

# **JUSTICE DIG**

## **by Rex Bolt**



**Chris Seely Vigilante Justice**  
**Book 9**



## **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.**



- 1 On The Rail**
- 2 Only Hundreds**
- 3 Back A Notch**
- 4 Levity Behind**
- 5 Grapefruit League**
- 6 Far Bench Working**
- 7 Guy Being One**
- 8 Pronto In Case**
- 9 Tacked On**
- 10 Sharp Left**
- 11 Tracks You Cross**
- 12 Quote A Passage**
- 13 In The Presence**
- 14 Name And Basics**
- 15 Mind To Pull**
- 16 Temperature Rising**



# Chapter 1

“Jeez,” Chris said to the guy leaning on the rail at the end of the pier. “Some kind of fancy set-up down there this morning, huh?”

“Paddleboard race coming in,” the guy said. “Used to be a bigger deal. Lot of these peripheral sports though, the money dries up on ‘em.”

“Ah,” Chris said.

“Listen to the PA, for example. You able to understand anything?”

Chris listened for a minute, and he had to admit he could see the guy’s point. Tinny sound, like a cheap home made set-up, some feedback . . . but it was kind of interesting what he *could* make out, it sounded like they were comparing your different *varieties* of paddleboard racing.

“See?” the pier guy said.

“Yeah, but if I understood it right--this one’s 32 *miles*? You gotta be joking.”

“Oh no, that part’s legit. All the way from Catalina.”

“Dang,” Chris said. “Just *trying* to wrap your head around the concept . . . I mean you can only use your arms, right? No actual paddle?”

“I did it twice,” the guy nodded. “In ‘98 and ‘03.” He was chewing sunflower seeds, Chris noticed, and casually spit out a couple.

A stream of kids came by, teenagers, black and Hispanic ones, all with the same t-shirts on, apparently finishing off some kind of training run at the end of the pier . . . except no, they were turning it around and continuing back the other way.

“I’d earmark you as more of a wrestler,” Chris said. “If I *was* going to place you as an athlete.”

What Chris was really thinking was the guy looked awful soft, like his sport would be video gaming at best. One thing he’d learned though, since



living in Manhattan Beach, don't underestimate anyone down here in the fitness department.

The guy smiled. "That's what a lot of people say. What can I tell you."

"Well, how'd you train? . . . Before you get into that, you're looking at me funny."

"Those things, whadda they call 'em?" the guy said, still smiling. Referring to the little barbells Chris was carrying, one in each hand.

"I power-walk, if you don't mind," Chris said, and this guy was turning out okay, taking a friendly jab, something Chris decided the world could use more of, after spending way too much time on Twitter lately watching bitter people ready to rip each other's throats out over something Trump did or didn't do.

"I noticed though," the guy said, "those kids, the joggers, you were eyeballin' em."

"I was?"

"Unh-huh. I get that, we're not used to much minority population around here. They're a good outfit though, part of a church in Inglewood. Education and exercise being the focus. I throw 'em a donation every year."

"So . . . don't be scared of them, you're saying."

"Exactly. Answer your other question, how'd I train . . . we'll I know it sounds goofy, but the majority was in a pool."

Chris swiveled his head around and took a good look down the Strand, wondering could you spot Mancuso and Rosie, but concluding this'd be a little soon yet, if they were going to the Hermosa Pier and back like they'd announced.

"What do you do?" Chris said to the guy, who was starting to fit the doofus category after all, now that he'd thrown in the pool business.

"You mean *really* do? Movie shit."

Chris figured the movies would admittedly be more interesting than hearing about refining your paddleboard technique, but he thought about it . . . and decided it could wait.

He checked his wallet. “How much you got on you?” he said to the guy.

“I don’t know . . . why?”

“I’m not great in the ocean,” Chris said. “In fact I’ve only been in the thing a couple times since I moved here . . . Once I took a surfing lesson. The first hour and a half, she didn’t let me go in the water.”

“The instructor you mean.”

“Yeah. Very appealing woman, on the surface, which is why I got duped into it.”

“They do that, I know. They want you standing up on the board on the solid sand first.”

“Which makes sense,” Chris said. “At any rate . . . I’ll beat you to the beach. 50 bucks.”

The guy took a moment to process it and smiled again, little different formation to the mouth this time. “You’re not suggesting,” he said, “what I think you are.”

The guy wasn’t stupid, and they’d been talking water and paddleboarding and even surfing which implied there’d be some swimming involved, that it wouldn’t be a simple running race to the front end of the pier.

“What’s the drop, do you think?” Chris said, meaning how far was it over the rail into the ocean . . . *and Jesus*, could the impact knock you out or something if you gauged it wrong?

“The way you ask that,” the guy said, rifling around in *his* wallet now, “tells me you’re having second thoughts.”

“I am,” Chris said. Still, thinking back to when he threw that one guy’s bicycle over the rail, the thing didn’t stay in the air *that* long did it?

The guy had produced the fifty bucks and was pulling his shirt over his head, and he definitely had a beer-belly on him but plenty of muscle too around the chest and upper arms, and Chris was thinking the fucker maybe really did do those races, in fact *probably* did.

“All’s we need,” the guy said, “someone to hold our valuables, and kinda ref the thing too.”

This made sense and there was an older man who’d been standing there for a while, off to their left. He had on a fishing hat, one of those baseball cap deals with the extra-long brim, something you didn’t see around here, and bermuda shorts, not common to the area either.

Chris looked at the race guy and the guy nodded that’d be fine and Chris said to the fishing hat person, “If you’re going to be here for a little while, could we impose on you to hold our stuff?”

“For how long?” the older man said, and as he said it he swiveled his head around, following a couple of bikinis that were headed to the ocean end of the pier.

“Why,” the race guy chimed in, “it’s so rough *here*, you gotta be somewhere else?”

“I know you,” the older man said to the race guy. “I’m not going to embarrass you where.”

“Damn,” the race guy said, scrunching up his face. “Now you got me. Where was *that* at?”

“Like I said,” the old guy said. “But the original question--a little while. Minutes, hours, what?”

“A little while in your experience,” Chris said, “that runs into hours, typically? And also--you’re *from* here, or no?”

The race guy said to the older one, “He didn’t mean he’s afraid you’re going to disappear on us. What it is, is your get-up. It’s unique.”

Chris was reversing himself again that this guy *wasn’t* too bad, that’s twice now he’d read his mind, the kind of person you might be friends with,

except he'd gotten under his skin for whatever reason and forced him to throw down this ridiculous challenge.

"What are you fellows doing, if I may ask?" the older guy said, accepting the wallets and cellphones and sticking them in the front pockets of the bermuda shorts, which had so much room you could barely tell anything had gone in there.

"Agnes here," the movie guy said, "he thinks he can beat me to the sand. The long way."

"Yeah well we don't have to," Chris said, "not like someone has a gun to our heads."

"Oh but we do," the guy said. To the fishing guy, "Pardner, can you give us a one, two, three?"

"Just a second there," Chris said. "You're saying right *here*? Over and in? I mean is that legal? I don't want to get arrested or something."

"You suggested it," the movie guy said, "motioning with your *head* right down to the water . . . but you got a point. All's we'll do then, go off the end. That should work."

There was a roundhouse at the tip of the pier, a sort of beat-up mini-aquarium, but yeah, Chris could see how most people's view would be blocked if you did it that way, and he took off his shirt and flip-flops and laid them on the bench and took a fairly substantial here-goes deep breath.

"You gonna swim with your sunglasses on?" the older man said, and Chris thanked him and took those off too.

The movie guy was up ahead now, doing circular calisthenics with his arms, looking pretty imposing.

The fishing guy said, "If you get in trouble, you always have the lifeguard. They really are amazing. One of 'em pulled *me* out, not too long ago."

"Well thanks for the confidence boost," Chris said. Though he had to agree with him, you *did* feel in good hands with those guys patrolling the

water. “And *your* deal, you got me curious . . . but some other time, I guess.”

“Come back, we’ll get a coffee. I *got* time.”

“You were awful antsy there, when we wanted you to stay put for a minute.”

“Not antsy. Just don’t like committing to stuff.”

“Join the club,” Chris said, and he moseyed on down to the end of the pier, the movie guy doing some sort of squat thrusts now, Chris not into any warm-up whatsoever, and his legs feeling pretty dang heavy.

“We’ll self-referee it,” the guy said. “On three. One, two . . . three.” The guy not fooling around at all, that was for sure . . . and he niftily straddled the railing, got his bearings, paused on the outside edge for a moment, and let fly.

Chris anticipated. First he wanted to make sure the guy came up. He’d been living down here close to six months now--give or take a couple hiatuses--and never actually had witnessed anyone jump off the pier into the ocean.

The guy popped up fine, no residual effects, though admittedly he’d been under water a little longer than Chris had hoped, and the guy made a left turn and was steadily working his way around the side of the pier, the south face, which meant he’d be heading for home soon enough . . . and he had that experienced open-water-swim deal going where your head was out of the water just high enough to avoid getting splashed in the face, and your arms were windmilling it a little higher than they would in your typical calm body of water . . . and Chris had seen enough people doing daily workouts way out there, around buoys and stuff, and this guy looked just like ‘em. . . and Chris figured no friggen way.

So he took his time, and after a couple minutes he started feeling real stupid and at least swung over the rail and leaned back against it from the little outside landing.

He had an ongoing memory that surfaced now and then and he wondered if he was making it up, or thinking that a dream he had was real, since it kept changing on him.

What it was, he was about 8 years old and he was with his parents and sister Bonnie, and Floyd would have been there too--except Jeez, he might not have even been born yet . . . and it felt like the municipal pool of a small hot town in an inland valley, somewhere like a Manteca.

There was a high dive and he climbed up eagerly, not to dive off but at least to jump, and he'd been seeing plenty of kids his age doing it and having fun, but when he got up there and walked to the end of the board he looked down and said unh-uh, and tried to get back down.

But there was a line of kids and he couldn't get through and he started crying and kids were making fun of him, and his dad saw what was going on, climbed up there making his way past the other kids, and wasn't smiling when he reached Chris and took hold of him and threw him off.

You'd think for sure you'd remember something like that clearly if it really happened, and Chris figured the bottom line was it likely did but he was blocking it out, distorting it. He hoped that wasn't an early sign of mental illness, and he thought you unfortunately might as well ask Dr. Stride about it at some point, provided he ever saw that guy again.

Anyhow . . . now you had to do *something*, didn't you, it felt like even the old guy holding their valuables was waiting expectantly, even though he'd be blocked out by the roundhouse at this point.

So Chris reminded himself to just relax, maybe hyperventilate a couple times to expand the lungs, and let the water do its thing, which after all was plenty salty and wanted to bob you back up the surface, it wasn't trying to fight you . . . right?

He said to himself here goes and just before he launched himself he glanced around to the left toward the beach and spotted the *guy*, no more than 75 yards away from paydirt now . . . and there was a lifeguard truck in

line with him on the beach that hadn't been there before . . . and thinking about it a little more, it may not have been a straight lifeguard truck but technically one of those LA County beach enforcement vehicles.

He considered it on the way down, decided yeah, the lifeguard ones were yellow weren't they, and this one was probably the same make and model but a light green . . . and when he made it back to the surface--which was no piece of cake, since there *was* a brief harrowing moment after you hit the water where you looked up but couldn't *see* any surface--but luckily that didn't last long and you got there, though not quite soon enough to convince Chris he'd ever try something like this again . . . but the point being, it seemed wise to go the *other* way.

So that's what he did, the north side of the pier, and Holy Smokes it was ice cold now that the adrenaline was wearing off and you actually had to bare down and swim . . . and for whatever reason he hadn't taken that into account in this incredibly stupid business he'd engineered, though the movie guy seemed immune to the cold and was operating like a machine.

But yeah, dang, this was still March, around the 17th or 18th Chris was placing it, because it was about 10 days since they'd made it home from South Dakota, that being Thursday the 8th he was pretty sure--Mancuso of course having to bail him out of a jam there, after Chris did away with the guy-he-met-in-Winnemucca's son-in-law.

The good thing about the north side, if you were trying to keep a low profile--and he wasn't sure anything was going to happen with that truck on the beach and the movie guy, but still--there were lots of people in the water here, this being more the boogie boarding side of the pier and the other being the surfing one.

So Chris blended in and rested a few times, floating on his back, and soon enough he made it to where he could stand up and negotiated his way onto the good old sand.

If they really were racing head to head the guy would have probably beat him by five minutes, at least . . . but what the hay, now that he was on solid ground and the endorphins were kicking in, it hadn't been the worst way to blow fifty bucks, he supposed.

Surprisingly, the old fishing cap guy was coming down the stairs from the front of the pier to the beach, intercepting him.

"Well I lost," Chris said.

"I noticed," the guy said. "Your friend though, it appears he's being detained."

"Jeez. Are you serious?"

"It used to be a ticket, if they caught you jumping off," the old guy said. "Now it's a misdemeanor, but a serious one, enforceable."

"*How* enforceable?"

"Don't know . . . A few incidents, the last year or two, commanded a good deal of manpower to make rescues and such, and a helicopter was involved, and the city said that's enough."

"Wait . . . you knew all this, and you let us go anyway?"

"Well, yeah," the guy said. "I wanted to see how it played out for you."

Chris said, "You're a bit of a devil."

"Known to be," the guy said.

"But what, you mean teenagers have been hot-dogging it off the pier, and not landing great . . . that type of thing?"

"Apparently. There was a suicide attempt as well. They placed a sign on the back of the roundhouse that tells you in no uncertain terms, the updated consequences."

Chris felt like he was pretty up on current developments in Manhattan Beach since he'd been here . . . but obviously there were the blocks of time where he was elsewhere and out of the loop, which kind of ticked him off right now, frankly.

"Well like I said," he said to the guy, "I wish you'd mentioned it."



“They had your friend in the truck, from what I could see. Beyond that who knows?”

“Let’s clear up one thing real quick,” Chris said, “he’s not my friend. But you mean, the vehicle was *going* somewhere? Or they were just socializing in place.”

“In place at that point,” the guy said, but Chris was curious and went back down toward the water to where you could see under the pier between the posts, and son of a bitch, the enforcement truck was moving now, toward the Strand, and you could see two heads in the front and one in the back, and there was no apparent human left behind *out* of the vehicle, so they were taking him someplace.

“Man . . . I feel kinda guilty about this,” Chris said to the old guy back by the stairs.

“What are you talking about? You ever speed?”

“Hunh? Okay, I know where you’re going, you see a guy pulled over and you’re going just as fast.”

“Exactly. Last ticket I got, I tried to play that card, the officer asked me if I ever went fishing. Enjoyed pointing out that you can’t catch all the fish.”

“That example I *get*,” Chris said. “But I like to be fair, take my lumps like the next person . . . only problem being, not a *major* one mind you, but I don’t like getting too mixed up in having to give out my name.”

“To the authorities you mean.”

Chris hesitated for a second, wondering, Jeeminy *Christmas*, was he being that transparent, meaning careless, and was the old guy eyeballing him different now . . . but the guy looked amused like he delivered a joke, so no point getting bent out of shape.

Chris said, “I wasn’t thinking the authorities so much, but fine, them too. My deal, I like some anonymity is all.”

“I’m with you. I tried a pen name once, it kind of backfired on me in my business, but I got attached to it and went with it for a while in real life. It presents a different spin, I learned.”

“Wait, you’re a writer, you mean?”

“Was. I’m afraid those days are long gone.”

“Well . . . what’d you produce? Anything I would have heard of?”

“Unlikely, but let’s get that coffee, how about, if you’re going to pepper me with the questions.”

The simple master plan had been, before Chris got sidetracked and competitive with the movie doofus--and you shouldn’t be calling him that, it was unfair, the guy obviously being put through some kind of ringer at this point--but he was supposed to meet up with Mancuso and Rosie and grab a little brunch, a new joint on Highland next to the designer sneakers place where Mancuso knew someone, and what else was new.

Admittedly that kind of thing *was* always fun and Ned had a way of suggesting what to order that was typically on the money, and maybe it was his imagination but the service and portions always seemed a little stepped up when Ned was involved . . . but the not so great aspect was Ned and Rosie having hooked up.

Or at least leaning that way, awful chummy the last week or so . . . and what did Chris expect really, the writing had been on the wall there when she asked him in Wyoming if he minded her riding with Ned the rest of the way.

So not a big deal at this point . . . but then again in the presence of Ned--and Rosie now too--you were in the back of your mind reminded of the recent not-so-pleasant stuff--nobody’s fault but you were . . . so you might as well keep it fresh today and see what the old guy had to say.

And staying with the *not so pleasant stuff* angle for a second . . . Chris wondered with a clarity that hadn’t hit him before, whether he had an alter ego . . . and if he did, what that even *was*?

## Chapter 2

Chris said Peet's or Starbucks? And the old guy said he favored the Coffee Bean, and Chris had only tried it once and the brew was a little weak but he could see the guy's point, it had an old-fashioned slow-paced local vibe, if that's what you were after.

"So don't make me repeat my question," Chris said.

The guy, who by now had introduced himself as Finch, said he wrote mostly in the 80's, started to fall apart in the 90's and faded into literary oblivion--so the heavy odds were there'd be nothing Chris would recognize.

"You could try a couple titles on me," Chris said, "but first--I hate that, when guys use a last name like it covers the first one too."

"You didn't like the Kramer character on Seinfeld then?" Finch said.

"That guy I *did* like, I'll give you that . . . Remember the one where they need a couple bucks and everyone's reaching in their pockets and coming up empty and Jerry asks Kramer what about *him*, and Kramer says sorry he only carries hundreds."

Finch laughed. "I don't, but that's a good touch, the guy's always home or in Jerry's apartment, no sign of ever working, but he's loaded." He laughed again, a little too hard, and coughed a couple times and Chris thought *ah Jeez* but fortunately the guy had ordered a cup of water with his coffee and handled it.

"You think though," Chris said, remembering the movie guy and the fact that Finch had the guy's phone, from when they asked him to hold the valuables, "we should try to contact him or something?"

“Offer to bail him out, you mean?” Finch said, which would have been funny to most people but not to Chris, at least this past 12 or 13 months, and Finch picked up on it and said he was kidding, and up to you.

Chris took a look at the guy’s phone, and he couldn’t seem to get the right screen, but he didn’t know much, he hated cell phones and had a mental block how to work them, beyond the basics he needed to check his own messages and essentially do nothing more complicated than speed dial the taqueria now and then to place his advance order.

He asked Finch if they were stuck and it was clear Finch knew less than he did, so Chris asked a kid at another table who was buried in a book but with a highlighter pen in hand, and the kid took the phone and ran his finger over the screen a few times and they were in.

“Thanks,” Chris said, “they still make you read physical books then?”

“Some,” the kid said. “Why?”

“No reason. My friend and I, we were just saying, books sort of dried up in the 90’s.”

The kid looked at Chris strange and went back to his work, and Chris said to Finch, “What now? And what was the pen name you adopted in real life for a while, you never said?”

“Pete Finnegan,” Finch said.

“I like it, nice balance, good ring. Go back to it and start writing again.”

Finch said, “You’re kind of all over the place, my friend. I ran into a gal a couple months ago, started badgering me the same way.”

“Older gal?”

“Young. Not *too* young, just perfect. She was an aspiring writer, she said. She fired me up, what can I say.”

“You do anything about it?”

“Me? No, not really.”

“Meaning you still have writer’s block. You know that’s all in your head, right? I been reading, there’s no such thing, it’s a figment.”

“You sound like my shrink, frankly. Not a *real* one of those, but my agent, Stew Portnoy. Retired guy now. Like me.”

“Sheez . . . the name. Wasn’t there a book . . .?”

“Yes of course, *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Not based on Stew though, I can assure you. Anyhow he’s an old New Yorker, we both are, lives in Santa Monica now. We shoot the shit every month or so.”

“And he helps keep you sane you mean,” Chris said, “since you referred to him as a type of shrink.”

“I had a real one once,” Finch said. “You *ever*?”

“Nah . . . but let’s not worry about me. What I’m hearing, you got another book in you but it’s stuck.”

“All it is,” Finch said, “and I’ll repeat what I told the young gal that time--I wrote three, back in the day, not intending to be a trilogy, but you know, same characters and settings and all, so it got labeled as one.”

“And you never concluded it properly is my guess. You left the readers hanging.”

“Not so much *hanging*, as I disappointed myself with my effort in Book 3. I had Simon & Shuster back then and there were contracts and time pressure, and even movie rights dangling, which never panned out, but even so--and I sort of mailed it in.”

“So ever since,” Chris said, “the unwritten concluder, it’s been eating at you.”

“Okay, fine,” Finch said.

“What happened to the gal? . . . And what do you mean she fired you up? Something actually transpired?”

“No, no. We had dinner once. She was working on a newspaper story, and I happened to have a few tidbits for her, but I told her she’d have to have that dinner with me to receive them.”

“Dang. That’s not bad, you sound like me.”

Finch said, “We ended off, she was going to email me part of her manuscript, though that never did happen. But she seemed quite excited at the time to get my feedback. I told her it was lucky I remembered my email address, because I’ve been inconsistent in that department . . . She said I seemed just fine to her. Smiling, laying it on, no rush to be anywhere . . . That was a nice moment, I won’t deny it, it kind of turned back the clock briefly.”

“Wow, yeah, nice story. But not enough to get you writing?”

“I thought it might. I woke up the next morning, I had it sort of figured out--even the title, *A Regular Monte* . . . The guy resolves the issue with his sister, moves back from Winnipeg to Oklahoma City . . . let’s see . . . may or may not kill off the guy that screwed him out of the money . . . and yeah, through it all learns to appreciate the little things.”

“Holy Toledo,” Chris said. “That’s a wild imagination there. You kill people off in your books?”

“Oh very much so. Mind you this is--or was intended to be--the *final* concluder, leaving no doubt, so Monte likely steps it up, even by his standards.”

“The others,” Chris said, “they have Monte in the titles too?”

“Yep. *Monte’s Question Mark* in ‘87, the sequel *Monte On Vacation* in ‘89 . . . and then the one I wish I never wrote, *Weekends With Monte* in ‘93.”

“So let’s see,” Chris was counting it off on his fingers, “93, 2003, 2013 . . . Jeez, a quarter century actually.”

“See what I mean?” Finch said. “There’s no way now.”

“I was thinking the opposite,” Chris said. “You’ve amassed all that extra wisdom. Different animal today, the book. Could work.”

“I must say,” Finch said, “you have plenty of zip to your game, the way you’re bossing me around. How about you ghost-write it for me? That’s all the rage now.” He was half-smiling.

“Very funny. So bottom line, you woke up a new man the next day, but by lunchtime it wore off?”

“Sort of. What it motivated me to do out of the gate was go bodysurfing. Talking about your quarter centuries, it wasn’t quite that long maybe since I’d been in there trying that, but you get the idea . . . Then I suppose I had a run of beginner’s luck, caught a couple waves, harmless ones. What fucked me up next was the overconfidence. I ventured where I didn’t belong.”

“Damn. What happened? That what you were touching on earlier, with the beach lifeguard?”

“Yeah. There was a line of kids on their boogie boards getting excited, positioning for a substantial wave you could see forming. The regular local kids, who know what they’re doing. I line up with them, like an idiot. I was out of my league, and took off just a fraction late.”

“I can picture it,” Chris said, cringing, and he could.

“I got somersaulted around, didn’t know which way was up or down. It was strange, I never panicked exactly, but I started having unlikely visions.”

“Oh boy.”

“First I saw my parents at a movie theater, then I was in the yard of my elementary school at recess. Then I was on a train in South America that was going backwards through the mountains.”

Chris blew out a thin exhale. “You were up against it then, no question.”

“Then an arm, a strong one, locked around my chest and pulled, and I was gasping and coughing, but now breathing. The gentleman cinched the rescue tube around me and angled me onto my back and brought me in.”

“I love those guys,” Chris said. “You’re getting me choked up here.”

“I came back the next day,” Finch said, “I’d bought him a 10-pack for the Cinemaplex on Rosekrans, you can either go 10 times solo, or bring a date and go 5. Different lifeguard this time though, he didn’t know where the previous day’s gentleman was stationed.”

“They move ‘em around,” Chris said.

“Right, so I gave the movie tickets to the new one. He was awfully nice, and no doubt equally capable.”

“Stick that in the book,” Chris said.

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They found what looked like a home number for the guy in his phone’s address book, and Chris dialed it.

A woman answered and said Regan--the guy’s name having been established now--typically rides his bike to the Manhattan Beach pier on Sunday mornings, but may or may not be coming straight home, and do you need his cell number?

This was an awkward spot, Chris wasn’t sure how to handle it, and he told her no that’s fine for now and they hung up.

“You see a bike on the guy, or locked up some place?” he said to Finch. “And as I’m thinking about it, how’d you *know* him? That what you said?”

“Don’t know about a bike, but weren’t those bicycle shorts he raced you in?”

Chris couldn’t tell the difference any more, or keep up with the steady developments in workout attire, but yeah that probably made sense.

“Correct, the timing didn’t seem appropriate to reference it,” Finch said, “but he and his partner turned me down on a film project. TV actually. He wouldn’t remember it.”

“Hold on. Recently? You just said you mailed it in, a long time ago in fact.”



“I thought I had. They called *us*. So Portnoy pitched them what they wanted, a pilot for a Netflix series.”

“Jeez. One of the ones you told me about, or something else?”

“The second Monte book, yeah. 80’s stories with crime in ‘em are enjoying a bit of a revival. Viewers like the lower-tech element, apparently.”

“Hmm. No DNA you mean, that type of deal?”

“Oh they had DNA. In fact I had to educate myself to try to be a credible author. But nothing like today’s forensics, that goes without saying.”

“Of course,” Chris said. “So the viewers, your era, they get more old fashioned police sleuthing then.”

“Right,” Finch said. “They like them solved circumstantially, at least that’s what the marketing people say.”

The whole thing reminded Chris, a sour taste to it, that he needed to take care of the business with Mark, why did he keep stringing it out so long, God dang.

He also had a few more questions for this guy, nothing earth shattering, but the inside scoop on the entertainment business was kind of interesting . . . except before he could go any further, a phone rang . . . the pier guy’s . . . which Chris figured it would sooner or later.

“Hey Butt-Fuck,” the guy, Regan, said, when it was established who was answering his phone, which didn’t take long.

“You okay?” Chris offered tentatively. “You sound a little stressed.”

“Yeah well, \$900 bucks’ll do that to you. My credit cards are maxed out, I had go to the ATM and pay cash.”

“Jeez,” Chris said. “They, like, drove you, you mean?”

“Walked me. Couple a dickheads. One of ‘em reminded me of you.”

Chris didn’t want to agitate the guy further . . . but was this the cops now? Not the lifeguard people anymore? He said, “The *other* one, he didn’t remind you of me?”

