling some booming shots, working at the moment on hitting straight-away apparently, with everything going to center field.

You had to be impressed, as you got closer, Chris was thinking, with the form, the subtleties in the wrist technique, the follow through--flatter and more elongated than how the previous generation of major leaguers did it--and the all-around talent level of this guy.

Blaise looked up again, this time with disbelief, changing to panic, as he dropped the bat and raced out of the batting cage.

Chris didn't worry about that for the moment, he had a bead on the cage so he ran into it anyway, and then over it and through it, a bit surprised how easy that was, though admittedly there was probably some aluminum to it.

Meanwhile Blaise was headed toward the closest fence, which was left field--again, not a lot of gates in this place, probably just the one, but of course the fence was cyclone and easily climbable.

Chris found third gear though . . . and dang, this thing had some pop . . . and Blaise swerved to the right as Chris bared down on him, but it wasn't going to make a difference . . . and it wasn't particularly pleasant, and it did end up being messy--what was left of Blaise under the machine--but Chris did what he had to do.

Chapter 14

It was 10 after 5 when Chris brought the Avalon to rest in parking space J-104 of the Rancho Villas.

Pat was standing on the driver's side when he opened the door and got out.

This time her hands *were* on her hips.

"To say you've got a lot of nerve," she said, "wouldn't come close."

Chris was about to try the old *I can explain everything* line, but it seemed like way too much work, and likely fruitless. So he kept his mouth shut.

Pat said, "So *I'm* good to *my* word--which only leaves *one* despicable human being between us."

"Sheez," Chris said, "now isn't that a tad bit extreme, your reaction?"

"Not really, no," she said, and she belted him a pretty good one, open handed, but still a decent slap high up on the right cheekbone.

Pat turned and walked away, not needing to use the vehicle at the moment, that certainly wasn't the issue . . . and Chris dabbed tentatively at his eyebrow, hoping once again that the cut hadn't re-opened.

He felt bad, and probably what she was getting at was he hadn't shown her any respect . . . by stealing the car of course, that was part of it . . . but also, after their less than stellar interaction this morning, she apparently expected him to be a bit more focused on her needs when she got off work.

What could you do?

He went back to the apartment, and checked his messages for the first time in a while.

There was some Craigs List feedback, including a few fresh responders as well, and Chris took a minute to get through it, and he concluded, that you know what, there normally isn't a whole lot of good that comes from checking messages.

Anyhow . . . there *was* the hot tub, that just might work pretty darn nicely right now . . . and Chris went out there and eased into it, and his old friend Arty had beaten him to it.

"I switch my schedule," Chris said, "to throw you off. But it doesn't matter, you're always here."

"You have a good sense of humor," Arty said. "You're not really *funny*, but you have a *spirit* to your delivery."

"Well," Chris said, and he was starting to add a sarcastic come-back, though he was awful relaxed and it wasn't going to be very effective . . . but just then Pat came bounding out the door of the fitness center and marched straight up to Chris and said, "And I was right the *first* time. Ass-hole."

And she picked up the nearest chair and flung it, surprisingly forcefully, into the hot tub.

Chris was prepared to duck, or go underwater, but fortunately the chair landed a little short, and Pat went back inside.

Luckily Chris and Arty were the only ones in the Rancho Villas 40-person spa at the moment, and the chair was bobbing around in front of them.

Arty said, "She seemed excited."

"Yeah, well," Chris said.

"What about your ring deal?" Arty said.

"Ah don't remind me. That was a *big* mistake, picking that up."

"No takers? Or the wrong ones, you mean."

"Wouldn't you think," Chris said, "two, three, mass communications by now, *one* of them can tell you what it actually *looked* liked?"

"So scammers, then?"

“A couple for sure. The others I can’t quite read. One guy though, I get the distinct impression he wants to strongarm me. Nothing specific to go by, but just a hunch if I met that guy--like he keeps wanting to--that he’d rob me.”

Arty considered it. “I see what you mean. So why not call it quits, put the ring back exactly where you found it, and inform them all.”

“I thought of that,” Chris said.

“But . . . that would be no *fun*,” Arty said. “Correct?”

“Something like that,” Chris said.

THE END

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