“Nah. They were tag-teaming me, good guy-bad guy. A third one spoke to me too, a detective. Apparently our little stunt was the highlight of their crime-fighting week.”

Wow, this *was* the cops. Even more of a relief now that Chris employed the right-turn option around the south side of the pier when it looked like Regan was swimming toward something developing on the beach.

Although . . . could the guy have mentioned *him* too, or if not, could that still happen?

Chris made a snap decision. “Look, I feel bad. We’re at the Coffee Bean. Give me a minute, and I’ll find an ATM too. I’ll have a couple hundred bucks for you, for your trouble.”

That was a bad way to phrase it and Chris knew it right away and Regan said, sort of disconcertingly sing-songy, “Oh you’ll have lot more than that for me. We’ll straighten it out.” And he clicked off.

“Didn’t sound the greatest there, honestly,” Finch said.

“No,” Chris said.

“Sounds like some fallout, if you don’t mind my two cents.”

“Like Newton’s Law, you mean,” Chris said, “every action, throwing you back an equal and opposite reaction.”

“Oh yeah,” Finch said, “good analogy.”

“Well how’s about you throw in your two cents *productively*--the mope’s gonna want a thousand bucks, at least, for his time and trouble.”

“Uh-huh,” Finch said. “Welp . . . in my books, with Monte, he’d get himself in those type of jams.”

“He always wriggle out of ‘em?” The old guy was starting to get on Chris’s nerves, frankly . . . though admittedly it was kind of interesting hearing how Monte *did* handle this kind of shit.

“Not always, no. I had to take some liberties, as the author, to keep him around for the next book. The funny thing though, you can ask readers

to suspend disbelief--if they're into the story by now--and they don't question it."

"You're saying you can get away with stuff," Chris said. "Well whoopee." Giving the guy a bit of a look now.

"Okay look," Finch said. "Off the top of my head?"

"Yeah?"

"Call him back, invite him for a sit-down. Throw him the grand, and sweeten the pot somehow . . . Bottom line, satisfy the guy. Nothing worse than a lingering grudge."

"Directed at *me*, you're saying." Chris knew the old guy was right, unfortunately. His own experience had reinforced that a couple times, the lingering grudge business, how those were bad for everyone's health all around.

Finch said, "Of course though, how are you going to call him back?"

"Good point," Chris said, "we better head down to the pier. Or at least I better." Remembering what the wife said, that the dude was on a bike today, meaning he likely *had* locked it up down there and would be going back to retrieve it now.

Chris and Finch stood and Chris cleared their table, doing his duty and throwing the plastic in the designated recycle bin.

"You trust these things?" he said.

"Not at all," Finch said. "Regular garbage is always mixed in."

"My thought too. I'm worried it's all for show. Starbucks, they're even worse, actually, less confidence that they're helping the planet."

Just then the movie/pier guy came storming in, clearly not a happy camper.

"Jeez," Chris said. "We were about getting ready to intercept you."

"Is that right," Regan said. And he approached Chris, maybe fifteen feet away now, scooting around the first row of tables--son of a gun, it sure did look like the *guy* was getting ready to unceremoniously throw a punch.

Chris hadn't been good at avoiding those. He flashed on Joyce's boyfriend, the wine guy and apparent bodybuilder, at the foot of his staircase on Broderick . . . Then there was the Reno-supposed-husband of the gal who performed in the casino in Wendover--what the devil was her name . . . but the fake band name was Luella and the Capris, Chris remembered that.

That one there, you mostly blocked out, no idea what he was trying to accomplish showing up and ringing the bell.

And actually, now that it *was* registering a little bit, the husband hadn't exactly punched him with his fist, it was more like he picked up a fireplace log and used that. In fact Chris had been admiring the cozy fire blazing away in the guy's living room up to that point.

Either way, with Joyce's friend he was lucky it hadn't been worse . . . and of course the second one was where he ended up in the hospital briefly . . . but the point being, both cases, he'd been terrible at anticipating--and more importantly avoiding--the blow.

Had there been one more incident too? And we're talking the last 13, 14 months, since he'd gotten that seemingly fateful diagnosis in Billy's office and angled his life in a decidedly different direction.

Oh yeah . . . the storage guy belted him in the face too. Jeez. The guy accusing Chris of selling a phony painting. It wasn't of course, but Chris supposed he deserved it, having forgotten the guy in the storage unit on Aviation Boulevard, a fairly remote spot actually.

Chris had low blood sugar after he'd first confronted the guy and locked him in, and the idea had simply been to get a bite at the pizza joint in Hermosa and go back and release the idiot . . . but he had too much on his mind apparently and didn't remember the guy until the next day--make that two days actually, Chris recalling for some reason that the lock-in had been a Monday--and by Wednesday he was a third of the way up Highway 5 toward San Francisco . . . and at this point not sure what that trip was all

about, but giving it a little thought, it was the high school reunion-Jerry Smith deal.

So being pinned give or take 60 hours, okay that gave you the right to punch someone in the face.

At any rate . . . that was three. Now the movie guy looked awful restless and was closing in at maybe 8 feet, and oh Jeez, he's rubbing his hands together, going into some kind of street jive . . . and putting it together real quick, the guy had a bit of a New York accent, likely Brooklyn, which was where a lot of these Hollywood movie guys germinated once upon a time . . . and those Brooklyn guys had grown up in pretty basic circumstances, the elevated subway rumbling by their apartments every couple minutes, and Chris figured they unfortunately would know how to mix it up.

“Sir . . . *Sir!*”

Luckily someone was intervening. It was a kid from behind the counter, not the main coffee person but the helper who wiped down tables and popped in and out of the back-room kitchen. The kid was about 5'7, 135 pounds, with stringy red hair and glasses and a pimply face.

But the kid got between Chris and Regan and stuck both arms out fingers-up like a ref separates fighters in a boxing match.

Regan hesitated and smiled slightly at the kid. “Yeah well, out of my way Popeye, if you don't mind.”

The kid stood firm. Chris couldn't help it, he was nervous for the little dude (not to mention for himself) but also admired the kid's nerve, and you had to say something.

He said, “Son, whatever they're paying you . . . you know what I'm getting at.”

“What you're saying,” a new guy who Chris hadn't noticed, said now, out of his seat and coming toward the action from behind Regan, “is being a company-man ain't close to being worth it.”

Regan was fixed on what was in front of him, likely figuring if the kid backed off or even moved slightly he could deliver the big right hand he'd been saving up for probably a while now, to the bottom of Chris's jaw.

So Regan took slightly too long to look around and see what this *other* voice was all about, and by that time the new guy--turning out to be a middle-aged weather-beaten surfer type, with the white T-shirt with the stripe across it right out of the '60s--got a right arm around Regan's throat and locked it up using his left.

Regan grabbed at the arm but there wasn't much conviction behind it, and his eyes started to roll backward, though that could have been Chris's imagination. Either way, he was at least temporarily under control.

Finch spoke up. "That's impressive, I must say. You don't look like the type."

"I get that comment," the surfer guy said, not able to move his mouth too much, which Chris figured applying an MMA choke on a guy would limit. "I had an incident 3 and a half years ago, decided I better learn a few moves."

"Well, you never know, I guess," Chris said.

"You got that right," the guy said. In another situation Chris would have asked him what his incident was that motivated him, there could be an interesting story behind it . . . but not here.

Chris didn't know how it worked, the anatomy of choking off the carotid artery and whatnot, but to a layman at least, the guy looked passed out. Chris said, "Do you suppose, you should lay him down or something?"

"Probably so," the guy said. "Though how much time's gone by? Roughly."

"Enough," Finch said. "I agree with my friend here . . . Let's not go so far as to commit a homicide, or anything."

“Not sure about that,” the employee kid said, his arms still instinctively stuck out separating Chris and the guy. “Isn’t it, kinda, self-defense that we have going on here?”

“Come on!” Chris said. “You’re starting to freak me out.” And the weathered surfer dude reacted, thank God, and released the hold and eased Regan down to the floor.

The main coffee person was out from behind the counter, with a damp rag and a bunch of ice, and after a minute you could see Regan starting to flutter his eyelids and come to, and you were reasonably convinced he was going to be okay -- though Chris often wondering in those MMA bouts, were there any long-term implications to being submitted, such not being able to remember your wife’s name before that first cup of coffee after you’ve turned 35 or so?

At any rate, the developing problem now was Chris could hear a gal off in the corner, her coffee and the LA Times spread out in front of her, on the phone, not talking particularly loud, but you could make out enough that she was unfortunately speaking with the police. Giving them the old who, what, where and why.

That was an issue for sure these days. No one could do anything anymore without some well meaning but nervous-Nellie hooking up to something electronic and either videoing you or reporting you or all of the above.

Chris announced: “Again kid, thanks, you have a lot of guts . . . And you too, appreciated it.” The second part directed at the surfer guy with the chokehold, though Chris wasn’t sure he really did appreciate it now that cops were on the way. He might have been able to quick-talk Regan those last couple steps and resolve it peacefully -- though who knows.

Either way Chris was on his way out the door and Finch caught up to him on the sidewalk. Chris said, “It seemed reasonable to make a move. I

better find a bank. Maybe not right around here, if you know what I mean . . . I didn't ask you, but you don't have a car or something, do you."

"I hear you," Finch said. "Nope. I hoof it back and forth every day. I told you my routine, right?"

"Okay let's can the routine at moment, how about?"

"I see . . . well, my suggestion is simply to take a side street. A couple banks I can think of up by PCH."

"Sorry to jump down your throat," Chris said, and they turned left up the hill and made sure to go a couple blocks before turning right along the side of Von's supermarket, so that right turn wouldn't be viewable from the Coffee Bean if anyone back there was so inclined to wonder.

They ended up zig-zagging onto North Crest Drive, and a couple blocks turned into 6 or 7 and Chris knew a Citibank for sure in Hermosa Beach, and the old guy was agreeable to go the extra mile or so, and they went there instead.

Chris said, "Good to walk level when you can. The hills back to my apartment, they're starting to screw up my knees, I think."

"I don't have any trouble there," Finch said. "Other issues, or course, yes." Which kind of pissed Chris off, this guy being 25 years his senior at least, maybe more, Jeez, if the guy was all the way into his 70's.

"What I'm thinking," Chris said, "I withdraw the grand. Then I'm ravenous, let's get a bite. And yeah, I suppose come up with something to sweeten the pot. Unfortunately."

"Good thinking," Finch said, though it was 100 percent *his* idea, but Chris wasn't going to waste time straightening the guy out.

The machine only let him take out \$800, and Chris was tempted to march into the branch and say what the heck, but Finch volunteered to come up with the extra 2, and used his own card.

"You're a better man than I thought," Chris said, "and obviously I'll pay you back, but right now -- where do you want to eat?"



“I’m not particularly hungry,” Finch said, “I try to space out my meals. The digestive processes and all.”

Chris didn’t need to hear this, but the good thing, he wouldn’t have to spend a lot of money on their lunch, which would limit the residual damage of an already disastrous financial day.

In fact the pizza joint should work fine, and Chris started walking Finch that direction . . . except wow, you didn’t want to let the Regan business continue to stew, did you?

“You still got that guy’s phone, by any chance?”

“I do, as a matter of fact,” Finch said.

“You’re poker facing me,” Chris said.

“Well . . . seeing as how it was on our table, when you got up to confront the gentleman, it seemed reasonable to pocket it.”

Chris smiled, for the first time in a while. The old guy had some moxie to him. But was there any advantage in having the thing? You never know. Probably didn’t hurt, generally speaking, not to have the cops rifling through it, piecing together the call they made from the Coffee Bean to the guy, and the guy’s wife . . . speaking of which.

Chris figured what the heck, and dialed the wife. No, she said, she still hadn’t heard from him, and repeating again that Sundays are his bicycling day. She did then ask if everything was okay, not seeming real concerned, and Chris said oh yeah, nothing like that, and they cordially hung up.

“Think the guy’ll remember his bike, at this point?” Chris said to Finch.

“Oh I’m certain he will.”

“That gives me confidence.”

Finch said, “There’s a series I’ve been reading, poorly done in my view, but trashy enough to keep me going. The main character is an ex-cage fighter turned private eye. This comes up occasionally, what you’re asking.”

“Oh . . . You mean, how long it takes to get the faculties back, after being choked into unconsciousness?”

“Exactly. Typically the individual is rendered limp and confused, but the apex is within the twenty minute mark. After that, mental acuity returns at least in part, but normally in full.”

“You’re saying,” Chris said, “if I intercept the guy now, he’ll remember what we had going, and understand what the grand is all about? . . . And that should close the door on it?”

“It should,” Finch said, “provided the deal-sweeter you alluded to is included.”

“That’s sort of what I didn’t want to hear,” Chris said, but he knew the guy was right. And picturing it play out back there . . . yeah, a couple cops probably did show up, nothing *that* crazy-urgent since there wasn’t any active fighting going on, or blood on the Coffee Bean floor . . . and they’d probably speak to the employees first, and the explanation would be this gentleman came barging in, fixated on an existing customer, and another patron interceded with a wrestling hold, thereby diffusing the situation.

Naturally the cops would ask who the existing customer was, so there’d be a bit of a description, but likely no big deal since the existing guy didn’t do anything . . . and if anything the cops would be more interested in the surfer dude getting physical, and Chris could see it soon enough being resolved and the cops leaving, and telling everyone next time let’s stay cool . . . and to have a nice day.

That would mean if Finch’s 20-minute recovery deal was in the ballpark, the guy would be ambling down to the pier, remembering the bike -- and Chris, by now, back in focus as well.

So . . . you better intercept the son of a gun, and take care of this.

“This is a little awkward,” Chris said to Finch, “but can you give me an hour or so, and we’ll get that lunch?”

Finch laughed. “Son, I can give you all day. I actually enjoy the sights at Hermosa more than Manhattan.” Pointing toward the beach and slightly to the left.

Chris didn’t want to ask, but he suspected Finch was referring to the female skin on display. There was an area just off the Strand down here, kind of a circular plaza, and there were people working out, dancing, jumping around, whatever else, and you did admittedly see all manner of interesting attire jiggling around and doing its thing. Chris enjoyed the sights at Manhattan fine, but yeah, things were a tad more conservative there in that regard.

But back to this. Chris figured he better throw in the phone too, not leave this deal open-ended, and Finch handed it over and told him take his time, no worries.

It killed Chris to have to consider it, but you better run. Not sprint, necessarily, but maintain a steady jog clip . . . putting the timeline together, even a sprint might be questionable if the Coffee Bean scenario unfolded relatively smooth and didn’t detain the guy too long. One interesting sidelight of course -- they’d just hauled the guy in and made him pay that fine, so they might be interested what the same guy was now doing *charging* someone, and yeah, maybe that *would* slow things down a bit.

Chris used to be a semi-serious jogger. In fact the Damirko ocean-drowning scenario wouldn’t have worked if it weren’t *for* jogging.

But shortly after moving to Manhattan Beach he started to question the logic, and opted for walking, good enough, and sometimes power-walking like he’d been doing today when he ill-fatedly struck up a conversation with this Regan.

But that was the extent of it, no real aerobic work in several months, and man the lungs were burning as he lumbered back north on Highland Avenue. The quads too, tightening up bad on him. Criminy.

But he made it, and if it was a mile the way he understood it from pier to pier it sure felt longer, and maybe it *was* longer -- but the point being he did see the guy when he got up on the Manhattan pier, except the son of a bitch was on his bike and riding away, two or three hundred yards back toward Marina Del Rey and where the guy had said he lived, so at least his brain was working right in that regard.

So he'd almost pegged it right, the business with the cops, but he hadn't used his *own* brain obviously, and now you'd just given it an Olympic marathon effort and came up short.

Some guy was coming his way, along the Strand, on one of those electric skateboards, and Chris made a snap decision and blocked the guy so he'd stop, or else run over Chris.

"Whatta ya *doing*, Pops?" the guy said.

And Chris didn't like this, being called Pops yet again, since that was part of what set him off the second day here . . . but not important right now.

"Sorry about that," Chris said. "But I'll give you . . ." Looking in his wallet, only a dollar bill in there at this point, and you weren't going to insult the guy. "Make it a hundred bucks, you catch me up to a guy riding a bike."

Very unpleasant to have to dig the C-note out of the new wad in his pocket that was earmarked for Regan, but Chris handed it to the guy, and the guy smiled and shook his head, like I've seen *everything* now . . . and Chris balanced on the back of the board, and it was pretty dang scary, the guy motoring at a good clip and Chris acutely aware that it wouldn't be good to fall off.

Regan came into view and Chris pointed him out and the skateboard accelerated even a bit more, and the guy dropped Chris off, and luckily Regan wasn't pedaling very fast, and seemed to be looking at the ocean more than anything.

“Hey!” Chris said, and he didn’t react at first, just kept riding, and Chris wondered if he was going to have to start running *again*, to contain the idiot, but Chris called out more forcefully, including his name, and Regan stopped and looked around.

“Where’s my *phone*,” was the first thing out of his mouth. Not quite as indignant as when he charged him in the Coffee Bean, but not asking either, *directing*, which concerned Chris again.

“Here you go man,” Chris said. “I’ve also got a grand for you . . . time and trouble and all.”

“Let’s have it,” Regan said, Chris pretty sure now Regan was mentally recovered and re-focused on the issue.

Chris handed over the 900 and Regan started counting it, and Chris couldn’t help asking, “What was the deal back there?”

“*My* deal? Or after you scooted your sorry ass out the door?”

“The second one.”

“EMS showed up, the jerkells. I had to convince ‘em I didn’t require urgent care.”

“What . . . like they tested you?”

“Yep. Two finger bullshit. More to it, but that was the crux, just like back in high school football.” Chris latched on to a memory himself, his own ill-fated experience in high school football, where he went down hard on an off-tackle play and when he looked up someone was flashing him the two-fingers too.

“So,” Chris said, “then no cops.”

“At the end. I already knew one of ‘em, the little episode with having the pay the fine that no doubt you’re familiar with. The guy basically said it looked like I’ve had a rough day, and left it at that, and they went on their merry way.”

“Oh.”

“You’re short, pal.”

“Yeah . . . will that work anyway?”

“Not only won’t it *work*, you ain’t even in the ballpark.” Chris didn’t like the guy using ain’t, not the guy’s normal style apparently, which could mean things could turn unpredictable again.

Jeez . . . all he wanted this morning was to finish watching that paddleboard race come in, then the little brunch with Mancuso and Rosie, and then whatever -- maybe call Chandler later, see if he wanted to hit a few tennis balls down at Polliwog Park.

Except of course nothing ever followed the script, and here you were having to make another spot decision. Regan was off his bike, pocketing the nine hundred bucks, one hand on the handlebars.

“Holy Toledo!” Chris said, pointing down the beach toward El Segundo. “What the heck is *that*?”

Regan turned toward it and Chris grabbed the top tube of the bike and yanked, and by the time Regan fully reacted Chris had dragged the thing back toward the Manhattan Pier a few yards, but hopefully out of Regan’s reach, and Regan stood there dumbfounded and fortunately this time didn’t make a move, and Chris mounted the bike.

“Give me 20 minutes,” Chris called back, “half hour tops.” And riding away he wasn’t sure if Regan answered, but if he did it was quietly, and Chris figured it wouldn’t kill him to sit down for a while, and anyhow, what could the guy do, he wasn’t going walk to Marina Del Rey, and the guy might have even said he lived in Culver City, which was further.

Chris had thought of something kind of on the fly there, when Regan pointed out he was short, not just for the extra hundred but the pot-sweetener too . . . that he had that coupon he won in Arizona.

*Fancier* than a coupon actually, you opened a snazzy pouch and inside on heavy duty paper with some gold lettering was a week at a pickleball camp in Anthem, all expenses paid (except for getting there).

There'd been a charity event, God knows for what, Chris couldn't place that part of it, but it had been a Saturday night where he was working the bar in the resort, and he'd pitched in his 10 bucks for a raffle ticket like everyone else, and lo and behold the older gal running it, wearing a glitzy sleeveless gown that was too tight on her, called the grand prize winner (there had been a dozen smaller prizes building up to it) and it comes out Chris's number.

Chris awkwardly waved from behind the bar, meaning to point out that he was an employee and ineligible . . . but there was a huddle between the main gal and a couple others, and dang, it was like a Congressional caucus, but they determined that yes Chris was a part-time employee but he was also a resident . . . and the tight-gown gal handed him the pouch, big smile, and congratulated him.

Chris figured he'd never use the thing in a million years -- first of all he didn't care for pickleball, it was too loud-- and but he hung onto it, and he almost gave it to that trucker Abe when they got on a certain subject and he thought Abe might find a use for it, in fact he *intended* to when they stopped and he could dig it out of his suitcase, but he forgot.

The nice thing was, even if you didn't set foot on a pickleball court, the prize gave you a room at the resort in Anthem for a week. Just go in the pool and hot tub, take a walk, look at the red rock. Why not?

Chris had a little stash in the apartment and it was more challenging than it looked pedaling up those hills, even in the guy's low gear, but he got there and found an extra hundred, plus the two that Finch had to spot him, and wedged the resort prize into his back pocket . . . and man, now you had to be careful of the reverse, building up too much speed going back *down* the hills to the beach . . . and Chris decided he was either getting old or over-reacting, and there was Regan, same spot, not sitting but slumped against the railing.

Chris handed him the bill and the prize-pouch, and started to explain what *that* was all about, and that it was open-ended, you could take advantage of it any time . . . and Regan took it but waved a hand to cut him off, not needing to hear about it.

Regan said, "Let's not run into each other again, how about."

Chris said that sounded like a great idea, and he stuck out a hand but Regan ignored it and got back on the bike and pedaled away.



## Chapter 3

Chris almost grabbed an Uber for the return trip to Hermosa, but the day had turned into a bluebird one, a cloudless sky, high sun, all kinds of action on the beach for a Sunday in the middle of March. So he figured what the hay, and reversed direction on the Strand and headed back that way on foot, knowing of course he should have jumped in the Uber.

There was no more jogging in the forecast, that was for sure, and he hoped he hadn't done any damage that would show up later. Chris knew that often something goes haywire when you press matters outside of your comfort zone. A few years ago he got in a situation on a trail near the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, got carried away trying to impress someone, and walked four or five miles in the wrong shoes, and paid the price for a couple months when the plantar fasciitis kicked in, and getting to the bathroom in the middle of the night was like walking on hot coals.

But the unknown consequences didn't seem critical right now. The main thing, he'd (hopefully) put the swim-racing incident to bed, and you chalk it up to a case of bad judgment (maybe a couple of those) and what can you do, you move on.

It was obviously way too late to run into Rosie and Ned on their return stroll from Hermosa -- you missed them by a couple hours -- and Chris didn't particularly feel like checking in at this point, and judging by his lack of phone activity, they weren't too worried about him either.

Rosie was getting the hang of the southern California lifestyle, so that part was good. Chris's intention, scooping her up on West 148th Street those couple weeks ago, was to thrust her into a fresh environment, so that she'd hopefully stop turning tricks.

*Probably* that was the case so far . . . Chris wouldn't really know, since the projected scenario shifted a bit around Wyoming, where Rosie

asked Chris would he mind if she rode with Ned for a while, and the writing was on the wall, and Chris figured who was he kidding, it wasn't like she was going to move in with me, I was a client for gosh sakes.

Plus by then Ned had selflessly gone to bat for him, and Rosie too, and there wasn't much you could hold against the guy.

When they'd made it back to MB Ned mentioned he could square away housing for her, which Chris assumed meant they'd be shacking up together, and Chris never pressed it. It was hard to tell exactly *what* was going on, since he'd run into them both in the Crow's Nest a couple times and Ned was his usual gregarious self, meaning real friendly in there, with multiple women . . . and Rosie didn't seem to mind, in fact she was cozying up to a few guys herself, seemed to be enjoying the scene just fine.

*Meaning Gee, now that he thought about it, was she turning tricks?*

Whatever . . . what Chris did know was Ned had set her up with a job in the Strand house, where he engineered his porno flicks operation. Rosie's duties were supposedly assisting the gal at the front desk when you walked in -- Chris couldn't remember her name but she was very pleasant, sort of a middle-aged madam type who did the scheduling and secretarial work.

You'd be naive to assume Rosie never ventured into the upstairs action as well, where the real money was, acting out the scenes . . . though even driving cross-country Chris considered that possibility, and figured it was at least a significant step up from standing on a street corner on a frosty night in the old meat district of Manhattan propositioning strangers, which is where they met.

In fact he was about a third of the way to Hermosa right now, coming up on the actual place . . . and it was tempting to knock on the door and see who was around and what might be cooking . . . though he'd done that a couple times and it had admittedly been interesting, but he of course came away saddled with the intimidation factor.

So nah. Plus you couldn't be everywhere, you couldn't be everyone's keeper, stuff rarely followed a script, you had to dial things back a notch and be more flexible and go with the flow -- these were lessons he was learning as he was coming up on the 1 and a half month mark of considering himself disease-free.

He was *learning* these lessons but unfortunately he wasn't always *acting* on them -- kind of like today.

But that aside. He'd been diagnosed in early February of 2017, so six weeks ago he'd hit the one-year mark. Chris considered anything *post* the one year mark as the bonus column. No scientific basis behind it, no input from Billy his doctor -- or Bethany, Billy's admittedly voluptuous receptionist who liked to throw her weight around on medical matters, and did so right up to when she essentially dumped him out of her life, after piecing together the red rock incident with Kyle.

So yeah, as far as Chris was concerned he'd beat this thing for a short time. The first year doesn't count. Whether the diagnosis had been a mistake to start with, that's anyone's guess, but it felt a lot better since this February, by the week, to (for the most part) deem himself cleared.

There were still the ups and downs where something would happen and he'd question his physical health -- even today, on the jog to intercept the doofus he could hear his heart pounding away pretty good as he crossed the Ardmore -- and son of a bitch, it seemed like there was an extra little *sound* in there, in the beat process.

So you weren't going to escape all of it, *ever* probably, but you did your best.

Finch was on a bench right where he'd been talking about, the horseshoe plaza that dipped away from the Strand about 100 yards short of the Hermosa Pier. There was always some new contraption down here, typically related to physical fitness, and even living here in the middle of it Chris was caught off guard with the new paraphernalia.

Right now a shirtless muscle-bound bronzed guy was rolling around on his hands, using these special grips with wheels on them. A woman in a neon bikini was holding up his feet, and she was kneeling and riding on some contraption herself, her impressive heinie going strikingly vertical each time the two of them rounded the far turn and circled back to where most of the people were watching.

“My man,” Chris said to Finch.

“You found me,” Finch said.

“Just another day at the beach, I guess,” Chris said.

“I can’t perform anymore,” Finch blurted out. “I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

“Ah for God *sakes* . . . way too much *information*, come on . . . I think I get your point, fine . . . that you take in the sights and sounds, to, kind of, *offset* things . . . but Jeez.”

“Uh huh.”

Chris said, “But hold on, isn’t that what they got Viagra for now, and other stuff too?”

“It didn’t work for me,” Finch said. “I mean it *worked*, on one level, but . . . you’ll see what I mean some day.”

“Well, you ever have, like a wife or something? In your past life?”

“Me? No. I played the field throughout. It caught up with me. Holidays are rough. Then you worry too, what if I fell down coming out of the shower, who’s going to hear me?”

This was piling on more that Chris didn’t want to hear now, since it felt like he was projecting into the mirror himself. Obviously he wasn’t worried about falling down in the shower, and there’d hopefully be plenty of water under the bridge before he got to Finch’s stage -- but okay, yeah, last Christmas *was* a little rough, even spending it down here in the middle of all this positive energy and mostly friendly vibe.

“On a more urgent note,” Chris said, “how’s that appetite, any better?”

“A bit,” Finch said. “And I took a liberty, I hope you don’t mind.”

“Uh-oh,” Chris said, with some edge, and he meant it, not in the mood for any more surprises today.

“Well, the newspaper gal, the one I mentioned. You asking about her earlier, getting me to re-hash that story. I guess it kind of charged the batteries, curiosity got the better of me.”

“Yeah?”

“I called her. While you were taking care of your business . . . How’d it go by the way?”

“Stick to one thing,” Chris said. “You called her, and?”

“You’re making it sound slightly routine. Took me a little fumbling around to come up with her number. I typically don’t call people back, in fact very little goes on with me electronic communication-wise.”

“*Give* me something here, Jeez,” Chris said.

“I invited her for lunch. Or I guess more like an early dinner now.”

“Umm. So you ate with her already? Or . . . I’m guessing God forbid we’re waiting on her.”

“Correct.”

“Listen, this may not work. I’m starved out of my mind here.”

Finch told him take it easy, she’s supposedly on her way, and Chris settled down and watched the action in the plaza, some guy balancing a stove on his chin for tips, though this one Chris *had* seen before, at least a variation, over in Venice Beach . . . and soon enough a bubbly young woman -- though not *that* young, early 30s or so, Finch called it right -- turned up, gave Finch a polite peck on the cheek and shook hands with Chris and introduced herself as Holly.

“Good to establish everything,” Chris said, “and now, where to?”

Finch and Holly kind of shrugged and Chris hated indecision when he was hungry and took charge and said we’ll go to Sergeant’s then, and no

one objected, and ten minutes later they were squared away in an overstuffed naugahyde booth with a tiny sliver of a view of the ocean.

“This place,” Chris said quietly after they’d ordered, “last time I had my doubts, are they going to make it? I get the pastrami sandwich, and *that* part’s fine, it’s a little greasy like you want it, and the pickle’s not bad, but then I ask for a Cel-Ray, and the waiter looks at me like what am I talking about?”

“Sheesh,” Finch said, “agreed, that’s routine procedure. Goes hand in hand with the pastrami.”

“I know. Something else too, didn’t seem right, can’t quite remember what . . . but it gave me pause, a Kosher joint in Hermosa, you have the clientele, but you’ve got to do it right.”

“Like New York he means,” Finch said to Holly. “Plenty of transplants out here. More so in Santa Monica, but the south bay too.”

“Yes,” Holly said. “I’ve been dating a guy from Armonk.” Chris thinking oh boy, the dating card pretty quick, setting the groundwork, though obviously it’s none of his business.

“See now Armonk though,” Finch said, “that’s not real New York.”

“High rent district in the northern suburbs,” Chris said. “Is that where everything’s walled off into estates? Don’t the Clintons live up there?”

“That’s Bedford I think,” Finch said, “but same deal, a town or two over.”

“What’s your guy do?” Chris said, something you might as well ask.

“He’s a yacht broker,” Holly said.

“There you go,” Finch said, “though nothing wrong with that.”

“That’s the line of work *I* should have got into,” Chris said, as the food came, all three plates piled pretty high, admittedly, and the waiter friendly, bringing the Cel-Ray without raising an eyebrow this time -- Chris re-evaluating, that the place might make it at that.

“Not bad at all,” Finch said, juice of something dripping toward his chin, and Chris handing him an extra napkin and pointing.

“Before you overindulge,” Chris said, “save room for the cheesecake.” He was starting to feel a lot better, almost relieved actually, having devoured half his sandwich, and he wasn’t minding Holly at this point either, a sparkle in her eye that could have been devilish or playful, or nothing, but it was good to have some fresh company. Including Finch.

“Thanks,” Holly said. “When you say save room though, what does that mean? Don’t finish my plate? Or finish it, but convince myself I’m not full?”

Chris said, “You’re sort of a piece or work, would be my wild guess. When the gloves come off.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not following you there.”

“Boxing term,” Finch said. “Actually, hockey.”

Chris said to Holly, “You got a semi-famous literary figure right in front of you. Why didn’t you send him your manuscript?”

This changed the tone of the meal slightly, and Finch shifted around but kept quiet and didn’t try to step in and diffuse anything.

“My Gosh,” Holly said, turning just a little red Chris thought. “And, how do you know what I may or may not have shown Terrence?”

“Hold on . . .” Chris said. “*Terrence* Finch? Jeez, I actually think I *have* heard of you. Why didn’t you say something?” Meaning why just keep the last name and nothing else, though Chris was also slightly embarrassed because if he’d heard of the guy at least casually he’d never run across, much less read, any of his books.

Finch said, “Well sometimes I give an abbreviated full name, what can I *say*. Holly put two and two together, which I didn’t expect.”

“How’d that work, exactly?” Chris was asking dumb questions, but it was all interesting enough he supposed, no where else he had to be at this point, nothing earth-shattering waiting for him back at the apartment,

where he typically fell asleep in the recliner these days watching reality shows or re-runs of Law and Order.

“You seem to know everything *else* about our previous encounter,” Holly said, at least putting it lightly, “but you don’t have *that* part down?”

“We were in Scion’s,” Finch said. “Holly’d been working on a story at my hotel. I withheld possible useful information to get her to have dinner with me.”

“That you *did* tell me,” Chris said. “You bragged about how you maneuvered it.”

Finch said, “And as I recall you said you were going to file *away* the maneuver, and use it yourself, when the appropriate opportunity presented itself.”

“You believe this guy?” Chris said to Holly.

“He started off in Scion’s,” Holly said, “delivering his personal reviews of the south bay restaurant scene. I was too polite to re-direct him to why we were there, and thinking oh Gosh . . . but then it dawned on me, just like you, Terrence Finch? In my case he’d introduced himself as Terry, so I had a clue.”

“Fine,” Chris said. “Then I’m guessing you sprung on him that you write too, and he was kind enough to offer you some feedback.”

“Something like that. I mentioned that after college I’d applied to a few MFA programs and got rejected. That my sample work evidently didn’t cut it.”

“That was your problem then,” Chris said. “*Sample* work. You want to get somewhere, give ‘em *real* work.”

Finch said, “I pointed out to Holly that MFA programs don’t necessarily make a writer better, they sometimes in fact make you worse.”

“Yes,” Holly said, “and you told me to sit my ass the fuck down and let my fingers work the keys however they want. Let it fly, is what you added.”



“Salty language,” Chris said, considering again that she *could* be a bit of a live wire.

Holly said, “No I don’t use profanity, typically. I was reciting Terry’s reaction word for word.”

“Ah,” Chris said. “Like a good reporter then. What was the big article you were writing, anyhow?”

“Well,” Finch said, “as I may have pointed out, I live in the Valerian Inn Express.”

Chris held up his hand. “My fault there, but before we get to that, let’s establish and complete one thing at a time. So *why* didn’t you show Terrence your work?”

“I started to,” Holly said, “cut and pasted my best two chapters, had it all lined up, but couldn’t click Send.”

Finch took a moment, and reached over and squeezed Holly’s shoulder.

“Okay yeah, sorry,” Chris said, kind of feeling bad now too, reminding himself that more isn’t always better, and to just shut your big mouth sometimes.

Though Holly had a little momentum going. She said, “My novel is about a woman who walks cross-country. To raise money for charity.”

“By herself?” Chris said, figuring it was okay to chime in again.

“Yes. She has adventures along the way. And a few scares . . . I suppose it’s trite and a bit corny to summarize it this way, but she essentially finds herself. And may or not have improved her relationship with her sister. *That* part would play out in the sequel.”

“That doesn’t sound trite at *all*,” Finch said, patting Holly on the shoulder again, and Chris couldn’t help thinking the old guy was politely stretching it, since to him the plot sounded terrible.

“Well in that case -- here,” Chris said, writing down his email address. “Now you can send it to both of us.”

“Oh my,” Holly said. “Thank you then, I guess, for your interest. I didn’t feel my story was that exciting, honestly . . . which I’m sure you’ve deduced by now is the *real* reason I didn’t follow through with Terrence . . . I guess expressing it to a stranger helps me gain some perspective. Thank you so *much*, actually.”

“Well it sounds like there are interesting challenges in that storyline that we all can relate to,” Chris lied. “Meanwhile . . . part B now . . . *what* happened at the Valerian Inn Express, you say?”

“There was a homicide,” Holly said. “Back in December.”

Chris looked at her, and then at Finch, and decided they were serious. Now he regretted asking the question, big-time. One thing he didn’t need, was any more bits and pieces of that stuff skittering across his radar, even peripherally.

But you had to ask, “What the *heck*?” And following it up with, “I didn’t even think to clarify -- you actually *live* at the Valerian Inn?”

“I do,” Finch said. “It’s been a couple years now. The room is fairly spartan, faces the back of the parking lot, and when I come out the door you have the side of the auto body shop behind the fence.”

“Wow,” Chris said, “but it works, I take it.”

“I envy his situation actually,” Holly said. “And Gosh, he’s quite the deal maker as well.”

“What’s *that* mean?” Chris said.

“Well kind of dumb luck,” Finch said. “I liked the location and amenities -- they have a nice pool and not one but *two* hot tubs -- oh, and the full complimentary breakfast every day, not one of those Continental efforts limited to the toaster and Corn Flakes, but a real bacon and eggs breakfast with plenty of side options as well.”

Chris was thinking the toaster and corn flakes was pretty much what he was limited to .

“Anyhow,” Finch continued, “I approached them about the long term rate, and I can’t remember what it was, it was probably fair, but I couldn’t afford it. So I’m having lunch a few days later with my agent Portnoy, over in Culver City, and he suggests hitting them with a cash offer they can’t refuse.”

“Hmm,” Chris said.

“So yes, 40 grand -- cash -- up front. For 5 years. With the option to renew . . . It’s a franchise of course, and they had to get back to me, likely needing an approval, but it was my good fortune that they accepted.”

Chris was trying to do some calculations in his head. “So what’s that come out to? A month?”

“Around nine hundred I believe,” Finch said. “Under a thousand anyway, I’m pretty certain.”

“I thought you told me it came out to around \$700,” Holly said.

“Did I?”

You could see she was determined, and she pulled out a pen and paper and starting doing it the old fashioned way, and Chris was certainly interested himself, though the scenario was starting to disturb him.

“Let’s see,” she said, starting and then hesitating. Chris said, “You can keep it simple, just divide 60 -- the five years -- into 40 grand.”

“That’s perfect,” Holly said, and in a minute she announced, “Even *better*. I have \$667 a month.”

“*Jesus Christ*,” Chris couldn’t help blurting out. “Why didn’t *I* think of something like that?”

“Well first of all,” Holly said, “I suppose you need to be willing, and able, to step up to the plate with the lump sum.” Nodding at Finch, with what Chris detected was a measure of admiration.

Chris said, “That makes sense, I guess.” At the same time evaluating his own finances, that yes he could come up with it, but he’d have to sell

some stuff . . . and this brought up a darn good point, shouldn't you responsibly have more cash laying around?

Either way, this sure put a damper on his own living situation, which Holly didn't waste time asking him about. "What's *your* arrangement?" she said.

"Well," Chris said, "I've learned now that we're almost neighbors. Maybe Finch, you can sneak me into the breakfast sometime."

"Oh absolutely," Finch said. "They never check, you just grab a plate. The chef comes around sometimes from in back, makes sure you're doing okay."

"Wonderful," Chris said, not exactly meaning it.

"You didn't answer," Holly said.

"Ah. Well . . . I started off at \$2150 in a one bedroom. That was in October, when I moved down here."

"Sounds a bit steep," she said.

"Probably. I was subletting my place in San Francisco for 25, so for better or worse I accepted the differential . . . Later though, I did a couple favors for the landlord, and he told me drop it to 15. I kept paying him the full amount, but he'd be refunding me back, so I guess now I can declare that I pay \$1500 . . . as opposed to *this* guy's deal of the century."

"What *kind* of favors?" Holly said.

"Gee. Do you always have your reporter's hat on?"

"I'm interested."

"Well, I try not to dwell on them, but there were two I guess, neither one particularly pleasant. The first one -- Sharif, my landlord, he also has a mom and pop motel on Sepulveda -- they had a guy, an overnight guest, he claimed something happened that was Sharif's fault, can't remember what, but the gist was he wasn't moving, wasn't paying for the room anymore, and had begun legal proceedings against them."

"You mean he filed a Summary and Complaint?" Finch said.

“Don’t overcomplicate this,” Chris said, “maybe he just had a shyster lawyer write ‘em a letter. Either way, they couldn’t sleep, they’re a nice family, Sharif and everyone.”

“So what did you do?”

“I tried knocking on the door and speaking to guy, but it didn’t work. My roommate, Kenny, he got involved and resolved it, though Sharif thinks it was all me. Now Kenny and the deadbeat mope are even friends, apparently.”

“Why did this Sharif person ask you to help?” Holly said.

Chris figured it was probably on account of him tossing that guy over the second story rail of the Cheater Five and into the pool, but no point going into that. “He didn’t exactly,” Chris said. “I felt kind of bad for him, figured why not lend him a hand, as an outsider.”

“Fresh approach,” Holly said. “What was number two?”

“Man, you really are sort of relentless here, you don’t mind my saying . . . Well that was a little trickier, did involve some old fashioned reasoning and diplomacy . . . Sharif’s daughter, or maybe it was his niece, but she became a little too westernized for the family’s taste -- which on its own you can understand, growing up in LA -- but she started running with the wrong crowd. She broke up with a guy who didn’t take it well, and they were concerned there could be fallout.”

“So what, you had to get physical with that gentleman?” Finch said, starting to jiggle around a little bit laughing, and Holly was now too.

“Let’s get real here,” Chris said. “Alls I did, I drove by his apartment over in Westwood, tried to catch him coming home from work, hung out for a while, and eventually he shows up in exercise clothes, and a respectable looking woman with him. I figured they were an item, and he’d moved on, and I basically reported that back to Sharif.”

“How’d you know it was him?” Holly said. Jeeminy, she kept digging in, and Chris had to extend the lie further by explaining he both had a

photo of the guy and knew his apartment number, which had an outside entrance . . . the true story of course more complicated, that Chris did have to do something physical to the guy or at least show the ability to . . . and wow, he couldn't remember it all that clearly right now, the details, and hopefully he was just blocking it out, but was this another a bad sign?

And the full story being, the guy *was* hounding the niece, or daughter . . . and the hounding stopped after Chris's visit.

"Good story then," she said. "So being a friendly citizen saved you, what, \$650 a month?"

"Something like that," Chris said, still wrapping his head around *Finch's* deal -- again, the old guy more on the ball than you'd give him credit for on the surface.

"Why not raise the rent of your sublet?" Holly said. "My understanding is SF is the hottest big-city market in the nation."

This was a good point obviously, but what he'd done, after he'd had to evict that one guy, using the roof as a little leverage, was turn the whole works over to Shep, his favorite bartender at Weatherby's. Shep was a good guy, and handy too, and right in the neighborhood, and Shep said don't worry about a thing, he'd find him someone respectable this time, and Chris didn't argue, and said if you can get me the same \$2500 that would be great, and charge as much as you want over that and keep the change . . . and they hadn't had to discuss it since.

And it sure sounded insane, to be able to charge someone 3, 4, even 5 thousand a month for an apartment in the Marina district, but Holly was right, that city had lost its way and gone nuts.

"Enough with the financial planning though," Chris said, and he was starting to get a headache, different ideas swirling around . . . should he get a job, even a part-time one, and what would that *be*? Was he living too close to the vest? He knew he probably was, you had to watch it every month. He had his buyout of course from the Chronicle, and there was investment

income trickling in here and there . . . but if a real crisis emerged, shouldn't you be more on top of stuff? A rainy day fund, and all that?

There hadn't been any thought of getting a job this last year of course, the issue being that he might die . . . though he had had the little gig in Anthem, passing out the towels in the rec center, and that was admittedly kind of fun, you asked people about their day . . . not a real job naturally, but now that you declared yourself cleared, well, who knows.

Chris said, "Before we get back to that apparent homicide deal . . . you're a reporter? What's that pay these days?"

"It pays minimum wage," Holly said.

"Oh."

"I've with the Daily Gull. You probably know it."

Chris did, it was one of those weeklies that you saw for free on the wire racks inside supermarkets and other places. It covered the South Bay -- Manhattan, Hermosa, Redondo, maybe a little further toward Long Beach as well. Nothing much in there, to be honest.

At any rate, Chris said, "So Finch, you're telling me someone kicked the bucket at your hotel."

"More like a motel, keep in mind," Finch said, "no rooms above a second floor. But yes, I'd come back from my routine in town -- I told you about that right? The way I work it?"

Chris said yes you did, though Finch hadn't broken it down exactly, but Chris assumed it was close enough to his own little deal most mornings, where he'd start off at Starbucks or Peet's and shoot the breeze with whoever's ear he could bend, and then wing it from there, typically in the direction of the beach. Somehow the whole shebang sounding a little less exciting now that this old guy was doing essentially the same thing.

Finch said, "When I got there -- and first I'm taking the little covered walkway they have, past the pool and such -- but when I pop out in the open I see three squad cars. One in front of the main office, but two in front

of a room, six or seven down from mine. Oh, and an unmarked car was there as well.”

“I wasn’t on the scene yet,” Holly said.

“No,” Finch said. “What it was, at that point, an officer sees me and motions me over. Proceeds to ask if I’m familiar with the people in 32-B. Name is Spenkman, is what he said.”

“Speed it up just a touch,” Chris said. “So *were* you?”

“That was the thing, I told him it’s possible, but I’d need to see a photo or something, that I don’t recognize the name alone.”

Holly said, “But he showed you one, and you didn’t identify them, right?”

“Sort of like that. He mentioned the female was in LA General, and the guy had stabbed her, and they had him in custody as well. So I asked, were they on vacation, or just passing through or what?”

“And?” Chris said.

“The officer answered, and I’ll try to quote him, that ‘Let’s let me be the one asking the questions, okay Bud?’”

“They do that,” Chris said. “But not a bad rendition you gave there, kinda funny actually.”

“Anyhow,” Finch said, “I started thinking . . . and I remembered a couple arguing quietly but with intensity a few nights previous in the lounge during happy hour. Incidentally, the Velarian, in addition to the marvelous free breakfasts, serves dinner three nights a week as well. Not a full course meal or anything, but they whip things up in and around the outdoor barbeque, more like large appetizers, but really, you couldn’t ask for more.”

“Your deal is sounding better all the time,” Chris said, gritting his teeth slightly, “but what were they arguing about?”

“The gentleman was quite neat. Gold chains, a mustache, though it appeared he had a hair weave. The woman was noticeably younger, likely in her twenties, very clear, porcelain-white skin -- and I must say she was



somewhat statuesque in an outfit that was perhaps a size too tight. Particularly when she stood up once.” Finch glanced at Holly, Chris figuring he was concerned he went too far, and Holly gave him the *don’t worry about it, keep going*, look.

“It was an interesting altercation,” Finch said, “something one might use in a novel actually, and I moved a bit closer, pretending to be absorbed in one of the front lobby tourist brochures on Universal Studios.”

“You didn’t tell me all this,” Holly said. “You’re a pretty good detective.”

“A sneaky one too,” Chris said.

Finch said, “Fine, reaching the crux of the matter . . . my developing impression was the woman may have been a paid mistress . . . and from there I couldn’t quite figure it out . . . that perhaps she didn’t like it that this man was seeing multiple women, which sounded strange . . . or maybe it was one woman in particular who for some reason had gotten under her skin.”

“Either way she was angry, you’re saying,” Chris said. “So, we got a punch line here?”

“Yes and no. The cop did pull out an I-pad and he flicked around and produced a photo, and it *was* the man from the argument. I took a look and said I didn’t recognize anyone.”

“What do you mean?” Chris said. “For God sake’s, help ‘em *solve* the thing.”

“I take it,” Holly said, “that Terry didn’t care for it when the cop said he wanted to be the one asking the questions. Right?”

Finch nodded, and said, “There were a few more details that emerged in the couple’s argument as well. There was a man’s name Roland, that was bandied about. And something I pieced together after the police left that day, that for a few nights prior there’d been a Jaguar parked in front of that

room -- you do notice a vehicle like that -- and that it wasn't there when the cops talked to me."

"Maybe they towed it," Chris said.

"That was Holly's reaction when I told her as well. But it seemed too soon. And wouldn't you need a warrant for something like that?"

"Hmm. What you're getting at," Chris said, signalling the waiter for one more Cel-Ray beverage to wash everything down good, "their own *car* might not have been there . . . when he stabbed her. Allegedly . . . Sorry to keep sounding bottom-line, but we got a dead body here, or no?"

"We do," Finch said. "There was a day in between, quiet, and then the next morning you had a forensics van and two unmarked cars outside 32-B. That's when I first met Holly, she asked would I have a moment for a few questions, and I said I had all day. She asked how many nights I'd been here, and I told her I'd have to think about it, and I came up with ballpark 700, since I'm coming up on the two year mark."

"Don't keep getting sidetracked," Chris said. "Forensics -- and Holly now -- were there *because*?"

Holly said, "There was a blood clot, and she unfortunately took a turn, and passed."

"Right," Finch said. "So I told Holly I might have a lead or two for her, you never know, and we met for dinner."

"And?" Chris said.

"I gave her what I had. Told her if anything pans out she can maybe scoop the LA Times. Even the cops."

"You added," Holly said, smiling, and touching *her* hand to *his* shoulder now, "that whether they pan out or not, running down leads is good fuel for we novelists . . . He said *we*, which designated *me* an actual novelist."

"Very nice of him," Chris said, "but what happened? When you did run 'em down?"

“Oh,” she said, “well if you’re asking if I solved the case, unfortunately no. I may have unearthed something a bit disturbing, would be the extent of it at this point.”

Chris took a moment, signalled for the check, and told Finch and Holly not to be strangers, that this had certainly been an unexpected social development today.

He was curious of course, what the ‘a bit disturbing’ referred to -- how could you not be -- but he didn’t have the fortitude to process anything more this evening, the events of the day were starting to slam him big-time, and he got out of there as unceremoniously as you could, though he did thank the waiter on the way out for being a good sport.

## Chapter 4

Chris wasn't a fan of ride services, he didn't like sitting in tight quarters in some guy's personal vehicle. You had the concept in your mind of the guy driving around in there for 6 or 8 hours, sweating, and eating on the go and whatever else, not that you could blame anyone trying to hustle up an honest living.

But you missed the old Yellow Cab days, especially the way they did it in New York. You were in back, separated by barrier, typically a bullet-proof one at that -- and if you could hail a Checker, which was *really* roomy back there, like a poor man's limo -- even better.

But there comes a point where you give in, even in a southern California beach town, and Chris made it up Pier Avenue as far as Bayview when he decided this sucks and called for an Uber.

Or tried to. He hated apps, had a mental block against them, but he probably got it right except no one showed for 10 minutes, which was the estimate, so he bit the bullet and kept moving, though when he hit South Sepulveda there *was* a cab and he flagged it down, though it was green and white, not yellow, but whatever.

Except the driver didn't speak English that well, he was a friendly-enough fellow but apparently didn't understand Chris when he said we better turn on 1st, with the light, and the guy continued straight, and this was going to be a mess because you had quite a ways where you couldn't make a left turn, and a block up Chris decided this was good enough and got out there.

Finishing it off, unfortunately with another 3 and a half blocks on foot -- back to 1st, across the 6 lanes with the light, the right turn back to 2nd,

the left, and the right on good old McLellan Lane . . . and frankly that recliner -- maybe even the bed right away -- in his little piece of the Cheater Five Apartments, never sounded so good.

The only possible problem being -- as Chris turned the final corner and headed the half-block for home -- that what you could only assume as a couple of unmarked police cars, LAPD, the different size antennas sticking off the roof up the wazoo --were parked in the Cheater Five lot.

And not exactly parked, more like double-parked, since there weren't enough spaces for the apartment dwellers and Chris typically didn't bother battling it himself, and stuck the Camry around the corner.

But whatever the *fuck*.

He thought for a second of making an about face and hightailing it out of there, to God knows where . . . except rationally thinking, he hadn't done anything wrong, lately, *had* he? And if he were really in trouble, wouldn't there be a squad car here or something?

Not necessarily. Nothing etched in stone how someone might be apprehended, Chris supposed that could work all different ways . . . and maybe it was the fatigue factor, or simply not wanting to get on another Greyhound bus . . . either way, after rattling around the pros and cons for thirty seconds, Chris decided the odds were decent it had nothing to do with him, and God forbid if it did, they weren't ready to haul him in tonight.

So he crossed the parking lot, flicked the gate latch by the pool and started up the stairs, and there was a guy smoking up top, not in front of Chris's apartment luckily -- and now that he had a vantage point Chris found the other guy, down below, under a metal awning sticking off the laundry room on the corner of the property, and Jeez, it was actually starting to drizzle a bit which it never did down here, so maybe the guy under there made sense.

The upstairs guy had a sport coat and the other one had a Tennessee Titans jacket made out of slick material, but who was anyone kidding, they

were cops. Plain clothes, and you'd assume detectives, and Chris didn't know the hierarchy though he was surprised when he investigated the Zodiac case a bit that the lead SFPD detectives -- and they did call those guys Homicide Inspectors -- were often just sergeants, by rank.

At any rate he said *Hi, howya doing* to the guy up top, and the guy didn't say anything back but watched him now, and when Chris paused in front of his door, B-9, and pulled out the key, the cop called over, "Have a word with you?"

Chris decided not to open the door just yet, or maybe any time soon, and when he looked around the Tennessee Titans' guy was on his way too, headed to the front staircase.

"Sure," Chris said tentatively to the first guy. "Is there a problem?"

A dumb question, he realized as he said it, especially the *way* he said it, if you were trying to portray innocence, but that didn't seem too important at present since they were standing right here in his face.

The first guy took a minute, sizing him up, and nothing Chris could do about it, you felt as exposed as in one of those full-body scans at the airport.

"You're Seely, we already know that," the first guy said.

"If we didn't," the second guy said now, reaching the top of the landing, "we might have better things to do tonight than be waiting on you with our dick in our hands."

Chris's heart was beating dang quick, a million thoughts racing through his head . . . but he didn't like this guy's attitude, and not much to lose at this point, so he said, "If you're going to speak like that, you need to take it off private property. There are respectable folks living here."

You could see the Tennessee Titans guy had a short fuse, and he took an aggressive step toward Chris, and the first guy said, "*Hal*. We're okay here. Relax it a bit."

So Hal stopped and Chris said to the first guy, “Pretty sure you asked, *can I have a word with you?* Any follow up on that?” He was being obnoxious for sure, the false bravado kicking in that typically means this is not going to turn out well.

On the other hand . . . the glimmer of hope being, what he’d considered a minute ago, that if this *did* have something to do with him they likely weren’t ready to haul him in quite yet. *At least you prayed.*

The second guy said, “Fine. Cutting straight *to it*, asshole -- we’re looking for Kenneth Chamberlain.”

“We have a 6th sense you might know him,” the first guy said, no smiles anywhere.

*Holy Smokes.*

A couple of emotions kicked in. First, that they really *weren’t* looking for *him*, Chris, tonight. Which hopefully wasn’t a ruse, but then again why beat around the bush if they *were* looking at him right now?

So relief.

Then concern. Kenny? What the heck?

Chris had had that first unfortunate encounter with Ken, which had turned out to be a misunderstanding, and the kid took it well, pretty admirably in fact. From then on, sure, Ken was confused here and there, the direction of his life, his jobs, his relationships, no different than any 25-year-old probably . . . but Jeez, when you stripped it all away he was a sweet kid, someone who’d go to the wall for you when the chips were down.

In fact, that first time Chris had to go away the police stopped by and tried to rattle Ken, and Ken politely but firmly told them he had no idea where Chris was, even though he did.

So . . . piecing it together in about five seconds with these two yokels bearing down on you, one or both of them emanating garlic too, which Chris hated having to smell . . . you’d have to assume there’d been a raid on Mancuso’s porno-flicks gig.

Ken of course had become a male actor in the proceedings, a reasonably popular one as well, according to Ned. Chris was happy for Ken because *he* seemed happy with it, and the money was good, but this was always in the back of Chris's mind, that something could go haywire legally at a moment's notice.

After all, it wasn't that long ago when Chris heard about Ned being pinched, and Rory the Crow's Nest waitress as well . . . and even though Ned didn't seem worried about it and admittedly it got smoothed over . . . you still felt like everyone involved in the Strand house operation was pushing the odds.

So this couldn't be good, and you'd have to be resourceful and help Kenny deflect this. Doubtful they'd actually *sentence* a porno actor, in the full scheme of things, *would* they?

The kid didn't assault someone or anything, so let's be real.

"How about an Emma Klinheist," the first cop said. "*She* ring a bell? *Except . . . now this was getting weird.*"

Chris said, "I do as a matter of fact. Or *she does*, the way you asked it." He felt on automatic pilot, no idea where it was going here. He thought of something else, panicked and added, "Are they both okay?"

"Oh they're fine, far as we know," the second one said.

"Which we'd like to confirm of course," the first guy said, "as soon as you tell us where they disappeared to."

"Unh?" Chris said.

"Tell you what," the first one said, "let's go inside, in fact my partner Hal here, he'll run next door to Taco Bell, and pick up some nachos, so you can get comfortable and tell us all about it."

Chris could see less odds of Hal doing that than the man on the moon, but they were playing with him, which was okay, so he played back, "Funny thing, I've lived here nearly six months, only stopped in there once."

"Open the fucking door," the first guy said.



“I’d love to,” Chris said, “except the chairs are more comfortable at the pool . . . That is, if you need me for anything further.”

Chris was irked when he’d read about criminals in the paper get off on technicalities, or sleazy lawyers overturning searches as being improper, even when everyone knew they had the guy dead to rights.

Probably 25 years ago cop number 1 would have held Chris’s arms and number two would have grabbed the key out his pocket and they all three would have gone inside the apartment.

Now every law enforcement move was documented and even one of these guys right here might be required to wear some kind of body camera or otherwise record what was going on, so Chris supposed that was one benefit of all these technicalities . . . and he held firm and started down the steps to the pool, and the two cops followed him.

Chris let himself in the gate and sat down under an umbrella, which you would never need at night, except now with this light drizzle it didn’t hurt . . . and the two guys conferred with each other for a minute at the bottom of the stairs, and surprisingly -- almost shockingly -- without any further acknowledgement of Chris, they got in their cars and drove out of the Cheater Five.

Chris sat there a while trying to process yet another strange turn of events today. He’d given up smoking years ago, for the most part, but he wouldn’t mind lighting up something himself.

Soon there was activity in the pool, a young couple with a toddler had moved into a downstairs unit, and they were all three of them splashing around now and laughing. They’d no doubt out-grow their one-bedroom apartment pretty quick, but for now it was refreshing having some young spirit around here. The kid jumped off the side and his mom caught him, a big orange floatie on each arm, and Chris gave a little wave of approval and the dad asked how his day was going, and Chris said just fine, how about you, and the dad said if you want to know the truth it was one of the most

aggravating days of his life, and he's not sure how long he's going to last in his job.

But there was levity behind it, nothing life and death, and the wife pitched in that she was the breadwinner until she got pregnant, and might have to step back up to the plate . . . and the husband shook his head but smiled and cuddled up to her and the little guy jumped off the side again and they caught him together, and life was apparently still okay.

Chris showered and got cleaned up, and poked around the nooks and crannies of the apartment to see if there was any sign Ken had been there recently.

It didn't look like it. Ken's roommate-ship had been uneven for a while, and Chris never pressed the issue, the kid was clearly experiencing some growing pains. For a while there it looked like he'd hooked up with one of the gal performers from the Strand house, but who knows where that went, or if it was still alive.

Could be. Maybe the gal simply didn't like Chris and was more comfortable not coming around. That first time they were introduced she got pretty defensive when Chris asked a few what he thought were routine, break-the-ice questions, and what could you do?

He plopped down in the recliner -- and dang that felt good, separate from everything else -- and he debated it, would he be trackable making the call, and would it matter -- and went for it and called Ken's cell . . . and not only was there the expected no answer, but there was a recording saying the number you've dialed is no longer in service . . . and Chris was back at attention here.

He hadn't spoken to Emma in a while, in fact just once at the library was all he could place, since the ill-fated high school reunion episode in San Francisco -- but he dug out her number and . . . same exact thing, different recorded person speaking, but telling you her number was not in service either.

There were a lot of reasons why a cell number could be off the grid. They could have plunged off a bridge into a bay, he supposed, never to be heard from again. Even then though . . . would that cancel your service?

This was stupid either way. Chris knew from experience that you dismantle your phone and pick up a throwaway, untraceable one from a convenience store like 7-11 when you need to disappear.

Meaning -- combined with the cops asking for locations -- odds were that's what was going on here.

It just seemed so entirely unlikely though. Ken and Emma disappearing together?

Chris tried five or six different ways to wrap his head around it, and was starting on the seventh when the apartment bell rang.

This was a bit disconcerting. It could be the cops again, for one, maybe having forgotten to slip in a follow up question. Or worse, threaten him with some kind of charges, if he didn't cooperate more agreeably on Ken and Emma -- since they would know LAPD talked to him a couple times in the past, and he'd unfortunately be on the radar. The one cop even seemed to reference that -- they knew who he was.

In fact it was kind of surprising they didn't use that card harder the first time.

This could also be Ken -- a *relief* in one sense, to see him in the flesh and know he's okay -- but certainly problematic as well.

It could also be someone ringing the *wrong* bell, a guy delivering take-out Chinese, but that was less likely.

Chris got up, said screw it, no *who's there* through the door, he just pulled it open and it was Stacy.

She was crying and this couldn't reflect well on Ken's behalf. She and Ken were tight at one time, in fact living together when Chris and Ken first met -- long story, some issues apparently, maybe another guy involved, and

they broke up. But she'd re-surface every so often, and Chris hoped for the best between them, since he liked her the best of Ken's girlfriends.

In fact, flashing in his head now was the time he came back from his *own* self-imposed disappearance, the first one, only to find Stacy in the apartment, caught off guard and embarrassed, explaining she and Ken were giving it another try and they didn't expect him back so soon, and starting to scramble around grabbing her stuff to get out of there . . . and Chris opened his arms to see what would happen, and Stacy came into them and they had a nice hug, a special one, and Chris told her to relax, you and Ken don't have to go anywhere . . . which worked for another week, before things fell apart again.

Something else too, which he kept forgetting: Stacy had masterfully engineered the fake painting, which closed the deal on the Craigslist guy. That situation could have gone a *whole* different direction without her efforts.

Chris said now, "What Sweetie?"

Stacy didn't say anything, and Chris motioned her in, and he made her some tea, and she took a couple sips and said she heard from Ken, 11:30 this morning, that he was in trouble and what should he do.

"Okay whoa, here," Chris said. "Heard from him how?"

"He texted me," she said. "I texted him back, called him 5 minutes later too. I tried several more times. Finally his phone didn't work."

"What *kind* of trouble?"

"He didn't say what kind."

"Fine. But I'm asking *you* now -- what kind of trouble is he in?"

"I wish I knew. I don't."

"Don't bullshit me," Chris said, surprising her, and himself a bit too. He held her gaze, but she didn't avert her eyes, she seemed genuinely perplexed, not to mention scared.

“Okay that’s on me,” he said. “My fault, I didn’t mean to strongarm you.” He told her about the cops showing up.

Stacy started crying again and when she came up for air she said, “See, that’s the thing.”

“Meaning . . . you’re not surprised? The law enforcement aspect?”

“No,” she said, “I *am* surprised. Totally. I can’t imagine . . .” And some tears again, the voice a little raspier.

Chris debated opening a can of worms, but decided to bring up the Strand house stuff.

“I know all about it,” she said. “You’ll think I’m crazy, but I’m happy for him. He’s able to do his thing, he’s fulfilled.”

Chris might have put it a little differently, the last part, but forget that. “How about the Emma lady?” he said.

“Well . . . I don’t know about currently, but at one time they were screwing . . . Sorry to come out with it, Ken swore me to secrecy on that one.”

“That’s fine, don’t worry about it,” Chris said. He’d suspected that might have been the case, there were too many signs, in Chris’s view all of them instigated by Emma . . . the Mrs. Robinson syndrome he supposed, and Ken was a healthy human and she wore him down. At least that was the easiest way to look at it.

“Did it continue though,” Chris said, “I mean their . . . relationship . . . once he started . . . you know?”

“You mean doing the porno scenes? I’m not sure. That’s around when I moved up to Bakersfield for a while. I don’t think she cared for it though, his new line of work.”

“No, she probably wouldn’t,” Chris thinking *that’s for sure*, since *a*, Emma had him to herself every day in the library *before* that, and *b*, of all jobs he could have taken, he ends up in the one that centers on multiple female anatomy.

Chris said, “But you have no *idea* what their status has been lately? Say the last few weeks? I mean has he *said* anything, even something innocuous where maybe you can read between the lines? . . . When’s the last time you spoke to him . . . before he texted you this morning?”

Stacy shifted around and started to try to answer, and it was clear she didn’t know a whole lot more than she already said, and Jeez, why keep putting her through this, and Chris felt like a jerkell interrogator, like these guys who are always on their high horse in online discussion forums.

Chris said, “Let’s lay off it for a while, how about? . . . You’ve been through a lot, and you’re taking it hard. Which we all appreciate. I mean me and Kenny both . . . If I’ve never mentioned it, you have a good heart.”

This boosted her a little bit, and she half-smiled for the first time since she’d shown up, and Chris said how about they find a movie, and Stacy said thank you but she needed to go, and Chris didn’t take no for an answer and fired up the popcorn maker and melted some butter, and they sat on the couch with a bunch of napkins, and Chris flipped around Netflix and found a good one, Robert Redford in Jeremiah Johnson.

Admittedly some death and destruction in there, which he wanted to avoid, but it was set back in the old west and the landscape was so spectacular, especially the remastered high-def version, that it did the job . . . which was seem to settle Stacy down for the 120-or-so minutes it ran, though Chris wished he could say the same.

When it was over she was at the door pretty quick, and she thanked him and he made sure she didn’t need a ride, and she said she was good, that her friend Martin was waiting for her outside.

“*Excuse me?*” Chris said. “*Recently?* . . . I mean, you’re not saying . . .”

“Yes, he brought me. I told him I might be a few minutes, and he was fine with it.”

And she was gone, and Chris decided you can only scratch your head sometimes.

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On a list of 100 things you could do the rest of the night, going back out would be last. But Chris got in the car and drove down to the Crowe's Nest.

Which was not quite accurate. Parking in this once quaint little beach town was getting really messed up. That was one reason, not the main one, but a factor, in why he moved out of San Francisco and down here in the first place.

Not that you could get anywhere in the Los Angeles area once you *were* here, that was a different animal, LA traffic, but you at least expected to put your vehicle *remotely* where you wanted it, in your own town on a late Sunday night in March.

But apparently not, and Chris ended up off Manhattan Beach Boulevard but way up there, near the elementary school, in fact three or four blocks beyond the police station where the Regan guy supposedly got dragged this morning.

At any rate . . . one or two familiar hands went up when Chris walked into the Nest, though no one exactly got up and greeted him or called him over, but still it was good to be recognized, and slowly but surely he was feeling like a local.

Ned was here, you caught that right away, holding court in his corner table spot, a couple of attractive women sitting opposite him at the moment actually . . . but whatever, at least he *was* here and Chris hadn't wasted a trip.

You could have phoned Ned, saved the trek period, but like a lot things this past year it was questionable if that was the safest approach, meaning what kind of electronic residue you might leave. Chris had reminded himself pretty much from Day 1 of his business, after he got diagnosed, to treat all technology like it could remember you -- rational or not -- and he'd done a reasonable job of sticking *to* that. There had been

various lapses, induced by fatigue, stupidity and plain old indifference on occasion -- but you could only control what you did going forward, and if you can see a guy in person without driving a thousand miles, you better do it that way.

Ned spotted Chris, and he did stand up, and he said something to the two women, and he motioned Chris over to the table.

“My brother,” he said. “What’s shaking? It’s good to see you tonight, wasn’t expecting you.”

Which was fair enough, Chris wasn’t much of a Sunday night person in here, it was typically Friday or Saturday, and maybe a week night that he stopped in, though there’d been exceptions. But Sunday nights he liked to watch 60 Minutes and then there was a British spy series on PBS, and by that point he typically figured don’t be a hero and go anywhere, save it for the fresh week.

Chris said, “Well, what can you do?” And Ned said, “Lydia and Margo, say hello to my good friend Chrissie -- you don’t mind if I call you that in public, do you?” Ned laughing about it, and the girls politely smiling as well.

And this little joke stemmed from when they went to the pro tennis matches at Indian Wells, Ned and Chris and a few others . . . and you could appreciate the skill level of the players but soon enough the points started to run together on you, not much variety or creativity out there, all of them pretty darn clone-like . . . and Ned and Chris started talking about other eras in tennis, and Chris Evert’s name came up, a 1970’s women’s champion, and Ned unfortunately used that as a springboard to start calling him Chrissie.

But the guy meant well, Chris was pretty sure by now, and you kept coming back to that fact. Yeah Ned was still mysterious and probably a sleazebag, or worse, on some level -- except Chris kept on *looking* for that



level, with his guard up, and hadn't found it yet. And Ned had shown some character, let's face it, in legitimately going to bat for Chris more than once.

And who knows, Ned probably pegged *him* the same way -- mysterious too, and probably a scumbag, but not able to pinpoint that yet himself, seeing as how they got along okay.

So it was what it was . . . and Chris said, "You see Kenny? I mean today, yesterday . . . anything?"

"I haven't," Ned said. "I actually gave him a little time off. You know, suggested it. Seemed like he needed it, they all do after a while, whether they admit to it or not."

"Did he seem, like *normal* and everything?"

"No. He didn't like it, and I went from suggesting it, to insisting . . . Which I can understand, no one wants to lose the income, but I told him give it ten days or so . . . In fact a buddy of mine, we have a connection, there's a cruise ship, leaves from Long Beach, goes down to Baja. You come back refreshed."

Here you go again. Ned didn't spell it out but it was clear the cruise wasn't going to cost Ken anything, that Ned was either forking over at least some of it, or otherwise making it work.

"But?" Chris said, and Ned gave him an irritated look, like what more do you want from me, and Ned paused and said excuse us a couple minutes to Margo and Lydia, and they didn't say anything but seemed comfortable, and Ned with his head directed Chris into a back room to the left of the bar.

There was an old metal desk in there and some celebrity photos on the wall, signed, as well as a couple of gold records, in frames, Chris figured from when LA was still a recording studio hub, and there was other memorabilia up there as well, and it would have been interesting to examine the stuff, and see just who might be connected to whom around here . . . but some other time.

Chris said, "Those gals at your table, is that for . . . part of Ken's business? The Strand stuff?" Chris couldn't help it, he knew it wasn't exactly like that -- necessarily -- but whenever he met one of Ken's possible co-workers, he pictured them hooking up.

"Yes and no," Ned said, and what the heck did *that* mean?

Chris said, "Ken's gone AWOL I think."

You could see Ned tossing it around, working the angles. He said, "Okay, that cruise deal, for starters, he didn't take me up on it."

"Was there, I don't know, something building up that you noticed?"

"You mean some load he was carrying? The might have bubbled over?"

"Yeah?"

"No, not that I saw, not blatant anyway. He performed his tasks as directed, no discernable chinks in the armour -- always showed up on time, took his lunch, punched his timecard like everyone else. What can I tell you."

"Jeez. You guys actually have time cards?"

"No, just an *expression*. Why are you sure he went Awol? Ask *around*, he'll turn up. Ask Chandler in fact, he probably played tennis with him *today*."

It was pretty clear by now that Ned *didn't* know anything -- much less was involved himself with Ken in whatever this new situation was . . . and Ned seemed genuinely curious, though he wasn't going to lose sleep over it.

Chris said, "At first, when the cops fired a few questions at me, my thought was y'all got pinched."

"I'll give you that," Ned said. "You were applying common sense."

"Playing the odds," Chris said, waiting on a little more reaction from Ned, who naturally kept it light.

"That, you don't have to worry about currently," Ned said.

"Unh. New zoning commissioner, and all?"

“No, same one,” Ned said, leaving it right there, and on the one level you could tell Ned enjoyed playing with him, but on the other there were gray areas you probably didn’t want to stick your nose into.

Chris said, “So yeah, that crossed my mind *first*. But then cop number two asked if I knew Emma Klinheist.”

“Wait a sec -- the lady you used to hang out with?”

“Yep. Honestly, I didn’t *know* her last name, or else forgot it, until the cops brought it up.”

“Heck,” Ned said. “Out of left field. But could it be a different person?”

“Nah, they were friends. Don’t forget, she got him his gig stacking books in the library . . . Both of ‘em, disappeared from sight, apparently . . . That’s where I’m at.”

Ned was rubbing his cheek. He’d heard enough, you could tell he was ready to get back inside, but he was thinking.

“What?” Chris said.

“She might have picked him up at work a couple times, last month or so, now that I think about it.”

“So?”

“So nothing, I’m just saying . . . what’d you *tell* them?”

“Not much, it didn’t get to that. They took off when I suggested chatting by the pool instead of in the apartment.”

“Hmm . . . so they were looking for something. I thought Kenny wasn’t rooming with you much anymore.”

“He’s not. But maybe it’s a more stable address than anywhere else he’s been holing up . . . or maybe they were just fishing, checking everywhere. Getting a look at *me* in the process.”

“I didn’t want to point that out,” Ned said, and this was true, since a *look* at Chris could theoretically lead to a connection to Ned . . . but the cops taking off pretty quickly seemed to ease that concern for both of them.

“I won’t hold you up,” Chris said.

“No, it’s fine, I’m glad you brought this to my attention. It’ll straighten itself out, don’t lose any sleep . . . meanwhile, you say hi to Rose?”

“Rose? That’s where it’s at now?”

“Sure, why not.”

“Well I didn’t actually. Didn’t spot her.”

“She’s there, she’s found her comfort zone in here. The patrons love her.”

“I bet they do,” Chris said, letting it hang, waiting for something out of Ned, and finally a smile, and Ned reached out and ruffled Chris’s hair the way a playful uncle might do it with a nephew . . . and again, how ticked off at the guy could you actually be?

They went back inside and Chris found Rosie now, middle of the bar, seated between two guys, both pretty husky, her little frame apparently blocked out when Chris had first shown up tonight.

“What do we got,” he said, tapping her on the arm.

Rosie turned, her expression brightened, and she came off her stool and mumbled something friendly, gave Chris a wet kiss, sort of on the lips but not quite, and it seemed a bit alcohol-induced, but Chris figured, good enough, he’d take it tonight.

The two guys sandwiching her weren’t thrilled but weren’t going to interfere, and Chris was thinking maybe they take a walk up the block, he and Rosie, catch up a bit for old times’ sake, get a little more lowdown on how she’s adjusting to the southern California lifestyle -- but Rosie had swung back around and re-picked up whatever she had going with the two guys, and that was that.

## Chapter 5

Chris went home, had a bowl of cereal, satisfied himself that for tonight anyhow, he was exhausted enough to block out the real world, and wouldn't even need the recliner as a sleep-aid -- and lumbered down the hall to the bedroom and forgot to turn off the side light, but it didn't matter, he was out like a shot.

Until about two-thirty in the morning when the phone rang.

Chris's first thought, a weird one frankly, was I have to change the dumb marimba sound on that thing, if I can figure it out.

"You awake?" Ned said.

"No. Jesus."

"Listen . . . on that deal you ran by me earlier tonight?"

This didn't deserve an answer, what *else* had they talked about. Don't be adding a Preface, not at this hour.

Ned said, "Your Emma friend, she tried to kill her husband."

"Huh?"

"Over in Torrance. She used some kinda garden tool on him, they said."

Chris was rubbing his eyes hard, trying to come-to in a hurry.

"You mean, *attempted* it? But it didn't *work*?"

"That part's unclear," Ned said. "Just thought you'd want to know."

"Yeah, dang . . . thanks," Chris said, trying to put it together here, *what the heck*, and was this even the right information . . . though Ned got that kind of stuff right . . . especially when he went to the trouble of contacting you in the middle of the night, there was substance behind it.

And Chris realized he hadn't asked anything more about Kenny, and he started to but Ned had hung up.

And some guys you'd call right back in that situation, but it was clear Ned told him what he wanted to, or what he knew, and it was up to Chris to interpret it.

He got up again, flipped around late night TV, settled on MLB Network where they were replaying spring training games at all hours, most of them from Florida, the Grapefruit League, but some from Arizona, the Cactus League as well, such as the Giants of all people right now in the 5th inning against the Colorado Rockies.

Chris took a minute and studied the screen, trying to figure out which team's spring training park they were playing in, meaning did he recognize the Giants' one. It was hard to tell, most of the wide shots of the stadium featured families in grassy areas along the foul lines more or less picnicking as the game proceeded, and they always seemed to be having a good old time.

What the devil was even the name of that guy, the ballplayer Chris acted on, where the field maintenance machine happened to come in handy at the right time on a sleepy Sunday in January.

All of it a reminder that he hadn't checked the Phoenix news for a while, and he better make sure there were no unforeseen developments that could keep him awake *big-time*.

For now though . . . tough as it was to wrap your head around, there *was* a dose of reality to Ned's information . . . that being, Emma had said one time: *If I had a bazooka, I swear, I'd use it on my husband.*

Words to that effect.

Chris could place it too, it was when things were picking up steam between them, and you didn't know where it would go, but Chris was inspired enough to invite Emma up north as his 25th high school reunion date. He didn't have a whole lot of slam-dunk options, but still.

Emma had explained to him when they first met, that yes she was married, but she and her husband had an open relationship, and they lived together strictly for convenience at this point.

A week before the reunion though, Chris got up one morning wanting to be with her and she told him she was in Venice, and they met for a little brunch on the beach boardwalk. It was a warm morning and there was a lot of flesh passing by -- biking, walking, jogging, skating and otherwise -- and Emma expressed an interest in a few of the male bodies, which Chris was fine with, and a female or two as well, which Chris found he was *also* fine with.

She told him the reason she'd been in Venice, spending the night with old college girlfriend, is she had a bad argument with her husband and stormed out of there, and Chris didn't pry into the details, he let her talk, and that's when she built up to the *If I had a bazooka* declaration.

And wait a second, Jeeminy . . .

Now that it was coming back . . . didn't she make a few other similar comments here and there as well?

Because now he remembered that he, Chris, actually drove over there -- the Torrance house -- and parked up the block for twenty minutes before driving away -- but the concern had been, should he inform the husband that Emma might be sliding a bit off the rails.

He realized now too, that part of going there was a sneaky motive of his own, since he didn't completely trust her and wanted to see if there even *was* a husband and if she lived where she said . . . and after those 20 minutes he felt guilty snooping around, even if the original reason had some credence . . . and he didn't give much thought to the guy again.

Now that you were up, unfortunately for good it looked like, you might as well check the news. So first the easy way, on TV, and there was one 11 o'clock LA newscast being replayed, but he came in halfway through and there was nothing about any assault in Torrance.

And let's face it, unless someone died, or it was a particularly noteworthy assaulter or assaultee, it likely wouldn't make a half hour newscast anyway.

So plan B -- Chris was never sure about this -- but the internet. The whole business of leaving tracks -- what kind of stuff your were looking at, even searching. He made a decision this time, that if a man can't simply read the news online, we've gone down the tubes as a society . . . and yep, there was a small item, page 3 of the LA Times, datemarked 6:12 pm, meaning it wouldn't appear in the physical paper until tomorrow morning -- meaning *this* morning, since it was close to 3 now, but whatever.

### **Torrance Man in Critical Condition Following Alleged Domestic Assault**

**by Ruben Barnaby**

**March 18, 2018---A south bay architect is in critical condition tonight following what police say was a domestic argument that escalated into violence in a Torrance townhouse.**

**Nicholas Mathieson, of 1189 Lone Pine Way, was rushed to Torrance Memorial Medical Center at approximately 11:45 this morning, after a dog walker reportedly heard a man calling for help from the residence.**

**Police declined to specify the nature of the assault, but sources tell the LA Times that a hand tool was involved.**

**Police offered no other information at this time.**

**Records show that Mathieson, 46, maintained an office in Redondo Beach, and has been married three times, most recently to Gina Mae Loren, whose whereabouts at this hour are unknown.**

Sheesh . . .



Was he all mixed up here, and was even the *right guy* getting assaulted?

A couple things. You could understand Emma, with her personality, not taking a husband's last name -- this guy or anyone else's, even if she was married to *Bradley Cooper*.

But three wives for the dude, the current of which wasn't Emma?

Unless she'd really been feeding Chris a line, faking her whole identity, which seemed going too far, and he dismissed it.

He supposed you'd have to look it up, but not here, you'd need the security of the library computer . . . and just for the heck of it he went through the rest of the LA Times online, and the Daily News too, to see if there was a *different* assault in the last 24 hours in Torrance, but nothing showed up.

Chris felt a little more relaxed about looking around Google Street View, and even so he went incognito mode, which someone told him about recently, not sure if it protected you but why not . . . and there was the townhouse and you could spin it around 360, and if he didn't 100 percent recognize the house he at least pegged it the same block he sat in the car on for the twenty minutes when curiosity got the better of him last fall.

So . . . you had a verified assault. You had the cops, in pretty serious mode, looking for Emma. In theory, they could be looking for her as a material witness, not as the perpetrator . . . heck, maybe this listed third wife, the Gina gal, didn't like Emma for some reason, and took it out on poor Nicholas.

Except then you had Mancuso telling you she hacked the guy. And the sucker did have his connections.

You couldn't fight it at this point, despite the confusing multiple wives deal . . . and when you took the news article literally -- domestic dispute -- Emma might have been making it with the guy on and off, never married to him.

Either way, it was sure coming into focus now that she's in some deep doo-doo . . . But, what does that have to do with Kenny?

Probably plenty, unfortunately. The kid was loyal to a fault, for one, and could be helping her now, hiding her, driving her cross country for all you knew.

However you spun it, this was pretty messed up.

After a while Chris tried to go back to bed but that was useless, and he went down to the pool and there was a paperback someone had left on a patio table, and the security light off the side of the building gave you just enough, and the book happened to be a Western, not great, a bit predictable, but it helped kill a couple hours until the sun came up.

## Chapter 6

“Whoa, I’d say look what the cat dragged in,” Chandler said, “but that’s not quite the appropriate expression.”

“How are you,” Chris said.

“I’m good. Maybe great even. Depending on if I can close this guy out in straight sets.”

Chris had dropped by the Polliwog tennis courts, 10:30 the next morning, a quiet Monday down here, only Chandler and the one guy going at it. Chandler was one of those finicky people who didn’t waver from his schedule, so it was a good bet he’d be here now.

Chris played with Chandler a fair amount for a while, and it wasn’t the *losing* the got to him -- fine, Chandler was a little better, and won most of their encounters -- but it was the cocky attitude he’d lay on you, during, and after.

That’s apparently what was going on today, a young guy with a paisley bandana wrap covering his hair on the far bench working his gatorade and not looking like a real happy participant. Chandler volunteered to Chris that he was up 4-2 in the 2nd set, having won the first 6-3 -- had to throw in the first set *score*, no need for that at all -- and *to what does he owe the pleasure of Chris’s presence today?*

Chris said let’s get into it after you finish, and Chandler pressed up and off the bench, big bounce to his step as he manned the far baseline and got set to return the guy’s serve, which wasn’t much, the guy clearly an intermediate player at best . . . and Chris supposed if it makes your day to line up guys like this and be on the winning handshake so you can brag about your prowess . . . okay, whatever floats your boat.

The important point registering with Chris of course, was Chandler didn't seem to know anything about the other thing.

Meaning he didn't seem worried about anything related to Ken . . . which told you Chandler very likely didn't know that he was in trouble.

The last two games concluded, Chandler winning them both easily, and the opponent didn't bother sitting down any more, he wanted a change of scenery, you could see that, and as the guy headed to his car Chandler called out, "Great effort today, you're really coming on, I'll see you Thursday!"

"Now," he said to Chris, one leg on the high top of the bench, his chin angling toward his knee, stretching out a hamstring.

"You remind me of someone," Chris said, "guy named Maierhoffer. I told you that once, right?"

"I believe so," Chandler said, "you former doubles partner someplace?"

Not exactly, Chris wasn't partners with Maierhoffer, that was for sure, but fine. Chris said, "This guy today, he was a patsy."

"Oh to the contrary," Chandler said. "Sambo played last year at the JC. He's legit."

"Which JC?"

"Orange Coast."

"Yeah right," Chris said, and that would be a bunch of crap, Chris knowing enough to label this guy college-club level at best, and that'd be generous -- the more likely answer, he took a tennis PE class somewhere.

"Think what you want," Chandler said.

"But Jeez, Sambo."

"I know. I mentioned it to him, but he shrugged his shoulders, so what are you gonna do."

Chris remembered Sambo's restaurant chain when he was a kid, in fact there was one on Lombard Street, and the racial connotation of the

word surfaced eventually and they shut down, though they *did* give you a good honest stack of buckwheat cakes, where were hard to find in most breakfast joints.

“What about Ken?” Chris said.

“What *about* him? Different animal of course, he continues to kick my ass every Friday, when he can make it. I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

Chris had dragged Ken out here one day when he first moved into the apartment, and it was surprising how fluid and natural the guy was, and of course modest as well, and Chandler got it out of him that he’d played the high-level USTA junior circuit. Ever since then Chandler put Ken on a pedestal tennis-wise, and took an interest in the kid’s well-being period.

Which is part of why Chris supposed he was beating around the bush here.

“The police were looking for him,” Chris said. “Last night.”

Again, Chris was pretty darn certain this would be news to Chandler, but you still watched his reaction carefully, since Chandler could poker-face you . . . though Chris couldn’t see why that would be necessary now.

“You’re kidding me,” Chandler said.

“Not a joke,” Chris said.

You could see Chandler considering the possibilities, and Chris knew where he was probably headed. They’d never discussed it, but you had to figure between his tennis deal with the kid and his connection to Mancuso, that Chandler was aware of the Strand house business, meaning Ken’s recent involvement there.

Chris re-directed him. “And not where I think you’re going with it. This gal Emma, who I used to know and Kenny did too, she tried to do her husband apparently. The cops asked me about both of ‘em.”

“Which cops?” Chandler was in lawyer mode now, no more bs, no more hamstring stretching going on.

“Plain clothes ones. I’m guessing detectives.”

“LAPD?”

“You would think. Though the thing did happen in Torrance.”

“When?”

“I just said, yesterday.”

“What time?”

“The paper said before noon.”

“What else did it say?”

“Not a lot. The guy was on his third wife, it said. Different name than Emma.”

“Could that have been her real name?”

“It’s possible. My instinct would be, she’s either one of the other two wives, or was making it with the guy on the side.”

“How’d you know her?”

“We dated briefly. I mentioned her to you, I’m pretty sure.”

“What makes you think she’s involved with this assault?”

“Ned Mancuso told me. He didn’t know about Ken either, when I ran it by him. I guess he asked around.”

Chandler was quiet for a minute. He knew as well as Chris that Ned’s information on something like this would be solid.

“Did you know the husband?” Chandler said.

“No, but the other part, this gal was a live wire it turned out, went a little unstable on me later -- not *violent* unstable, but still -- she mentioned to me once wanting to bazooka the guy.”

“Did you report it?”

“What? . . . No, of course not, they’d just had some argument, it sounded like, that she was still steaming from.”

“You didn’t think she was making a credible threat?”

“Oh, well, I did do one thing, a week or so later, I drove over there, thought about knocking on the door, not exactly warning the guy, but relating the comment she made.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Nah, I chickened out.”

“How did she become *a little unstable on you later?*”

“That was nothing, I shouldn’t even have thrown that in. We were at an event is all, and she left in the middle with another guy.”

“Did she and Kenny have relations?”

“Jesus. Okay, you put a gun to my head? I think probably.”

“What else did the newspaper say? Beyond the first *what else.*”

“That’s about it, it was brief. The dude was an architect it said, he was in bad shape, critical condition . . . oh yeah, it mentioned something odd, that according to police the whereabouts of the third wife, a Gina something, where currently unknown.”

“Doesn’t mean anything. They do that, try to drop the guard of the real POI they’re looking for.”

“The rest was the police declining to comment further, only that it was something domestic, but the reporter finding out a hand tool was used . . . which Ned confirmed too, a garden one he said.”

Chandler was silent again.

“What?” Chris said.

“I hope to God he didn’t help her,” Chandler said. “But it looks like they’re working it that way.”

“My thoughts too,” Chris said.

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Obviously the wheels were turning with Chandler now and he’d be making calls and trying to piece it together.

And if he did get anywhere Chris would hear about it soon enough. But . . . you had both phones disconnected, and Stacy -- who let’s face it knew Kenny pretty dang well, despite their ups and downs -- *she* doesn’t know where he is and she’s worried sick.

Chandler would likely pull up more information on the crime itself, but that wasn't going to change much. You already knew you had a guy hanging on in intensive care, who hopefully hadn't croaked . . . and you had a kid on the run, to God knows where.

It was starting to boil down to that now, wasn't it . . . beyond the details of what happened or whether he might or might not have been involved . . . but where *was* the guy?

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Chris was in the taqueria on PCH, Scion's, for no other reason than Finch and the reporter gal talking about it yesterday planted a seed, and on the way back from Chandler he saw the sign and automatically turned in.

They were friendly in here, they left you alone and you could think. Or try to.

Chris never knew a whole lot about Ken's background. It didn't seem appropriate to ask him much, you let him go there if he wanted, and Ken, for all his openness and gregariousness, hadn't said much.

Chris remembered one thing though -- that when Ken worked his deal with the deadbeat motel guest who was causing all the trouble for Sharif, threatening legal action and all -- Ken mentioned he found common ground with the guy, which loosened things up, and the common ground was they were both raised by their grandmothers.

Then again . . . somewhere that'd be public record, wouldn't it? When the cops started digging around, which they probably already had?

Chris had no idea how to get ahold of Stacy at this point, and you hated to involve Dr. Stride now, but maybe you needed to. Stride's number he did have, not the office number but the personal cell, on account of the guy insisting Chris carry it around. That was the least you could do, Chris supposed, after Stride had gone the extra step that time to drop by the apartment and make sure things were okay.



Stride had been his psychiatrist -- technically, though it was a one-shot deal, and a complimentary session with a coupon at that. The thing that happened, which Chris had forgotten about when Stacy showed up last night, was Stride and Stacy were an item briefly.

Putting it back together now, when Stride did his welfare check Chris felt bad and invited him to stay for dinner, and at that point Ken and Stacy were back staying in Chris's apartment so Chris invited them too, and Marlene must have been hanging around the pool or something because she came too.

At the restaurant that night Stride started holding court, and the guy was pretty erudite and Chris supposed interesting too, and Stacy was kind of swept off her feet there, and Ken didn't seem to mind, he was sort of out of it that night.

They all went across the street after dinner to the Nest and yep, Dr. Stride and Stacy sure looked like an item, they didn't try to hide it, and of course you had the Indian Wells tennis event, where Ned got the limo and drove everyone, and the two of them were plenty lovey-dovey there too.

So Gee, Chris must have blanked on the whole business last night, when Stacy had *Martin* waiting outside.

"Bruce here, speak to me please," was how Stride answered Chris's call.

"Very strange," Chris said. "Why would you talk like that?"

There was some hesitation and Dr. Stride placed Chris's voice, and said it was good to hear it. Though you could feel some apprehension there as well, the doctor likely wondering what would be coming next, from a former patient.

Chris said, "I was thinking back just now, I couldn't even remember why you made the personal effort to check on me that time . . . did I *say* something? It must have been a comment that concerned you, right?"

“I believe you called the office,” Dr. Stride said. “The receptionist indicated that you were highly agitated when she couldn’t work you into a follow-up appointment as early as you liked.”

“Yeah well, whatever,” Chris said, and he did remember that now, though he wasn’t sure what he’d wanted the follow-up appointment *for*, but he’s not crazy, there must have been a good enough reason.

“I’m going to cut you off here,” Stride said, since I detect where this might be going.”

“Whoa.”

“I cannot in good faith treat you any further Mr. Seely. We’ve had excessive social contact together. I’m sure you understand.”

“Okay knock it off with the fake formality . . . and what if I didn’t want any further sessions?”

“Your prerogative,” Dr. Stride said. “Though as you might recall, my recommendation was for continued therapy.”

Which it had been, this was true, Chris making the mistake at the end of that comp session of telling Stride to give it to him straight, that he was mostly fine right? And didn’t require real therapy? . . . and Stride *gave* it to him straight, that frankly there were some significant red flags today in the material we covered.

“Is that . . . still your recommendation,” Chris said. “I mean after you’ve gotten to know me socially and all, like you say?”

“Absolutely,” Dr. Stride said.

Chris thought about this. One more piece of unpleasant news on his plate, that he’d apparently been forgetting about on purpose.

“What about Stacy?” Chris said.

“Oh. What about her?”

“You tell *me*.” This was obnoxious, but it was good to take the upper hand with this guy when you could.

“How *is* she?” Stride said. “*Fuck* it -- is everything *alright*?”

“She’s fine,” Chris said. “I knew the *regular guy* was in there somewhere.”

“No, it’s just . . . you startled me momentarily. I apologize.”

“You guys broke up then?”

“She broke it off,” Stride said, leaving it at that, and Chris figured he better ease off the pedal, and asked for her phone number, and you could tell Stride didn’t have to look it up, that he had it memorized.

“Good then,” Chris said, not saying why he needed to reach Stacy, and Stride didn’t ask. “So I’ll let you go.”

“Don’t be a stranger,” Dr. Stride said. “Just not professionally.”

“I got the message the first time,” Chris said. “If . . . I don’t know, I did ever want to speak to someone -- hypothetically . . . how would that *work*?”

“I’m happy you asked. I’ll have the office contact you.”

“I mean who would you recommend? Knowing me like you sort of do.”

“Dr. Hammerstein,” Stride said right away.

“Male or female?”

“Male. Let’s please not pass judgment in that regard. You asked my opinion.”

“You guys got any females in your stable there? . . . That might connect with me the same?”

You could tell Stride was irritated, but a moment later he gave Chris a Dr. Lauren Moore, in Topanga Canyon, and told him to take care.

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“Listen,” Chris said to Stacy . . . In fact first, long shot obviously, but you haven’t heard anything, right?”

“No. Listen, what?” she said.

“I’ve been rattling this around. Where would he go? Anything cross your mind there? No matter how inconsequential it might seem?”

“All’s I thought of,” she said, “he had a friend, Drake, in North Carolina.”

“Do you have a last name on that?” Chris said.

“I don’t. He had an old girlfriend from high school also. I think she still texted him sometimes.”

“Where was that?”

“I believe New Mexico.” A bell did ring, something Chris forgot, Kenny telling him one time he grew up mostly in Albuquerque.

“He mention a grandmother?” Chris said. “Or any other living relatives?”

“Not to me,” she said, and you could hear the distress creeping into her voice again.

“It’s okay,” Chris said. “I’m thinking let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves, let’s cover the basics first.”

Stacy mumbled that that sounded like a plan.

“Do you know where his car is?” Chris said. “Is there any way to confirm it’s not around?”

“That sounded backwards,” she said.

“I’m just brainstorming. Where would he typically park it? These days. Do you know?”

“You know what, I should have thought of that. Something so basic.”

“Believe me,” Chris said, “easy to do.”

“Well he *was* seeing this one person, *sort* of recently, I think she was in North Hollywood, but that went caput, I’m pretty sure.”

“What was *her* name?”

“Mellow.”

“Gee.”

“I know. Mellow *Marsh*, if you can believe it, was what he told me.”

“Ooh boy . . . was she, you know, part of the deal?”

“His work? I think so . . . but before then, for a while, he was parking in the garage off Rosekrans.”

Chris knew that one, he'd parked there for a couple days himself when he first arrived in Manhattan Beach and was apartment hunting, and made the mistake of staying in a fleabag motel two blocks from the beach up by El Porto, which didn't include parking.

The garage had a long term rate, and Chris figured you did need that down here, given the dicey parking situation, period.

“Okay then thanks, I'll take a look,” Chris said.

“I've got this,” Stacey said, and you heard a little more conviction in here voice, having something now to at least try, and she clicked off.

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Wow, Chris hoped he hadn't been talking too loud, and he hated it when others talked on the phone in restaurants . . . but what could you do, and he turned back to the business at hand which was dealing with the immense burrito currently in front of him, the wet Manadero special, and it felt like he'd been working it hard without much to show for the effort.

“They *are* huge, aren't they,” the guy in the next booth chimed in, friendly.

“What,” Chris said, “I'm wearing my emotions on my sleeve?”

“We normally split one, the wife and I, and even then often need a doggie bag.” Calling the gal across from him *the wife* apparently, and her not seeming to have a problem with it, or maybe immune.

“I'm JJ by the way,” the guy said, reaching his hand over the top of the booth, and JJ was eating tacos today, Chris could see, and didn't especially want to shake it but you had to, and the guy meant well.

“Christian,” he said, not thrilled to be identifying himself to the guy, no real logic behind that, but still. He did use Christian a little more lately, these type of situations. Not as extreme as George, who he was out in Eclipse, Arizona -- or for that matter the guy he was briefly in Bingham,

Nevada, that one might have been *Art*, though your name didn't come up as often in a casino town, mainly just to sign in at the motel, and fork it over once in a while at the blackjack tables when everyone decided to get friendly, typically when the dealer busted a few times in a row.

The guy from the next booth unfortunately ran with this now, mentioning a YouTube channel that had someone named Christian as the host, and he carried on for a minute, how he loved the guy's desert scenes north of Las Vegas . . . and *the wife* perked up for the first time and said they spend time out there in the winter, and she enjoyed the YouTube guy's narration as well.

Chris said that sounded interesting, though he *had* seen those and enjoyed them himself, but didn't want to get into a thing about it with these people right now. You did have to give the YouTube Christian credit, he was tough, he'd visit one of the Area 51 gates in the middle of the night, not worry about the spooky security that was eyeballing you, and he'd sleep out in the desert sometimes so he could give you unique late night and early morning footage.

Chris said, "You folks are on the move, then? Since you say you spend time in Las Vegas in the winter?"

"We're RVers," the man nodded, and Chris was tempted to look outside but figured a lot of these people towed a small car.

"Fully equipped park out there behind Sam's Town," the woman said.

"It's technically a KOA," the man said, "but you wouldn't know it. That's our home base."

"What's it run?" Chris said, since you might as well ask.

"Welp, we got a 60-footer," the guy said, "so depending on your add-ons, about 55 a night a night."

"Not bad then," Chris said.

"But," the wife said, "then your extended stay specials come into play."

“They do,” the husband said. “\$1530 for 3 months, or you can go the full 5, for \$2350.”

Chris not wanting to now, but doing more quick calculating of people’s monthly rents . . . and man.

He was wondering could you poke a hole it in, some aspect that was a real drawback, but nah, leave it alone, and he asked them what they were doing out here, specifically.

“We’re over at Dockweiler,” the man said, and this rang a bell because Chris had mentioned it to that nice couple who ran the motel in the midwest, the return trip with Rosie, though he didn’t know any details, he’d just driven by it on the way to Marina del Rey, and it was a big cement parking lot full of RV’s, no flavor or glamor to it, except you were right off the dang beach.

This was chit-chat and Chris had the real business at hand to deal with, and you should wrap it up . . . but these were good people and you never know, so Chris said, “Where would you go, if you were going to get lost?”

“You mean, *really* get lost?” the husband said. “Or go -- whachamacall -- off the grid.”

“Or do you mean spiritually?” the wife chipped in. “Because for that one, I’d vote for the canyons in Utah.”

“True,” the husband said, “we spent a month at the Dale Preck park at Bryce, and it does cause you to reflect.”

“No, the second one,” Chris said. “Disappear. Like in the movies.”

“To find oneself then,” the wife said.

Gol darn it. “No,” Chris said. “If for instance, the police were looking for you, or something.”

“That’d be up north,” the husband said, kind of surprising Chris by not having to think about it. “Oregon, Washington State. A lot of beauty up

there, but can be awful remote. Plus the rain, that can afford you a degree of concealment.”

Chris didn't understand *that* one, but figured fine, the cops were maybe a little less interested in looking for you when they were getting rained on every day.

“Why do you ask?” the wife said, and Chris didn't know why, other than he'd been wrestling with it now close to 24 hours.

He said, “I'm a True Crime buff. Starting with the Zodiac Killer up in the Bay Area . . . Law Enforcement, even with all the advances in forensics, DNA, what have you -- it seems they run into so many dead ends. Guys are disappearing on 'em. It makes you think.”

“Think what?” the wife said, and this was getting irritating but Chris said, “That in a perfect world, I'd like to track down a few of those SOB's -- bring them to justice.”

“I hear you,” the husband said. “Frankly I can't stomach reading the papers much. The bad guys are winning.”

“Would you split up?” Chris said. “If you were one of them, and you had an accomplice?”

The guy thought about it. “That, I can see both ways. Two heads is better than one, maybe . . . But yeah, I'd split up. Look what happened to Bonnie and Clyde.”

Chris said, well thanks, this has been fun, and to enjoy the rest of your stay, and he did need a doggie bag . . . and outside the taqueria the phone rang and Stacy said Ken's car was in that lot.

“Gee, you didn't fool around,” Chris said.

“No. My interest was way off the charts. I can't believe I didn't think of it sooner.”

“Any, clues or whatnot? I mean, there was no . . . like blood or something . . . *was* there?” He hated to sound like a cop and be asking, but whatever.



“Not that I noticed,” she said. “I realized I had the key, on my keyring. We’d share it sometimes.”

“Sheesh.”

“I know . . . so I guess I took the liberty of looking around inside.”

Chris waited.

“Ken was neat and orderly, as you know,” she said.

“So . . . nothing then? The . . . trunk or otherwise?”

“No.”

Chris was tempted to ask if she’d checked the wheel well, that little dip under the spare tire that may not be in all cars, but was in his own Camry at least . . . and which he’d utilized himself on occasion.

But don’t go overboard.

He said, “Well thanks then. This is politically incorrect, but you have some cajones, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“I appreciate that,” she said, and this was getting weird, but the fact was it did take some nerve to enter and mess around in a vehicle that you knew the cops would be looking for.

Chris got in his own car and thought, *that was pretty simple, wasn’t it* . . . and on a whim he drove to the Manhattan Beach library.

It seemed a normal-enough Monday afternoon in the place, and Chris went upstairs to Emma’s section, where she was a reference librarian in the non-fiction and archival department, and her desk was empty which didn’t mean too much, since half the time she was away from it.

There was an old guy Chris recognized, a volunteer who re-stacked shelves, and Emma had introduced him once. The guy wobbled a little and had an arm that didn’t work, and Emma said he had polio as a child, and Chris had tried to figure the time frame, whether polio would have still been around, and maybe it was.

Chris said, “Emma in today, by any chance?”

The guy recognized Chris, he was still plenty sharp, and said, “I wish she were . . . the fact is, the police were here this morning, asking the same sort of questions.”

“Oh my God,” Chris said.

“I know,” the guy said.

“Do we know . . . what’s going on?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” the guy said, and there was a little edge to it, the guy not entirely convinced Chris walked in innocent and naive.

“Well,” Chris said, “what about her car? Where’s *that* at, do you think?”

You had to be careful of course, it might or might not get back to the cops that this friend of Emma’s was asking questions -- but then again wouldn’t that be natural enough, the cops bang on your door and you’re concerned and you go looking for her?

“I have no idea,” the guy said. “It’s not in the lot, if that’s what you’re asking. I took a look myself.”

“Is there . . . like a spillover lot? Ever?”

“There is, but you’re barking up the wrong tree. She has a blue decal, that’s seniority, never gets shut out of the main one.”

Chris thanked the guy and asked him where the spillover lot was anyway, and it was four blocks away, 18th and Flourney, and Chris walked over there, and it was a sizable parking lot, but geared toward one of those live-work condo complex deals, but yeah, there were some city employee decals on a few cars, but nothing of Emma’s. She drove a Subaru unless that had changed, forest green, and she commented a few times how she felt safe with the four wheel drive going up to Tahoe.

So . . . was something like *that* a possibility?

He got back to the apartment and checked his email and there was one from Holly, nothing in the body of the email, but the subject line said:

## **Read at your own risk**

and there was an attachment, and Chris clicked on that, and it was a manuscript, presumably the one she'd backed off on sending Finch . . . and Chris wondered if she still had cold feet, was afraid of Finch's reaction and only sent it to *him*.

But then he saw it was only one page, and man, this gal really did lack some confidence, what was the big deal . . . and Chris went ahead and read it, and so far, nothing about the lady who walked cross-country for charity.

There was something else too, he should have put 2 and 2 together earlier, and Chris didn't have her number but didn't want to get into an email exchange, and looked up the Daily Gull, and the receptionist transferred him.

"Holly McGhee," she said.

"You have like a city desk there," Chris said. "Or it's not that specialized?"

"Hey there, how are *you*?" she said.

"I guess I'm honored, I got your piece of writing."

"Ah."

"It's very good. You have nice way with language, a pleasing tone."

"Gosh."

"Except I was looking for some gal finding herself . . . on her journey."

"You're right," she said.

"Incidentally -- not that *you* use it -- but don't you hate it when the Millenials are always referencing it -- their *journey*?"

"I hadn't noticed actually."

"Come on, they sling it around all over the place. Same with *so* . . . you notice how when they answer a question, they typically start with *So* . . . and the voice guys up a notch, and there's pause . . . before they bare down and actually try to answer it."

"You're funny, with these characterizations."

“You know what? Maybe *I* should be writing your novels. You need a good ear for this stuff.”

“Maybe you should,” she said, and Chris regretted pushing one button too many, since she was sensitive obviously, and he said, “Back to *yours* though, like I said, real good, except I wanted more. Where’s the female main character?”

“I sent you a different piece of work,” she said, and this made sense now, since what he read felt like the beginning of a story where a husband and wife get into a dispute over a neighbor asking them for a charity donation . . . and the thing was admittedly kind of *out there*.

“Fine, I’m looking forward to more,” Chris said. “Listen, the other reason I called . . . you guys handle Torrance, correct?”

“*Cover* it, you mean? We do.”

Chris was going to spill out more, thought better of it, and said, “Not to sound like a repeat of Finch here. I’d like to pick your brain on something, better off though over something to eat . . . Even a cocktail, or a beer, that would work too.”

Holly didn’t answer for a moment, and Chris thought, ah Gee, forgot about the boyfriend, the yacht broker from Armonk.

She said, “Well . . . when Terrence used that line on me, my response was he didn’t look like the kind of guy who’d *try* something, and more importantly he looked too *old* to be trying something.”

“So that cinched it for you,” Chris said.

“It did. You, on the other hand, I think you *might* try something.”

“Me?”

“You’ve had a distinctly underhanded way about you. Being perfectly honest. The same way you’ve been honest with my fiction -- which I appreciate.”

“How about,” Chris said, “I stop by your office. We go out on the sidewalk. I ask you one or two questions.”

“I suppose,” she said, and Chris said he’d see her in twenty minutes -- which unfortunately turned into 45, him not realizing the newspaper office was down past Aviation Boulevard in Redondo, and of course the traffic.

Chris made it quick, he didn’t mention the police, or even Ken, but pointed out that he knew Emma at one time and couldn’t wrap his head around what he heard happened, and could she please keep him posted.

Holly said she just got the story this morning, and hadn’t learned much, that there had been a mention of it in the Torrance PD Monday briefing, and she hadn’t attended but she caught it online, and they said there were two suspects at large, that they were working it that the victim and suspects knew each other, so the public needn’t fear a random attack.

Chris asked Holly if he could trust her to keep her sources confidential, meaning if *he* was one of them, and she said of course . . . and Chris said, “The two suspects at large -- those’d be my roommate and ex-girlfriend,” and he waited for a reaction, and he did have her full attention . . .

“What?” he said. “This confirms the underhanded business, you’re thinking?”

“Not necessarily,” she said. “But I thank you for this lead.” She asked about Emma and his roommate’s relationship, and Chris kept it simple, that they’d worked together at the library.

“How’s the victim?” Chris said. “They say?”

“Stabilized apparently,” Holly said.

Chris was happy for the husband, and in Kenny and Emma’s case attempted murder was an improvement over murder, but you weren’t exactly jumping for joy. He said, “So I’ll see ya . . . let me ask you though, if *you* were on the run, the tables turned, where would you go?”

“You mean -- if I had an accomplice?”

“Fine.”

“I think I’d dump them. Too conspicuous.”

“Sorta what I was thinking.”

“I don’t know . . . a plane would be risky, because of the ID. A rental car might be tricky as well . . . maybe a bus. Do they require ID yet on those? Maybe after 9/11 everything does.”

This gal was on the ball, you had to give her that, and the answer was no, the bus *didn’t* require ID -- unless that policy had suddenly changed since the Arizona trip.

He said, “Would you ask someone to *help* you . . . on the run . . . or just wing it?”

“Wing it. They’d be all over your friends and family members. They probably already are.”

Chris said, “You might be tough to hunt down then, working the angles like that.”

Holly tried not to smile but Chris caught a little something. “Anything else?” she said.

“Not right now,” he said, “but stay in touch. And you can send me the rest of that story. I mean come on, we’re talking made-up fiction, this isn’t life or death.”

## Chapter 7

Chris got home, thought about taking a dip in the Cheater Five pool, but it was a little chilly. The pool was tired and old-fashioned and probably hadn't been upgraded at all since it was built, which could have been as far back as the 1950's, but it was nice to have it available nonetheless.

Sharif's maintenance guy, Hector, took the pool maintenance business personally, and he'd be whistling out there reaching the gadget into the water, clearing out the bugs and leaves for your benefit, right down to the tiniest spec of debris. And then he'd be laying down on the edge with various plastic tubes going in the water, and checking and then balancing the chlorine and ph levels like a scientist.

Finally he'd hose down the pool deck, and put the chairs up and clean the underside of the umbrellas, and it seemed like a whole bunch of other little things -- and really, how could you beat it.

Today Hector was finishing up when Chris got there and they said hi, and Gee, it was getting to the point where you almost felt like you were insulting the poor guy if you *didn't* go swimming.

Upstairs though, not much email, no new texts . . . you could roam around online, seeing what updates there might be on the Ken and Emma saga -- see if either of them was officially named yet, or if that was still being held back . . . but Chris figured there's a point sometimes where enough is enough. You didn't need every detail probably, you weren't particularly worried about Emma, to be honest. She knew what she was doing, and she can make her own bed.

It was boiling down to the one thing -- you needed to locate the kid.

No way *out* of this mess, that Chris could see, unfortunately . . . but you're getting ahead of yourself . . . don't try to build Rome here, keep it simple, and *find* him.

Soon there *was* some noise from the pool, that new couple once again with the toddler, and Chris decided it couldn't hurt, and the air might be nippy but the water was obviously fine, and he waited until he didn't hear them anymore and threw on his suit and dove in.

It was true sometimes, what they said, that you could think straighter with water on your head. He'd that experience in the shower, at least once, thinking of the morning he decided to alter his plan, make a left turn off Highway 80 at Salt Lake City and detour up I-15 for three hours on the hunch that Thad might be around.

Now he was trying to piece it together, anything Ken might have let slip, or even Stacy -- or even Ned or Emma for that matter -- any clue as to where the guy might have run.

Again, he was raised by a grandmother -- but you figure no, no family contact.

The car hadn't gone anywhere. Emma's vehicle status was unknown. You figure both of 'em were too smart though, to jump in a known vehicle either way, unless it was for a short distance and they were in a safe house right here in the LA area.

It's conceivable they took off together in a different car -- not a rental since *that* wouldn't work -- but someone else's maybe? You were getting a headache here . . . Chris supposed they could have *stolen* a car . . . hard as it was to wrap your head around.

*No way* that'd be the Ken he knew . . . except *none* of this was.

But Ken with the emergency text to Stacy . . . reaching out . . . don't know what to do, asking for help. Suggestions . . . so you'd lean toward him being on his own at that point. If he were with Emma, that's probably a question he wouldn't ask.



Ken had some porn business associates, mostly female, the ones Chris met, a few guys too . . . but nah, too close to home.

A guy and a gal Kenny knew were passing through Manhattan Beach one time, and they spent a night in the apartment, and Chris only half paid attention but you could hear them in the living room telling old stories until the wee hours. Maybe. Though in the morning when Chris asked them where they were headed they said up to Vancouver, and they were going to pick up the Pacific Coast Trail . . . and they had a vagabond feel to them, like they wouldn't necessarily settle down anywhere for a while, if ever, and the option for Ken of emergency-holing up with them was probably off the table.

This felt like you were going nowhere, and let's face it, if the kid was smart he'd follow the lead of what he, Chris, did, and get on the earliest Greyhound bus, and not worry where it was headed, and get off where it seemed logical and keep your head down and hope this nightmare somehow blew over.

Holly had said the same, that your best bet would be wing it on your own.

Chris never told Ken in so many words what *he'd* done those couple times, but the kid got the picture obviously. And . . . maybe that *wasn't* everyone's cup of tea, and it *wouldn't* be their first choice . . . the safest way to play it, probably, but not a slam dunk. Maybe you had to be an older guy to embrace the concept . . . And you did get a little lonely.

Chris started to think, where had he had any extended conversations with Ken, where the kid might have opened up without Chris realizing it . . . and there was plenty of loose chit chat in the apartment, and he dragged Kenny to Peet's Coffee a few mornings . . . but the prolonged stuff would have been on that Zodiac hunt they took up to the Bay Area.

There was something *else* too. Gloria in her endless generosity had put them up in the house on Washington Street, and she enjoyed Ken, and

there were times when Chris went somewhere and left them alone, the trip to Modesto to confront the Hilliard guy being one of them -- Chris not wanting to involve Ken in case something actually did happen out there.

But no . . . you can't bring Gloria into this, start peppering *her* with questions . . . and separately, out of curiosity, Chris was trying to get it straight, how *did* it play out up there exactly?

He'd come back from Chico, said hi to Gloria, and not sure of the context but she casually let it slip that her neighbor said he saw the Zodiac killer the night of the crime, all those years ago, being a young man then back home with his parents after flunking out of college.

Chris and Gloria talked to the guy the next morning, and Chris made a mental note to come back and follow up on some of what the guy said. So the next opportunity, Ken came along as well, and they worked it like pretty good detectives actually . . . kind of like in Law and Order where they keep knocking on different doors, a lot of them dead ends, but some leading to the next one.

So they started on California Street, then as Chris remembered it, that led to a gal out in the Sunset . . . which led to a sister or someone in San Rafael . . . which led to someone *else* in Point Reyes.

And finally, after getting re-fortified with a couple hamburgers, since this had turned into a good bit of running around . . . you had the second act, which was the basement of the high school building in Brisbane, going through the old yearbooks.

That was quite a day, he and Ken did talk a lot in the car, and here and there a comment would trigger something, not necessarily about the Zodiac, but prompting you to tell a story . . . and Chris was honing in on it now, Ken mentioning the Bolinas guy.

It was the San Rafael to Point Reyes leg, Chris taking Sir Francis Drake all the way out to the coast, a nice ride through Lagunitas and some sleepy towns . . . and they get to Highway One at Olema and start turning

north, and there's an overturned truck, not a huge semi, more like a step van, and it says **Bolinas Osmosis and Healing Provisions** . . . and no one looked injured luckily but they chewed on that one for a while, Chris telling Ken that Bolinas was an unusual place, 10 miles the *other* way on Highway One, a throwback to the 1960's hippy era, and he'd place a bet that the Healing Provisions part of the operation got you a bit more than was advertised.

Ken said he'd never been to Bolinas but knew someone who moved there, a guy he met in line at the snack bar one time at a Jason Aldean concert, and they hit it off pretty good those couple minutes, and the guy said what the heck, come visit.

Ken mentioned again how he never took him up on it, and this was 2, 3 years ago now, with the snack bar deal . . . and Chris like an idiot kept blabbing about his own experience with the place and didn't give Ken much room to expand . . . but of course how could you know it could mean anything.

Hmm.

This would be a shot in the dark, even so. But Chris asked himself, did you have any *better* ideas?

He wasn't sure Ken knew much more than that about Bolinas, but the fact was you kind of *could* get lost there. You had a main part of town down below and what they called the Mesa up above, plenty of money pouring into the place the last couple decades, weekenders and so forth, but parts of the Mesa still being pretty raw and there were some folks living off the grid.

There was also a sign on Highway One, a little fork you came to -- with Stinson Beach to the left and Bolinas to the right . . . and Bolinas locals kept taking down the sign for Bolinas, to the point where Cal Trans pretty much stopped trying to put it up.

A missing sign is not going to stop the cops obviously, but it makes the point . . . plenty of people living there who didn't want you to find the place, or maybe find them either.

Chris got out of the pool and went back upstairs. He felt a tiny bit encouraged, that you at least had *something* semi-concrete to latch on to -- and maybe the whole thing was a mirage . . . but unless a better idea crossed his plate in the next 8 1/2 hours, he was going to be on the road in the morning.

## Chapter 8

Except that in the morning, he realized he kept forgetting about the dang DNA.

If you were headed to the Bay Area anyway, you wanted to consolidate a few items, take care of business. One thing was stop by the apartment on Broderick, his sublet, make sure things were going smooth.

Though maybe don't *stop by* -- directly. That's what got him into the jam up there last time. So keep it *indirect*, which meant at least paying a visit to Shep in Weatherby's.

So you had that, plus always a few other developments up there that you could justify. Going up there, period, wouldn't be your choice though, without the Kenny angle being inserted. There'd been enough back and forth to hold you for a while.

But the part of that conversation with Ken that resonated -- the guy had said *come visit*. And whether or not this guy *was* literally off the grid, or an extreme back to nature person, it didn't matter.

If you meet a guy in a snack bar and that's the extent of it, you likely (hopefully) left little if any residue behind. Even so, with enough detective work, the cops might catch up to this guy eventually, add him to the list.

But Ken would be savvy enough, that there'd be a lot of leads before it came to that. And he could buy some time. For now

So Chris woke up placing the odds a little higher, and he even looked it up, there was a Greyhound run, three a day, from downtown LA to 7th and Market in San Francisco . . . and then you had to maneuver your way around the city a bit but you picked up a Golden Gate Transit bus that took

you to West Marin, with the last stop Bolinas. One of those per day only, but if you timed the Greyhound you could work it cleanly.

So he'd thrown a bag in the car and gassed it up and came back, and was going to tell Marlene to keep a little eye on the apartment -- but that would have been awkward, since they'd cooled the jets big time on the couple dates they'd had -- plus, thinking more clearly, you didn't want her, or anyone, knowing that you went somewhere, on the off chance the cops came back and asked a neighbor *why that might be*.

But then the DNA business. This was like doing your taxes, when you sat at your desk and had a list of 10 other things to do, all of them more pleasant, so you kept the taxes on the back burner.

Mark the hacker had driven it home last time, when Chris saw him on the way to New York and Mark had set him up with that syringe which helped out admittedly, not at first but eventually -- but meanwhile Mark correctly stressed the importance of Chris obtaining his own DNA profile.

And he told Mark he started the ball rolling, which was true, he found a lab in Hawthorne, and went and gave them a swab from the inside of his cheek, and they'd told him 2 weeks.

And what was this now? Man, he arrived in New York around the 25th . . . That would be *February*, which meant he was hanging out and being lectured to by Mark mid-month . . . and today, wow, we're talking Tuesday, correct? And Chris looked it up and it was the 19th . . . so the two weeks for lab test had morphed into a good five, and would they have simply discarded the thing?

The lab in Hawthorne had been pretty casual about the whole business, fortunately. DNA testing clearly wasn't their main thrust, the place felt like a standard medical lab who jumped on the bandwagon.

The *casual* part meant Chris paid cash for his test and gave a fake name. **Arnold Rye**, was the one he had gone with. There was a one-page

form you filled out, pretty silly, where you essentially checked a box and signed that you were authorized to obtain the DNA profile.

Authorized by whom? By *yourself*, they meant? You were the one letting 'em swab you or giving you a cup to spit in. Anyhow . . .

He regretted the **Arnold Rye** bit after he handed the clipboard back to the receptionist, because he was pretty sure now that was a bread company, but you drawing attention to it would be worse, and he forked over the cash, a hundred ninety bucks, and they told him the two weeks.

So it was something you had to do today, and luckily the receptionist (different one) found his paperwork pretty quickly and spoke to someone in back on the intercom and told him his drive will be up in just a minute.

Chris is thinking, what the heck is *drive* . . . but he didn't ask any questions and soon someone with a white half coat put an envelope on the counter, and the receptionist said she would just need his ID, and he'll be good to go.

He hadn't thought of *this*, and he tried starting to say he left it in the car actually, but did they really need it? . . . and a young guy came into the reception office then and said to Chris, "Hi, how are *you* today?" and continued into the back, and Chris smiled and waved and he grabbed the envelope and did the same to the new receptionist, and she seemed okay with it now, and that was that.

He drove out of there pronto in case someone did come out of the lab questioning him, and he was hungry anyway and stopped at the old Foster Freeze they had down here on South Inglewood, a legendary hangout back in the day, now a bit run down and a little dangerous-feeling too, but he went for a shake and some fries and opened the envelope, and son of a gun, it *was* a computer drive-type-gizmo. One of those plastic things with the metal stick prong that you shove into your USB port.

He assumed that's how it worked, you gave Gedmatch a file to work with, that supposedly separated you from billions of other humans

worldwide, and they went to town with it trying to link you to that special someone in your family tree.

Which in Chris's case of course, was the special someone he prayed he *wouldn't* to be linked to.

Meaning . . . bottom line, in the unfortunate event law enforcement gathered some genetic material he might have left at a scene . . . and in the substantially *more* unfortunate event they turned it into a profile and ran it through this same Gedmatch database . . . you weren't crazy about them finding a long-lost relative of yours, that you didn't even know you had . . . and them working backwards then to finding you and giving you the death penalty or whatever.

That was the point of Mark's involvement. He was going to look around Gedmatch, same way the cops would, using Chris's DNA profile -- and if there *were* any long-lost Uncle Wilhelms in there -- Mark would try his best to hack them the fuck out of the database.

Fortunately (and this was all relative) the police currently seemed so enamored of how they caught the Golden State Killer guy, using this exact new method for the first time last year -- that they were focusing top-heavy on their cold cases.

You didn't so far read in the paper about a guy who robbed a bank a month ago being apprehended by family-DNA. But no doubt it was coming, and you needed to make a preemptive strike.

So at least you had *that* going, the actual file in your hand, and you'd make a quick first stop at Mark's when you got to San Francisco, before you embarked on the more unpleasant task of checking West Marin for Kenny.

It was still bugging him who the guy was that cleared the decks there in the lab, with the Hi, how are *you* today? The emphasis on the *you* was what bothered him, implying the guy knew him previously, and Chris couldn't picture running across that guy in the lab the first time, and all he



could think of was maybe he spoke to him once in the checkout line at Ralph's.

Driving back to Manhattan Beach Chris took a different route. He was going to swing by Barnes and Noble, see if they had a new Harlan Coben mystery, since you'd invariably have stretches on the road where you had downtime, and there'd been another article recently -- and of course he'd seen it on Facebook, which twisted the concept -- but the gist was that humans really *are* re-wiring their brains with all the electronics interaction.

The Cobens he'd read were a bit predictable, and the sub-plots seemed to be variations of each other, but the guy did give you a good honest effort, and that was worth something.

So he headed that way from the Foster Freeze but got into a *both right lanes must turn right* situation and then got a little twisted around by the one way streets -- and long story short ended up in Lawndale, and there was the Bayside Medical Center on West El Segundo, pretty extensive operation, big leafy grounds too, almost like a college campus.

He remembered coming out of the hospital in Reno, and that was an attractive exterior as well, a few layers of terraces and a couple stone sculptures and a fountain, and the mountains pretty vivid in the near distance.

He'd been on the move then of course, couldn't give the aesthetics his full attention . . . but he was thinking now about that nurse.

What was her name, even?

Zeroing back in on that whole episode a little more . . . there'd been a bit of a connection, hadn't there?

Chris remembered starting off in ER the night before, and that took forever, and finally at 5 in the morning two orderlies showed up with a new doctor who explained he was admitting him, using the standard line 'as a precaution'.

There were two beds in the room and the other one was empty and soon the nurse, or assistant -- that's true even now, Chris wasn't sure *which* -- showed up and she was cute, bubbly personality, big mop of blond hair piled up high on her head.

Chris came up with it now, her name was Kay, and the first thing he asked her, pulling his usual BS, that he'd buy her dinner if she let him out of here.

Kay took it in stride, called him a nut, but she was having fun . . . and then you had the development where Chris started offering her money to drive him to Manhattan Beach . . . and when it reached a serious amount, like four thousand dollars, and Chris started counting down *going once, twice* like an auctioneer, you could tell she was thinking he actually might mean it.

She didn't bite of course but a few minutes later it dawned on Kay that someone with ill intentions *could* be looking for Chris, which is why he was so fidgety to get out of here . . . and Chris hadn't thought of that, but it wasn't bad, and he went with it . . . and Kay sort of looked the other way while Chris disappeared down a stairwell.

Something else too, she kept calling him Ken, so that would have been what Chris used in the ER, not sure of the last name he gave, but it might have been Holmes, his old friend Ray's last name, which he'd employed more than once.

Then later . . . when things were semi resolved and Chris was having a nightcap back in Weatherby's on Chestnut, Chris mentioned this nurse, and how you never know . . . and Shep had said, "Call her up sometime. Life's short."

So hmm . . . yeah, screw it, what's there to lose . . . and Chris found the medical center okay but wasn't thinking clearly, all the safeguards in place that shielded the personnel -- and dang, if he even knew her last name

he might get lucky in the old-fashioned Reno-area white pages, but you didn't even have that.

Chris spent a few minutes on the medical center website, trying to concoct different ways to work it, and decided they were all too fancy, and dialed the number for the emergency room.

Someone friendly said if this is a real emergency please call 911 -- but otherwise can we help you?

"Hey there," Chris said. "This sounds out of left field probably. I was a patient there in early December. I unfortunately got smashed in the face and so forth, and your ER department was kind enough to admit me overnight . . . and my caregiver upstairs, she suggested some therapy for my neck . . . and the darn thing's still bothering me, and I didn't pay enough attention to her instructions."

"Your name please?" the phone person said, and Chris hoped for the best and gave Kenneth Holmes, and he got lucky that he had it right. The early December part he wasn't positive about, but piecing it together with the Bingham scenario, that sounded in the ballpark.

You could hear the keyboard going. "I'm not seeing any remediations on your chart. Do you have our Patient Continuation Packet? Normally that contains the inserts pertinent to your condition."

"I tossed it right in the garbage outside the hospital," Chris said. "Now I'm paying the price. This sucker's killing me today."

In that case, the person said, please stop in and we'll be happy to re-examine you, and Chris said he was in Bakersfield though . . . and after one more delay they put him through to the 3rd floor nurse's station.

"Kay please," Chris said, and there was the clunk of the receiver, and son of a bitch, a minute later there she was.

"It's Ken," he said, "the guy who tried to extort the big bucks from you?"

There was a pause but it didn't take long and Kay said, "I *remember* . . . I'm afraid to ask, but what's your latest shady proposition?"

"You meet me in San Francisco tomorrow, is all . . . Or it could be Oakland, even San Jose, that would work too." Thinking of the three airports in the Bay Area.

"What on earth *for*?" Kay said, but Chris detected that same bit of playfulness from back in December, looking up at her mostly from the prone position . . . and before he could think of a good come-back line she said she had to go but might call him back, you never know.

He'd kind of forgotten about it by the end of the day, and he was taking a walk in the hills, currently on 10th Street and North Poinsettia Avenue, and she called back.

"Everything still good?" she said. Kind of a backwards question, but Chris supposed you rolled with it.

"What I don't care for," he said, "they blend the architecture around here. Indiscriminately. You have a minimalist place on the corner, does sort of fit a beach town, but then two houses in is something out of a Roman holiday."

"Columns, you mean, that style?" she said.

"Exactly. And a whole lot more."

"I have girlfriend in San Francisco. So I guess."

"Hold on, just like that? You *guess*?"

"Unh-huh."

And this little hunt for Ken just got a bit more interesting.

## Chapter 9

Chris figured he'd tried to out-smart the traffic enough times, once leaving at 9, right after rush hour supposedly subsided, and that was totally messed up, the 405 bumper-to-bumper all the way to Westwood, so forget that . . . and then he tried leaving at 1 in the afternoon, in between the morning and evening logjams, and that was slightly better, except from Los Banos north for whatever reason you were in trouble.

So this time he left at 4 in the morning, sharp, assuming nothing could go wrong except you're a little tired . . . and wouldn't you know it, middle of March, today the 21st to be precise, they get a freak dusting of snow overnight on the Grapevine, and you're crawling over the thing in the dark, wondering if you should have put on chains or something . . . and you don't end up at the bottom until a little after 8.

Chris tried to be organized this time, armed with the recommended stops on Highway 5 between Gorman and Tracy as announced by some blogger. One of them was here, near a bunch of outlets, all that stuff dead to the world still this morning but a simple McDonald's and a steaming cup of coffee sounded good.

So that worked, and it was uneventful from there, except for the one trucker giving him the finger when Chris rode the guy for being in the fast lane, the trucker obviously feeling he had to be there to pass a few underperforming *other* trucks.

But 162 miles from the first stop you had the recommendation of a town called Volta, and this maybe was an error by the blogger, not much here unless you actually followed another road off the interstate, which you never wanted to do. But there was a gas station with a convenience store

and a little stand-up counter in there . . . and Chris fingered around in his pocket for a second and started to panic . . . where was the DNA thingamajig?

And he pieced it together, quite unfortunately, that he'd stuck it in the center console of the Camry under his elbow -- and then like an idiot, to be *safe*, he brought it into that McDonald's, at least in his pocket.

Something must have gone haywire in there, Holy Mackerel, could it have got tangled up with his change or something when he added a small fries to his order . . . and what the heck.

Unreal. You could call the place maybe -- but then what? You make an about face and tack on an extra 325 miles, round trip, just to get back to this convenience store . . . and what if the person on the phone misunderstands you, and it's not there *anyway*?

Chris reminded himself, when this business with Ken was settled, that you had to relieve yourself of all these balls in the air, the different forces swirling around . . . where you don't complete the *main*, simple task at hand.

Could you have the lab overnight a duplicate to Mark?

Didn't sound the greatest, something like that, you'd be attracting extra scrutiny for one, and it would likely require special approval, and you had enough trouble getting out of there with the dang profile the first time.

Chris could picture it -- you'd probably have to start all over, different lab, different fake name that this time you had ID for to back it up . . . *and whoopee*.

So check Mark off the list, even though you told him you were coming and he's going to be pissed.

Of course another reason it would be dicey to go back to the McDonald's is, we're talking 5 hours of extra driving now, and you'd blow it with Kay. Who was scheduled to arrive at SFO on Southwest at 4:12, and you better move your ass.

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“You look different,” Chris said, and she did.

Kay said, “You wouldn’t have spotted me, you mean? If I didn’t raise my hand?”

“You didn’t raise your hand, technically,” Chris said. “You had like a little bear in it. You still do.”

“Yes, you being late and all, I was able to take advantage of the gift shop. It was a bit pricey, but my girlfriend’s daughter, she’s a cutie.”

“Wow, a daughter.” Chris hadn’t considered it, but you never know, so he said, “You have any kids yourself?”

“Not yet,” Kay said, and Chris picked up her suitcase and they exited the baggage claim, and yep, he was late, nothing works like it should, and you could apologize and make excuses, or keep your mouth shut . . . and he opted for the latter.

Kay’s friend lived on Alabama Street in the city, Noe Valley he was placing it, but actually the other neighborhood, Bernal Heights, not quite as solid -- and you had a mix of gentrified yuppie-Millennials with some street people and shady types . . . and as a native San Franciscan Chris had the radar up for the parts of town that the current crowd didn’t seem to worry about . . . but what could you do?

“I’m dropping you,” Chris said. “And that’s it? Or there’s more.”

Kay said she’d catch up to him later, and the friend was out front now and Chris popped the trunk and they grabbed her stuff, and Chris gave a little wave and Kay may have waved back but if she had it sure wasn’t much.

So . . . this was *different* at least . . . and Chris questioned what he was doing, but the one thing, it did get you up here today, having a little motivation tacked on, even if things kind of fizzled out at the moment.

He drove cross town to the northside, more artificial these days than the niche neighborhoods like Bernal Heights, but that’s where he was comfortable, and after a few minutes’ deliberation he checked into one of

the Lombard Street motels, since no way you could impose on Gloria again over in Presidio Heights.

It was around 6, but plenty light, Daylight Savings had kicked in last weekend. From here at least you could look around the old neighborhood, and he passed the Broderick sublet, and so far so good, the place hadn't burned down or anything, and a few blocks further the Marina Green, and he figured what the hay, might as well to go to Fort Point and back for old times' sake.

But a couple hundred yards into, on a bench at Crissy Field facing Alcatraz, there was a couple arguing.

Stereotypical young folk who Chris guessed moved to the Marina district after college -- often an Ivy League one, or an elite private school like Duke -- and worked that high-powered first job either south of Market, where all the startups were, or maybe down in the Silicon Valley.

He had noticed last time there was in fact a shuttle bus that stopped at Fillmore and Chestnut, right in front of where *New Joe's* used to be, that went directly to Santa Clara.

Right now the guy on the bench was saying, "Darlene. Give . . . me . . . the . . . *phone*."

And Darlene was ignoring him, and she had the phone up to her face, two hands on the thing, like she was scrolling through stuff.

And this was disconcerting of course, but also really weird. Since there'd been something in the news recently, a Giants baseball executive allegedly having the same sort of issue with a woman he was having coffee with, and no one got hurt or anything -- but the point being she *too* had apparently had *that* guy's phone and wasn't giving it up.

The guy stood up and faced Darlene, Chris thinking the reason was unfortunately to get some leverage, and he put *his* two hands on it -- and she didn't let go for the life of her, feisty gal, and she slid off the bench and



the guy didn't miss a beat, he squatted down with her, both of them still locking four paws around the dumb device.

Now the guy tugged and it started to get ugly, Darlene sliding along the sand parallel to the front of the bench, the guy imploring her in a real bellow now to *let go of the goddamn thing*.

Chris was thinking you had the San Francisco Bay right in front of you, maybe you bearhug the guy, and try to persuade his ass into the water?

Except really, another water situation? And then what, you're fair game *too* at that point, and worst scenario, he knocks you out or drowns you, and *best* case, you're soaking wet.

Chris yelled, "Hey!"

They both looked up, but the battle for the phone kept raging.

"Friend," Chris said. "If you're *cheating* on her, how about you just *tell* her . . . You wouldn't be the *first*."

"Now what's that supposed to mean," the guy said, and he had let go and was straightening up, and Chris didn't like it that the dude looked bulkier than he thought, not to mention heavily fueled with adrenaline.

The woman herself was saying, "Carl, take it *easy*, remember what *happened*." And Jeez, the implication being this guy had a history of mixing it up, and who knows what Darlene was referring to, maybe the guy got *himself* clocked that time . . . but odds are he was going to get the better of Chris, if it came to that.

But . . . Chris couldn't resist sticking a little more needle in. "What, you leave your cozy text messages on your phone? At least screw around *thoughtfully*. Don't leave a stream of residue trailing out of your *backside*."

And Chris knew this was the thing. Kind of a fatal flaw, or at least an Achilles heel. Fine . . . you didn't want to just walk away, with the woman being dragged around in the dirt . . . but you *almost* had it under control, you at least said something to get the dude to stop . . . so why the need to escalate this kind of activity?

Carl didn't take it well, Chris's last commentary, and he stood there with his hands on his hips and let fly a stream of expletives . . . and he wasn't quite in bull-rush mode yet, but Chris was afraid that would be soon enough, and now Chris was set to get the heck out of there, and the question was which way do you go, toward Fort Point or back toward the Marina Green . . . and the big unknown -- could this maniac run you *down*?

The guy took a break from the first round of swearing at Chris and started a round 2, bringing Chris's mother into it this time . . . when a guy walking by carrying a surfboard against his side swung the back end of it wide as he passed Carl -- impeccable timing actually -- and hit Carl in the nose with thing -- and kept walking like nothing happened.

Carl didn't exactly go down like in a boxing match, but he took a moment to ease himself there, so same deal, and there was a lot of blood, and Carl started wailing, very high-pitched too, Chris losing a little respect for the guy, and Darlene was pulling out a hanky and trying to assist.

This seemed like as good a time as any to move on, and he exited stage-left, the same direction as the surfer guy, and he caught up to him where Crissy Field spilled out into the sailboat marina.

Hmm. *Two* semi-surfer guys bailing him out of late, thinking of the incident in the Coffee Bean.

Chris said, "That was some move, back there."

The guy kept walking but said, "Yeah, well. Always unpleasant when a lady gets mistreated."

"For a second," Chris said, "I thought maybe you bumped him, and didn't even realize it."

"Put it this way," the guy said, "it *could* have happened that way too."

"Frankly I never thought of a surfboard as a weapon. Not the worst thing to know, I guess."

"It isn't. You grow up in Seal Beach, it *calls* for it sometimes. You learn to handle your board."

Chris had been to Seal Beach once, that was Orange County, and it seemed reasonably upscale, like you wouldn't need to use your board for anything besides *catching waves* . . . but whatever.

Chris said, "The other part that was interesting, you could chalk it up to an accident -- breaking the guy's nose for example -- if anyone happened to bother you."

"Maybe so," the guy said, and he winked at Chris, indicating this conversation was over, and Chris crossed at the light and headed back to the motel. He started thinking Heck, they don't even *surf* out here, there are no waves in the bay . . . they *kite-surf* fine, but where was the guy's kite?

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There was a hole-in-the wall ramen place on Greenwich, up the block from the bar scene on Fillmore, and heading past all that Chris thought he wouldn't *mind* a little booze, unwind from the drive and whatever else . . . and there were three bars at the same intersection, the famous Balboa Cafe being one, and Chris had tried them, various times, felt like an outsider in all three, even when he was living 6 blocks away on Broderick . . . so he passed and was slurping down some noodles when Kay called.

"I'm free," she said.

"Oh . . . shall I . . . swing by and get you then?"

"No that's fine, Nancy has a car," Kay said. "Where *to*?"

Hmm. Maybe what she meant, she was *borrowing* Nancy's car -- Chris assuming this was the girlfriend, never having been formally introduced -- but more likely, Nancy would be along for the ride.

"Well," Chris said, the alcohol consumption angle still alive, "there's a friendly place, Weatherby's. We can start off there. Or *end* there too, it's up to you."

Chris gave her directions and Kay said *we'll* see you there, which confirmed it.

Chris neglected to mention the parking can be brutal, though he supposed on a Wednesday night in March you might have a chance, and Chris finished his ramen and took his time walking over there and Kay was out front, but no Nancy.

“Let me guess,” Chris said.

“I know. She’s circling around,” Kay said.

Chris didn’t want to entertain it, but you had to be a gentleman, so he told Kay to have her double-park on the corner and he’d take it from there.

“Very kind of you,” Nancy said, getting out and leaving the engine running. “Valet service tonight.”

“Something like that,” Chris said, and he drove Nancy’s car over to the Broderick apartment, and he still had the key to the downstairs and the garage, and he pulled it in and that was that. There was space for three cars parked end to end, and Nancy’s was the only one there so far and the odds were all three tenants wouldn’t be home before they left Weatherby’s and needed her car again . . . but if it happened, what could you do?

They sat at the bar, and Shep was trying to get one of the TV’s to do something, a couple guys apparently asking for a hockey game, and Chris was getting awful thirsty but it worked out and when they were all three squared away Shep said to Kay and Nancy, “*This* guy. He *moves* on me. But I see him more *often* now.”

Kay put away half her margarita pretty quick and she started asking Shep questions about bartending, and did he find he was people’s therapist back there sometimes . . . and Shep didn’t mind answering, and it sounded kind of interesting, a story he was telling now, but Nancy started talking to Chris and it got blocked out.

Nancy was certainly friendly enough, though she dominated the conversation, but she had a genuine laugh -- and another round into it, Chris started thinking maybe he liked *her* more than Kay. Her daughter was eight, she’d used bad judgement in a relationship back then, but she

wouldn't trade being a mother for the world . . . she worked in the Bank of America building, a high floor, you could see out to Livermore on clear day . . . she did pilates and sang in a women's chorus.

"Those last two," Chris said, "they seem dated though."

Nancy said she wasn't worried about that . . . but what did he *mean* a women's chorus was dated . . . and Chris had no idea either, but Kay bailed him out.

She leaned over and said to Chris, "So I get it now. *This* is where the idea came from."

"Huh?" Chris said.

"You and Shep," she said, "you were discussing me. How sweet."

For a second Chris thought she meant tonight, and then he got it straight, Shep must have mentioned to her that he suggested Chris stay in touch, following Chris's description of the Reno deal.

Chris looked over at Shep, who'd conveniently moved down the bar. Chris said to Kay, "Little out of character for the guy, honestly."

Kay said, "What's spilled across the bar, *stays* across the bar, you mean?"

"Something like that." Shep obviously did get a bit carried away, but it wasn't like he was disclosing family secrets . . . And it seemed okay, since Kay was now switching stools with Nancy.

"I *mean* it," she said. "That makes my *day*, being cast in that light."

This was getting a little strange, and Chris only remembered telling Shep there may have been a connection with this nurse in the hospital, except it got shorted because he had to high-tail it out of there . . . and Shep had made his recommendation.

Nancy said this was fun, and is there another place, for some variety perhaps, and Chris thought of the Booker Lounge but couldn't see an advantage switching over there, so the gals ordered a *third* round and Chris wasn't used to this, but you had to go along.

Finally he got them out of there and he was getting slammed, the drive and the other events of the day catching up to him, and he suggested some coffee but they said they were good and Nancy asked about her car.

“No, no,” Chris said, “that won’t work.”

“I know,” Nancy said, “I was just wondering where it *was*.”

And that was a good point, by now the extra vehicle in the garage *was* likely fucking things up over there.

Chris said either way, he’d get them a cab or an Uber, and not to worry, we’ll figure out the car tomorrow.

“Or we could stay over,” Kay said.

“That’d be fine too,” Nancy said.

And Chris had no more idea what this meant than the man on the moon . . . but you go for the gusto, he supposed, isn’t that what life’s all about?

So they headed over to the motel, and you had two double beds and Kay and Nancy didn’t waste much time, each stretching out on one, and Kay made a thin comment about *thanks for hosting us tonight* before she dozed off.

So Chris went to the office and there you were up against the late-night method, you had to do your business using the slot through the glass, the clerk’s voice coming out of a speaker, and Chris had to book a room for himself, and as was typically his experience at these Lombard motels, once again the traffic made it a tough night.

## Chapter 10

“Welp, I’m heading to Marin,” Chris said, “so I’ll bid you both a good day. It’s been real.” They were at the Broderick apartment. Chris had to knock on a door to get a guy to move his car, and that guy was grumpy and came down in his slippers and PJs and told Chris whatever this was he was pulling, don’t do it again.

“For what again?” Kay said, Nancy’s car idling now at the curb.

“I’m looking for an old friend,” Chris said. “One of those needle-in-a-haystack deals.”

It was 10:30 in the morning. Chris had bought them breakfast, Nancy and Kay, even though he could have saved 20 bucks directing them to the little Continental thing they had in the motel lobby.

Nancy apparently didn’t have to be at her job today with the high view in the Bank of America building . . . and why would *that* be . . . but whatever, he wasn’t feeling that great, you pick your spots.

Kay said, “Trying to *find* an old friend? Or, like, scouting out the area *on behalf of* an old friend?”

“Come on,” Chris said, “give me a break.”

She conferred with Nancy for a moment. “I’m game,” she said.

And again Chris wasn’t in the mood for asking too many questions and said fine, and Nancy dropped them back at the motel and twenty minutes later Chris had the Camry over the bridge and angling west onto Shoreline Highway at Tam Junction.

“You get car sick?” he said.

“I do,” she said. “But not if I can watch the road.”

“That’s the key. Reason I ask, we have a coastal option and the over the hill option. One’s prettier but windier.”

She didn’t answer, she was doing something with her phone, so Chris took the curvier way.

It always brought back some memories, Shoreline Highway arching over and then down into Stinson Beach, plenty of switchbacks, each with a pretty dang stunning view of either the Pacific Ocean, Mount Tamalpais, or more of West Marin to the north, and on a clear day such as now you could see Point Reyes nicely, and Chris said to Kay, “Off to your right there, that’s actually the furthest point west in the lower-48 United States.”

Kay mumbled a little something like she’d just woken up, and son of a gun.

“You’ve been *out*?” Chris said. “I mean I’ve been wrapped up in my thoughts, I haven’t challenged you in a few minutes . . . but wow, all the *turns*.”

“Heavens, this is *beautiful*,” Kay said, straightening up. “What thoughts have you been wrapped up in?”

“Well . . . this kid I’m trying to find. Not a certifiable *kid*, he’s 25, maybe even had a birthday, I lost track.”

“You can’t call him? Contact him some other way first?”

“Nah I tried,” Chris said. Though hold on -- *had* he even tried something so simple as emailing the kid? Either way . . . at this point, 99 percent odds that wouldn’t work, and might backfire on you with the police if they’re privy to his account.

“What do you need to tell him?” Kay said.

They were in the home stretch coming into Stinson and the stop sign was up ahead, the general store on your right and your beach access to the left. Chris said, “How about a burger?” and Kay said sounds good and there was a roadside shack type deal, still standing since Chris was a teenager,



though different now, and the burgers were all dressed up and gourmet and had celebrity names attached to them.

Chris said, “This place used to have a juke box, they’d play Glen Campbell records . . . you remember those?”

“*Which*,” Kay said. “Juke boxes, records *period* . . . or Glen Campbell ones?”

“Any of the above, I guess.”

“My dad liked Glen Campbell . . . You seem to use *food* to delay things. That’s my impression.”

Chris didn’t mind, her bit of spunk from the hospital room was back. “I do,” he said. “You have any better ways?”

“You didn’t answer my question. I guess we’ll find out.”

“What? Oh, what I need to tell my friend? . . . That’d be, mainly, stay put, and take it easy.”

“Hmm,” Kay said.

They rounded the lagoon and Chris pointed out a couple white egrets and a blue heron and they came to the sign, the infamous one, where you made the sharp left doubling back to Bolinas, that locals typically took down. It was up now actually, but the arrow went toward Stinson.

“Gosh,” Kay said, when they got into Bolinas and parked.

“The outfits?” Chris said. “Or the dogs?”

No surprise here. Bolinas had attracted the free love crowd back in the 60’s, and probably a lot of them were dead or departed but the idea lived on with the subsequent generations. You weren’t judged if you didn’t want to wear much, or otherwise express yourself . . . and currently there were two beautiful long-blond-haired apparent lesbians walking arm in arm right down Main Street, with substantial amounts of skin and appendages on display in their full glory.

Kay turned her head and followed them, so it wasn’t the dogs she was noticing at the moment. The thing with those, there were dozens of them

roaming around, almost all loose, several right in the middle of the street, and everyone seemed fine with it.

“Welp,” Chris said, pointing toward the beach, “we might as well try down there first . . . needle in a haystack that this is shaping up to be.” And now that you were actually here, this concept *was* looking increasingly far-fetched.

“What does your friend look like?” Kay said. “I’m a good detective.”

And he slid his arm around her shoulders as they got to the beach, and Chris figured you could justify it because the wind was whipping up a bit, and she wasn’t dressed that great, a sweatshirt, but it looked thin.

“You always do that?” she said.

“I was trying to pull it off, that you needed to be warmed up. That didn’t work?”

“Not even close. But you can leave it there if you want.”

So whatever . . . and they had a nice walk down to the end, toward Duxbury Reef, and Chris described Ken just in case, and there were a bunch of surfers out there today, and some of the rides weren’t bad, you had to admit.

“I tried it *once*,” Chris said. “Right here. I was 13. My mom set me up with an older kid, local, her friend’s son. I paddle out . . . I bob around out there for a half hour . . . and I paddle *in*.”

“Regardless,” Kay said, “you’re not really expanding your search. I mean for your friend.”

“Yeah let’s try the main plaza or whatever they got now.” And they walked over there, everything striking distance, and you had an organic farm stand and a basic market and an old tavern, Smiley’s, that was there back in the day . . . and there were some odds and ends shops . . . but this big manhunt was shaping up as rather ridiculous.

Kay politely said “Am I *warm* at all?” pointing out a young guy who might have fit the description, and you could tell she wasn’t real confident

either, and Chris said, “You know what? Let’s not *worry* about it, let’s go up top . . . and then the day is yours. I’m wide open.”

Up top meant the Mesa, big flat area on the northside of town up a steep hill and spreading out a couple miles west. You had to give the planners some credit, they’d stuck a building moratorium in long ago, and it didn’t look that different than 30 years earlier when Chris tried the surfing, except some of the houses were fancier.

Yeah, sure, Ken could theoretically be up here, sleeping in some guy’s half-basement or backyard granny unit . . . but what any normal human would be thinking -- say a Chandler or a Ned analyzing things objectively -- odds are Kenny’s *not* here -- you’re basing the whole shooting match on some off-handed remark the kid made about someone he met at a snack bar.

And then tacked on you have the heavy odds that you wouldn’t find him if he *were* . . . especially when a guy doesn’t *want* to be found.

Chris said, “What we’ll do, we’ll drive around the perimeter. You have RCA Beach to the right, there used to be big control towers there. Kinda eerie actually, especially at night.”

“It’s nice here,” Kay said. “Why don’t you live here? . . . Or do you actually *work*, which requires you elsewhere? I didn’t even ask.”

“I could pull it off. But I’d have to rent something. Or better yet, do yard work for someone, care-take the thing, live for free.”

Kay digested that one. “You don’t look like you use your hands much though. And you move kinda slowly, I can’t envision that, really.”

This was always a disturbing comment, one like this, and for the first year Chris got nervous and applied it to his condition, that maybe he *was* in trouble -- but after the one-year milestone, you were thinking you might be slowing down *period*. Even being healthy. That ill-fated swim race off the pier for instance, the other guy seemed a lot more active.

Up ahead was a hand-carved wooden sign dangling from a post outside someone's property, and it said

**Gilda Spinnaker, Traditional Musical Instruments**

and thumbtacked below it was a temporary cardboard sign, handwritten

**Open Studio Sale Today**

Chris said why not see what it's all about, and he felt himself essentially closing the door on his Kenny-location aspirations, and you might as well have an adventure or two, you never know.

Kay was into it and started off telling Gilda her grandpa played mandolin, he was from North Carolina . . . and these were some of the most beautiful string instruments she'd ever seen.

Gilda was nice, very relaxed, not laying any sales pitch on you. Chris placed her as a Jewish woman from New York. The type who may have studied classically at Juilliard and shifted gears, and easily could have ended up in a commune along the way. The place was messy -- there wasn't a studio to speak of, everything happened right in her living room -- but it was cozy enough. She seemed to hand-craft guitars, mandolins, ukuleles and banjos, and Kay was right, the workmanship was impressive.

Chris said, "Middle of the week like this, you typically open your studio? I thought that was more the weekends."

"Yes, certainly for artists," Gilda said. "In my case, if I feel like it I put out the sign. No rhyme or reason I guess."

"That's a nice attitude," Kay said. "I need more of that."

"Well, yes and no," Gilda said. "One negative, you don't know who might show up."

Chris wasn't crazy about where *this* was going. "What do you mean?" he said. "Someone no-good showed up?"

"I'm fortunate in that regard, no," Gilda said. "The worst thing that happened to me, someone contacted me from prison."

Chris had to cringe now, and he noticed Kay reacted as well. “When was *that?*” he said.

“Oh a few years ago. Not that big a deal. Any more.”

“Meaning it *was*,” Chris said, “*before* the any more.”

“I mean I was a bit concerned at one time -- in fact I’ll be totally honest, there was a stretch where I was *more* than freaked out -- but it’s blown over.”

“*What’s* blown over?” Chris said.

Gilda did an exhale and said, “This fellow saw me in the online catalogue apparently. There’s a group of us craftsmen in West Marin, and an organization behind it, and they do hold *official* open studios.”

“And?” Chris said.

“Unfortunately they include our contact information in the catalogue. Name, email, and address. You do need to disclose your address obviously, otherwise no one can find your studio.”

“Obviously,” Chris said, not liking the direction at all.

“But your *photo’s* not in there, is it?” Kay said.

“Not typically. We select a representative photo of our finished product . . . but additionally the catalogue includes random photos of artists at work on their craft . . . and mine was included the one year.”

“Come on,” Chris said. “The bottom line is *what*.”

“He contacted me. Email. No idea how an inmate would find something so obscure as our annual open studio event.”

Chris was thinking, *no* lady, *nothing* is obscure anymore. Not to mention prisoners these days likely enjoy as good internet access as most law-abiding citizens. Some fucker like this, all it takes is he googles something, one thing leads to another, the guy with nothing but time on his hands, and now he’s looking at acoustic guitars, and what do you know, *look at this foxy lady who makes ‘em*.

“Why on earth would your information be public like that?” Kay said, and *she* didn’t get it either.

And what Chris could see happening, they were putting out the catalogues every year the old fashioned way, which you still saw today, stacked up at your friendly neighborhood stores and markets. And okay, your information was out there, but it stayed local.

Then they worked the thing in online, and some genius decided to leave all the same personal information in place, so now prison inmates could access it as well . . . Whoopee.

Chris said to Gilda, “So what . . . he sent you like a request for more information on your product line?”

“It started off that way,” Gilda said. “The fellow was very polite, and of course I had no idea he was incarcerated. So we had a couple friendly back and forths, and then he became a bit darker.”

“Meaning *what?*” Chris said.

“Nothing dramatic, particularly. But commenting on my appearance and so forth.”

“And wanting to do anything *about* your appearance?” Kay said. Chris had to give her credit, that’s what he was going to ask.

“Somewhat. You know.”

Chris *didn’t* know. He said, “This was a couple years ago you say? When was the last bit of contact?”

“Yes, it’s been a while, I’d say at least 6 months.”

“Jesus,” Chris said. “So you had . . . *a year and a half* with this maniac?”

“Not steadily, no. 6 months ago though, when it bubbled up again, a friend suggested I make a report. That evidently did the trick, because there hasn’t been a peep since then.”

Gilda was stroking a cat which had come into the living room. Yes, she was an attractive enough woman. Olive skin, full lips, a little space

between her front teeth when she smiled, which was often. You figured she was smiling in the catalogue photo where the asshole discovered her.

Kay said, “Well I’d be fibbing if I didn’t say I admire you. Working with your hands, sending beautiful timeless creations out into the world.”

“She means you’re a throwback,” Chris said, “right?”

Kay said absolutely, and they made a little more small talk, and back in the car Chris said what next, and she said her friend Nancy actually, she was hoping to meet up with them at the Corte Madera mall.

Chris said that sounded as good as any other plan, and they drove out of Bolinas, following the fake arrow on the road sign that told you Bolinas was toward San Francisco, and going back over the hill Kay did get a little carsick, and Chris dug around and found her some wintergreen altoids and she said those worked okay.

## Chapter 11

Chris hated malls. A big one in San Jose opened when he was a kid, a multi-level indoor job under a massive atrium and full of ramps and escalators and dazzle, and that was fun, since it was the first of its kind in the Bay Area -- but now he had no patience for them, and he could rarely think of anything he'd *want* in one.

There were two malls in Corte Madera, opposite sides of the freeway and it was anyone's guess which one Nancy designated, and admittedly they each had a *little* character compared to most, and you weren't strictly indoors.

Nancy seemed quite animated and gave him a solid hug and mentioned how much fun it was last night -- which seemed a bit over the top, since you just saw the woman about 6 hours ago -- but maybe a switch went on when she was about to shop, and that was fine.

"What I'm thinking," Chris said, "you girls have your fun, don't worry about me."

"Really?" Kay said. "Where will you go?"

"I have a routine when I'm down this way. You start off in that neighborhood over there, there's some railroad tracks you cross, and then you have options . . . If you stay straight, you're on a semi-trail staring at Mount Tam, so you can do worse."

"So you're taking like a three hour walk?" Nancy said, and Chris looked at them and they both looked back like *yes, what's the problem . . .* and Chris said to have fun.



And man, you could almost go home and take a nap at this point, have plenty of time to make it back -- but home was still currently on Lombard Street, and you tried to minimize any time spent in that place.

So . . . maybe you get more adventurous then -- instead of *staring* at Mount Tam you get up on *top* of it . . . and there were a *bunch* of great trails up there, all different distances . . . and the fact was Chris used to drive over from the city and hike them regularly, and for whatever reason that tailed off since his diagnosis.

He had though come off the mountain that morning early on, the day he wrote out his initial list on the back of a receipt in the Mill Valley Starbucks . . . but he honestly couldn't remember when and if he'd been back up there since.

So now he took Corte Madera Grade to Blythedale, down to Miller, made the left at the 2am Club, and was halfway up Tam pretty quick, and then you had to make your decision.

There were the standard trails -- the Bootjack, the Dais Ridge, the Redwood Creek, the Cataract -- and you could segment any of them into a manageable chunk . . . and Chris parked near the ranger station and he set off on the Bootjack, this time going the opposite way from normal, which was away from the ocean, so that wouldn't be coming into view today but you saw plenty of it already.

The second half of the route, the reverse, was a little confusing, nothing familiar about it, and a mile or so in Chris decided give it another twenty minutes and just turn around and follow your footsteps the way you came, don't get fancy . . . and don't get *lost* for Gosh sakes . . . though you didn't fear getting lost on Mt Tam the way you might at Tahoe, the city being an hour away, and in fact viewable at times when the trees opened up on you.

Except he *did* get lost. Not *scary* lost, where you actually might be concerned about spending a night up here in the dark. It could happen, you

read about it in the paper, some dude from out of town heading up a trail late -- and even though, yep, you *could* see San Francisco in places shimmering across the bay, the guy'd still be stuck until daylight, and it typically worked out after that.

This wasn't as major, though admittedly you were starting to lose that first bit of daylight -- but what Chris did was go *straight* on the return trip instead of angling *left* when he was supposed to . . . and he wasn't sure but it felt a little different, and a half mile the wrong way there was another side option, a little marker down low informing you of the Dobbs Trail . . . and that sounded familiar enough and Chris was confident it would at least converge eventually with the main road, Panoramic Highway.

Which it did, and it felt like you added an extra half hour to your effort this evening, but what was the difference . . . and checking his watch you still had over an hour to kill before the women were done with their efforts.

In fact, thinking about it, the two malls likely closed at 8, so they were essentially shutting them both down, not leaving any shopping minutes unaccounted for.

There was a set of restrooms at the base of the trailhead, nestled back in the trees off a small parking lot . . . and Chris knew the drill from here, you'd cross the parking lot and hang a right onto Panoramic and walk back up the hill, which was probably ten minutes, and you'd be back where you left the Camry.

So yeah, you got a little mixed up but *no harm, no foul*, and Chris used the men's room and came out and two black guys were standing there with a snub-nosed revolver in his face.

"Hey," Chris said. "Please take it easy."

"That depend on how *you* take it," the guy not holding the gun said.

Without waiting Chris took off his watch and handed it over. The guys didn't move.

So he dug into his pockets -- and God dang it, he'd thought of locking his wallet in the trunk -- not because he thought he'd get *robbed*, but just less restrictive on a hike, not having something flopping around on your hip . . . Which in this case was the *front* pocket, where Chris carried his wallet ever he since he lived in New Jersey and people told him to, especially if he ever went into New York.

"Here's 60," he said, pulling the cash out of his wallet, and shoving the wallet back in his pocket.

"Mother-*fucker*," the other guy said, "you playin with *fire*. You'd best be giving it all up."

There comes a point, Chris was deciding -- despite being terrified at the same time . . . that *nope*, I'm *not* going to give it all up. He'd lost his wallet a couple times in his life, and the ringer you had to go through with the license and credit cards and whatever else was a royal pain in the ass.

"Wrong," Chris said. "You fellas got all there is to *get*."

And he met the asshole with the gun's gaze straight on, not being an a-hole himself, not threatening back exactly . . . but making it clear they're going to have to go further if the wallet itself is that important to them . . . which he really didn't think it was.

There was standoff for about 10 seconds.

"Hummmmmph," the non-gun guy said, and both pricks grinned slightly, and they turned to leave, and Chris saw the shadow of the one car in the parking lot, meaning he should have had his guard up when he came off the trail . . . but you were past that point now.

And the gun guy turned back, and smacked Chris in the head with the butt of the gun . . . and then they took off . . . and Chris's first thought was *I've seen it in the movies*, but now I just got my rear-end pistol-whipped.

Whooooa-baby.

The blow hadn't knocked him off his feet, he'd caught himself with his hands on his knees, and he was definitely dizzy but mainly was feeling around in his hairline, trying to access the actual damage.

They didn't have mirrors in the bathroom, just those metal reflective plates, and he washed the area a couple times and luckily the bleeding eased. It was more of a nasty blow than a gash, and odds were you weren't going to have to run to an ER and get stitched.

And Jeez, looking at the bright side, he probably wouldn't have to bring it up to Kay and Nancy even, like he definitely *would* if the mutant had caught him a few inches lower, on the cheek . . . and on top of that, fine it cost him 60 bucks and a cheap watch, but the credit cards and license were intact, not to mention his car keys . . . so it *could* have been a lot worse.

Not that you were going to exactly celebrate . . .

Chris got back to the mall on time and Nancy was where they were supposed to be, but she held up a finger to Chris, indicating Kay would be just another minute, and the minute morphed into 10 or 15, but at that point what was the rush.

"Success?" Chris said, to whoever.

They both looked at him a little funny, and Chris was wondering if his speech was off, not internally but on account of the side of face was feeling stiff now, and the words might be coming out funny.

Then again -- maybe there *is* no such thing as shopping success -- they're probably all confused, wondering if they made the right decisions and possibly what they should return.

He said, "Well moving forward then -- what do we got?"

"Tonight?" Kay said.

"You tell me," Chris said.

"Well," Nancy said, "Kay and I had an appetite for a some dancing. You can join us if you like."

“You can,” Kay said, and you’d like a little more oomph behind the invitation, but fine.

Dancing around was about last on Chris’s list right now, but you started considering the alternatives -- popping in again at Weatherby’s, and he didn’t feel like drinking tonight; catching up with Gloria, and again he’d worn out his welcome there; maybe dropping in on Ray, which tended to be depressing if you didn’t time it right.

Chris said, “I don’t *want* to join you. But I will. Reason being -- and this keeps coming up -- I’m a native San Franciscan, but lately I got about 3 options up here.”

“So you’re doing us a *favor*,” Kay said. “Thanks a lot.”

“It does sound like we’re the default category,” Nancy said.

“Okay,” Chris said, “I didn’t mean it to come out like that. Alls I’m saying, I may not participate in the dancing. Happy to watch you guys though.”

“Great then, where do you suggest?” Kay said.

Chris didn’t know the club scene these days but had an okay time at that Latin place on Columbus that Gloria had dragged him to, and the women were good with it and Kay told Chris she was going to ride with Nancy if he didn’t mind.

So this excursion you created, Kay coming down from Reno, it wasn’t going anywhere, and Chris figured what did you expect . . . and traffic was thankfully light into the city and they got there and the place didn’t open until 9 -- meaning Chris had to spring for another meal, an Italian place up the block, though it was tasty and getting something in his stomach help his head a bit.

The dance joint was pretty lively and they had a 4-piece band alternating with a DJ. Chris was able to sit for a while, and his ill experience up on Mount Tam came back into focus.

It *happened* . . . you'd have to *roll* with it and move past it, right? I mean what could you do?

Were you crazy enough to try to track down those guys? And how would you even *start*? . . . And *then* what?

Chris reminded himself that he thankfully had less on his plate lately, and he felt freer, so why open a can of worms. After all, no one got hurt (much) and the collateral damage was minimal -- so you swallowed hard and moved on . . . Didn't you?

An hour into it Kay told Chris he needs to be her partner now, because Nancy is leaving.

"Gee," Chris said, "what *for*?"

"She met someone." Chris hadn't been keeping a great eye on things, so this was a surprise.

"Just like that?" he said. "Isn't that kinda risky?"

"She knows him from the gym. So she *says*. At least *recognized* him."

Chris stood up and spotted Nancy indeed heading to the exit with some guy in a leather jacket, and she smiled and raised an eyebrow and Chris and Kay waved back.

"One-night stand type deal?" Chris said. "That was my original goal, as relates to *you*."

"I saw it right away and I countered it," Kay said, good natured enough about it and pulling him onto the dance floor.

It wasn't bad. It wasn't dirty-dancing or anything, far from it, but there was a spirit and an energy to being wrapped up with this gal . . . and Chris couldn't help projecting ahead . . . that hey, *Nancy* was out of the picture, you never *know* how the rest of the evening might unfold . . . and the head wasn't feeling that bad at the moment after all.

Except a half-hour later Nancy comes back, and she doesn't look that great, and Kay rushes over to her -- and it's not like she got assaulted or anything, but the guy turned out to be very unpleasant, was the verdict.

So there you had it . . . they get out of there and Kay goes back with Nancy to Alabama Street and Chris reprises last night at the motel on Lombard, and when he got there he realized he never checked out of that second room, so he was on the hook for both of them.

## Chapter 12

Chris slept better overnight than he expected, thinking maybe the blow to the side of the head *helped* him there, ironically, or it could have been the effect of the event itself -- either way he woke up feeling decent and with a clear decision to not screw around up here anymore looking for Kenny, or otherwise, and to hit the road back down south.

So he called Kay. "Listen, I appreciate this, what you did. If I'm ever back in Reno, let's . . ."

"Have coffee?" she said.

"Yeah why not, I like doing that, especially new places."

"So you're abandoning me," she said, and you couldn't always read Kay but it didn't seem like a big deal.

"I am," Chris said, "unless you want to come to LA with me."

There was a pause. "I could," she said.

"Jeez. I was joking . . . mostly."

"I have a girlfriend in Long Beach. Is that close?"

Chris said it was in the ballpark, and that man, you have girlfriends all over the place . . . and on top of it don't you have to get back to work? . . . and Kay explained they're working 6 on, 4 off right now, and she's got a bunch of saved sick days too.

So what do you know, and soon enough they're back on Highway 5 and Kay is reading a book in the passenger seat, her jeans rolled up to her knees, and Chris had no idea what book it was but she'd laugh occasionally and quote him a passage . . . and she told a couple stories about road trips with her mom and dad and brother when she was a kid, and they weren't



bad, there was always a punch line . . . and Chris had to admit it wasn't the all-time worst way to travel.

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He got her to Long Beach around dinner time, and it was more hip down there than he remembered, particularly on 2nd Street, which had a nice buzz to it.

Kay told him in front of a place called Nick's is fine, and he did his duty and got out of there, though coming back up the 405 to Manhattan Beach he wondered if this could be a *guy* friend and maybe Kay didn't want to get into that part.

Either way it was nice to return to the Cheater Five, despite the limp effort all around, and *one* thing, you couldn't beat the good old recliner, and Chris settled into a YouTube video of a guy riding a bicycle from Hazelton, British Columbia, to Vancouver, and the thing was time-lapsed of course, condensed into an hour, and he almost stuck it out but not quite.

The problem then being, you fall asleep too *early* you wake up weird, and in the morning Chris got the notion that maybe he could use that referral from Dr. Stride after all . . . there *was* someone he mentioned when Chris asked if there were any female shrinks in his stable, and Stride gave him one but Chris couldn't remember who.

So he called the office in Santa Monica, not wanting to alarm anyone by ringing Stride's cell at this hour, even to leave a message, and Jeeminy Christmas, like 20 minutes later, Stride calls him back.

"That's why I left a message in the office," Chris said. "No big deal, just getting my name into the rotation."

Stride sounded like he'd gulped down some coffee, half way sharp and half way out of it. "It's a concern," he said, "to hear from a patient after hours . . . that's why we have an answering service."

"Hold on, I didn't even speak to a live *person*," Chris said.

"Understood . . . but the service personnel are trained . . ."

“Oh boy,” Chris said. “A man can’t even leave an innocent message anymore and keep it private.”

“Part of your message -- or possibly the *anxiety* in the *tone* -- triggered a red flag, and we get a call when that happens . . . What seems to be the issue Chris?”

“There’s no *issue*. I’ve been trying to make that clear since Day 1 . . . Like I said, I have a little time on my hands these days, talking to someone might give me some direction -- do I want to get a *job*, do I want to write a *book*, should I take another *surfing* lesson -- you know, the basics.”

“Unh-huh” Stride said.

“You know what? You have a way of ticking people off. It’s kind of what you *don’t* say. I’m assuming they teach you that shit in therapy school -- then when you don’t *know* what to say, you look intelligent.”

“Listen, I’m referring you to Lauren again. I’ll personally call her in the morning.”

“Fine, if you insist, I appreciate that . . . But you throwing it into crisis mode here, I’m not a big fan of that.”

“Chris, we want to make sure,” Dr. Stride say. “My assessment is you are reaching out. That may or may not have unintended consequences.”

“Unless you call a truckload of *bull* manure your fancy consequences . . . Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. I know you’re looking out for me . . . *Unnecessarily*, but still.”

“You’ll hear from Lauren -- Dr. Moore -- in the morning,” Stride said.

Chris said *whatever*, and thanks again, and after a while he went back in the bedroom and put on an overnight radio talk show and it didn’t help much.

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Dr. Lauren Moore was a medium-heavy set woman about 50 who laughed a couple times as they were making the introductions in the lobby, so Chris thought that was a decent sign. For what it’s worth, she had

strikingly heavy breasts as well, he noted, and you couldn't disguise that element.

She sat behind her desk and Chris took a wooden chair, and she was looking at some paperwork and he said, "Before we get started, I'll fire a couple questions at *you*. Inform myself who I'm dealing with."

"Certainly," she said, and Chris appreciated the reaction, that this was a gal who'd probably been in the trenches a bit.

"First," he said. "No *couch*. In fact nothing comfy. What's *that* all about?"

"It's personal preference. I like the patient to be sharp."

"What you're getting at, some of 'em were falling asleep on you."

"I won't disagree entirely," she said. "Any other questions or concerns before we proceed?"

"Yeah. Are you happily married?"

A beat. "I am, as a matter of fact."

"First marriage? Solid all the way through?"

"I'm afraid it's my second," she said.

"Okay then, what happened with the first one?"

"Mr. Seely, we're extending the boundaries now. I'm going to leave it right there."

"Reason being," Chris said, "and I brought this up to Dr. Stride . . . but how do you guys expect us to take your advice, when you've screwed things up *yourselves*?"

"That's a fair question," Lauren said, "and the short answer is, that we're trained."

"Okay shoot," Chris said.

"I'm assuming that means *I* can ask the questions now . . . What's the most significant thing that's happened, in your estimation, between when you saw Dr. Stride, and last night, when you telephoned us?"

“See now, you guys with the latching on to *last night* . . . But okay, if you want to know the truth, I thought I might have something wrong with me originally -- *physically*, don't get all excited -- and I think recently it *passed*.”

“So do you think this ailment was a figment of your imagination?”

“No. Of my doctor's. I mean I didn't think it at first, but I arrived at that conclusion.”

“And how did this *ailment* manifest itself?”

“Oh for God sakes. I already explained it. It *didn't*.”

“You didn't say that.”

“Let's move on, I shouldn't have brought it up.”

“What *should* you have brought up then? As an important event since you last saw Dr. Stride?”

“I don't know, there've been a few things . . . Recently you mean? Some guy held me *up*, does that qualify? Actually *two* guys. I'm *over* it, no biggy. I'm not going to do anything about it . . . But *significant* shit you're asking? . . . I would say my friend Rosie might fit, who I met in New York and I thought we were hitting it off pretty good . . . and then that goes a different direction.”

“Is that common, what happened with Rosie?”

“Relationships? Didn't use to be *as* common, no. I used to be able to sustain 'em better.”

“Is the issue typically with *you*, or with your companion?”

“Me . . . I'm not sure how, but I think I scare 'em off . . . Okay not *scare* scare, uh-oh I see you making a note.”

“How do you scare them?”

“Wrong word, start all over. Let's go with *discombobulate*. I kinda screw them up, is what it is. They're not sure where I'm coming from -- and coupled with me not being exactly a matinee idol, they move on.”

“Your view is if you were somehow more attractive, your women friends would overlook your shortcomings?”

“Maybe. I’ve seen that aspect with my brother. Also this guy Ned, sort of a friend of mine . . . Something else too, you asking for the truth here, I feel like my organ got smaller. Sorry for the plain usage.”

“I see. And what do you attribute that *to*?” Dr. Moore said.

“Watching a pornographic movie being made, first hand. A few of them in fact.”

“Did you participate in these activities as well?”

“No. I was an innocent bystander. It was all interesting enough, but I came out of there intimidated as shit, and that hasn’t gone away.”

Dr. Moore said, “So do you feel your manhood has been under siege? And that could be precipitating your apparent failed relationships with women?”

“It could indeed . . . Except I wasn’t having tremendous luck the last few years, *before* my manhood got downgraded.”

“I see . . . and back to your experience getting *held up* . . . did you interpret that as a type of violation of your manhood as well?”

“*What?* . . . No, of course not. Nothing to do with it.”

“I believe you said,” and she was checking her notes, “*I’m not going to do anything about it.* What does that mean?”

“It *means* . . . like I didn’t file a *report* or anything. I chalked it up to a bad day all around.”

“What *else* happened bad that day?”

“I couldn’t *find* a guy. I wasted major time and energy.”

“I’m interested why you volunteered that you *aren’t* going to pursue it . . . *I* didn’t ask that question. That implies, you *were* considering pursuing it at one time. How long ago did this happen?”

This gal was twisting and turning everything, so Chris figured he better cut her off at the pass. “I don’t know, 5, 6 weeks ago. I’d forgotten all *about* it, frankly, until you made me dredge it up.”

More notes from Dr. Moore. She said, “Is there anything else Mr. Seely? That you’d like to add? In maintaining total honesty?”

Chris said, “Well, you asked. I wouldn’t mind hugging you. You look huggable.”

Dr. Moore said, “Let’s *explore* that a moment. What was your relationship like with your mother?”

“Oh brother. Fine.”

“You felt she nurtured you sufficiently?”

“Okay that’s enough, you’re getting off track.”

“I don’t think so. I believe we need to establish a correlation.”

“The *correlation* is, you’re a warm person, I can tell. And as a sidelight, your . . . physique . . . is impressive. You have to know that, let’s not kid around here.”

Dr. Moore cleared her throat, and started down a new path, the usual childhood stuff and were you ever *prone to*, or a *witness of*, any violence, and Chris did his best to give her the stock answers, and the session wound down.

“So lemme put it to you,” he said. “Same as I asked Bruce at the end of *that* one . . . Do you think I’m a candidate for more? . . . Or we’re good? Meaning I aired my dirty laundry effectively.”

“My recommendation is continued therapy, absolutely,” Dr. Moore said, and they shook hands and Chris said thanks for putting up with him, and he threw in a little *extra* thanks for seeing him on a Saturday, which he hadn’t thought of before, that she may have come in special after Stride apparently alerted her . . . though if she had, *Chris* had no doubt it would be reflected in the bill.

It turned into a pretty sweet day outside, so he swung by Venice Beach and got lucky with a parking spot and hung out for a few hours -- and the good thing, if you think you might be a little *nutty*, check out the crazy scene at Venice and by comparison you'll be fine.

## Chapter 13

On the way home though Chris graded his performance from this morning, and damn it, once again, just like that session with Dr. Stride, it was puzzling -- not to mention embarrassing -- why he was rude and forceful, and of course crude in there. *Not to mention a classic male chauvinist pig.*

Why did he need to show off, and hold the upper hand? These people were trying to help him.

He was thinking if he met this Lauren lady, or Stride too -- and that had already been proven with *him* -- in a normal social situation, there'd be no way he'd be such an ass. It must be . . . something about the office environment, and what *else*? . . . That he can't take constructive criticism from well-meaning professionals? . . . Or worse, he's afraid of being judged, and therefore tries to turn it *around* on them?

He had to admit, that might be an interesting question to *ask* Lauren -- if there ever *was* another session.

There was a text from Kay, *what's happening tonight* -- so she's halfway back on the radar maybe . . . and Chris told her he'd pick her up in Long Beach at 6 and they'd figure something out.

The mood took a substantial dive when he got back to the Cheater Five.

The same nice young couple with the toddler was in the pool, but when the dad saw Chris he got out and motioned to him.

"I don't know if it means anything," the dad said, "but there was an officer here looking for you earlier. At least I assume so. He was outside your apartment, knocking."



Chris tightened up and the only question he thought to ask was *when*, and the guy said about 45 minutes ago, and Chris lumbered up the stairs and hoped he'd thanked the guy for the heads up but he wasn't sure he did.

There was a business card wedged in by the door handle, and it said **Richard Lucchessian, Sergeant 2, LAPD** and a phone number.

And the usual assorted thoughts were racing around. They found Ken? . . . Emma? . . . They're hounding me for more information? . . . or God *forbid*, there's some new *different* follow-up re the *other* cops who'd been here the last few months, namely that guy Hamm, the detective, and his sidekick, both grilling him pretty good back then on (supposedly) the Modesto deal?

Chris picked up the phone but instead of calling this Lucchessian back he called Chandler.

"Yeah," Chandler said. "Make it quick if you can, I got golf on. McIlroy's on 17."

"I received another knock on the *door* just now," Chris said. "LE. Guy left his card."

"What's the name?" Chandler said, and Chris gave it to him.

"Okay now *that* guy," Chandler said, "he's around. You see him."

"Well whoopee," Chris said.

"He doesn't typically handle murder investigations, if that's what you're worried about." Chandler letting that one hang, making his point, strong, clearly wanting to get back to the golf.

"Oh," Chris said. "What *does* he handle then?"

"He's kind of a specialist, sort of like the old beat cops. You know, deflect something diplomatically before it gets out of hand. Of course he could be working *any* kind of case, I'm just giving you my experience with the guy."

"Ah."

“You threaten anyone?” Chandler said. “I’m sort of joking -- maybe -- but I know you by now. You seem like a nice enough guy, but you have that short fuse . . . Remember your *Craigslist* friend.” And you could hear Chandler chuckling, which through the phone sounded like a dumb giggle.

It occurred to Chris he better mention the therapist visit, even though it killed him to admit to it . . . and the part about saying he wouldn’t mind hugging the woman.

You could tell Chandler was thinking about this one. “It’s quite conceivable,” he said. “Not that the therapist necessarily felt threatened, but there *are* state requirements, and to cover their ass, they will report those kind of actions.”

Chris was thinking *what* action, nothing happened . . . but he was also considering his reaction when Dr. Moore asked him about the robbery, maybe he *was* exhibiting some extreme hostility there without realizing it . . . and she thought he might be taking the law into his own hands or something.

“Hmm,” Chris said. “Never good, but better than the alternative I guess . . . I mean your line of *thinking* is . . . Would you recommend . . . calling him *back*, this Richard?”

“Up to you. You want to be a solid citizen, then by all means. On the other hand, these type of inquiries, they’ve been known to go away -- if that’s what we’re dealing with here. Provided you don’t put the moves on any *other* therapists for the foreseeable future . . . and don’t fly on the radar any *new* particular way.”

You wanted to kill the guy when he was sarcastic and stuck the needle in like this, but it wasn’t worth arguing that you hadn’t put the moves on *any* therapist.

Bottom line, Chris *was* a bit relieved now, much as you can be, and he asked Chandler was there any word on Kenny?

Chandler said not a thing, though he heard Mancuso was on it now too.

Chandler not adding on to that comment, and Chris thinking *whatever that meant*.

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He decided what the hay, speaking of putting the moves on, the future didn't look abnormally bright with Kay, so why force the issue . . . and he invited Finch to join them for dinner, and told Finch bring Holly too if she's around.

On the way there Chris said to Kay, "This old guy, I think you'll enjoy him. He's a character. Some of the stuff out of his mouth is kinda scripted out of a 1960's movie -- you familiar with any of those?"

"I liked 'The Sterile Cuckoo'," she said.

"Dang. Good find, I have to hand it to you. Haven't thought of that one in forever. Who was the actress?"

"Liza Minnelli."

"No *way* . . . now *that* could win you Final Jeopardy, at the very least."

"I like 60's *music* too," she said. "We used to have an oldies station in Reno, but they canned it."

"*Tell* me about it," Chris said, himself missing the old KFRC up north. "Meanwhile, there's this gal, reporter friend of Finch's. A lot younger. I'm betting she shows up too."

Sure enough, no surprise, Finch and Holly are out in front of the place, Finch talking to her about something and Holly all ears like she's in the presence of greatness.

It was the type of MB place Chris favored -- side street, half dozen blocks off the beach, the place struggling a bit in recent months which meant you could get right in and the service was good, since they were trying hard to stay in business.

Holly and Kay hit it off well and afterwards Chris suggested the Crow's Nest for a little nightcap, unless anyone had to *be* somewhere . . . and he thought Finch might drop out at this point but he was okay and the four of them trekked over there.

By now Kay was intrigued by Finch *herself*, letting on at dinner when she found out Finch was a writer that she'd gotten her AA in English at Great Basin College in Elko, before doing her nursing stuff at UNR.

It was crowded in the Nest, a Saturday night after all, and there were two small tables open, different sides of the room, and Kay was happy to continue on with Finch and Chris sat with Holly.

"Good way for an old guy to get women," he said. "Just be a mysterious writer. *Fake* it, even."

Holly smiled and said, "I've seen it work with puppies." Chris had seen that too, some guy on a park bench with a puppy, getting inundated by women of all persuasions.

He said, "Speaking of which . . . you've got this yacht broker dude. But you're always *available*."

"That's the way we both like it," she said, no clarification, and that was fine.

"I know I cut you off on this before," Chris said, "but I'm still interested in your investigative reporting, the Finch's motel incident . . . Don't get all *long-winded*, I'm not saying, but how 'bout the condensed version."

"Well," Holly said, "it turned out the couple-in-question's car might have been somewhere else, when the assault occurred."

"No I *got* all that. And there was a name Finch said he overheard them using the night before, when they were arguing in the lobby."

"Yes. Roland."

"So let's not go *backwards*," Chris said. "Start with the part where you uncovered something *a little bit disturbing*, as you put it."

“Ah. Well, I don’t know what I have. And frankly my investigation -- such as it was -- it seems to have stalled. The disturbing part was simply . . . I did find a Roland Villanueva, long story short. He seemed willing to talk, that he had an axe to grind, possibly in relation to the event . . . So I met him in South Central, which made me nervous, even during the day, so I brought a photographer with me, not to take pictures but for security.”

“Hmm.”

“Exactly . . . And Roland was a creepy individual, tattoos all over his neck and head that looked homemade. He didn’t give me anything I could use for the case, but told me to come back any time, that he wanted to fuck me . . . Again, I don’t *speak* this way, I’m just repeating it for accuracy’s sake.”

“That’s not good,” Chris said.

“No. When we got back, a senior reporter suggested I go to the police, which I did. Roland is a known felon it turns out, though currently not in violation of anything.”

“Cripes . . . and that was the *extent* you got out of Law Enforcement?”

“Initially. They simply suggested not to contact him further . . . Then the phone calls started, unfortunately.”

“Oh no.”

“Not quite *that* bad -- not on my cell or anything -- but during normal business hours at the office. The paper.”

“You’re gonna tell me you talked to the cops again then.”

“Yes. A female officer, very pleasant, she took on my *case*, so to speak. She recommended a restraining order.”

“I have to tell you,” Chris said, “you’re not giving me a lot of confidence here.”

“Sorry about that. I felt there were pros and cons of a restraining order, plus the hassle, and maybe making a bigger deal out of this than necessary.”

“Or maybe *not*,” Chris said, not remotely having a good feeling about this -- and now . . . not about the poor guitar gal up *north*’s situation either.

“So my boyfriend and I -- and yes, we *do* speak -- we decided to keep it simple. If Roland called me *three* more times, even leaving messages, I’d go for the restraining order . . . and involve an outside private investigator as well, was my boyfriend’s suggestion.”

“Good idea, the *outside* guy. Do that *anyway*.”

“He called twice more.”

“That’s *it*? . . . So no . . . response *triggered*?”

“No.”

“When was the last one?”

Holly said, “You ask an awful lot of questions, actually. At least a *month* ago. I’ve moved on. As I say, I may be nowhere on the story.”

“*Fuck* the story,” Chris said. “Stay out of the way of dangerous idiots.”

“That’s kind of what my editor suggested. To let the LA Times -- and the police -- figure out what happened at Finch’s motel. That I don’t have to be a hero.”

“You don’t,” Chris said.

And they got onto other subjects, Chris inquiring about her novel again and if Finch was helping, and Holly said oh yes very much so, and she’s trying to talk Finch into starting an informal writing class.

“How’d he react to that?” Chris said.

“He pretended he wasn’t interested, but I think a lightbulb may have sparked.”

“He should . . . *I* might take that even.”

“Oh you absolutely *should*,” she said.

“I’m joking. Jeez.”

“I’m totally *serious*,” Holly said. “You have a ton of stories in you, I can tell. You may not know how to express yourself, but that’s what a *teacher* is for . . . Look at this, for instance.”

And you had Kay and Finch on the other side of the joint, Finch holding court and talking the whole time and using his hands, and Kay looking like she was hanging on every word, which Holly'd been doing earlier.

"I'll be honest," Chris said after a minute. "I thought I might get somewhere with her -- we had a past connection that showed promise -- but I'm outclassed big-time."

"You have your good points," Holly said.

"Well . . . if the marriage or boyfriendship, or whatever you got going with the yacht broker from Armonk, ever goes south . . . let me know."

"Something tells me," she said, "you've used that line more than once."

"Oh yeah," Chris said.

Eventually everyone wrapped it up, no Ned or Rosie in here tonight, so far, so you didn't have to over-socialize, and Chris got Kay home safely and when he got back to the apartment it was half past midnight . . . not *too* late maybe, and he called Chandler.

## Chapter 14

“Did I wake you?” Chris said.

“What do *you* think,” came the mumble from Chandler.

“Listen . . . I’m not going to waste time apologizing . . . this, or the other ways you’ve been helping me out.”

“But?” Chandler said.

“Okay. Something happened tonight. Not an event, but a discussion . . . and nothing to do with my phone call earlier, that Lucchesi guy stopping by.”

“*Lucchessian*,” Chandler said, “and I assumed as much. Spit your new thing out.”

“Welp . . . there’s someone up north, I think she’s in trouble. At the very least, on the edge of it. And may not be coming to grips . . . Some incarcerated SOB is contacting her. Or *was*.”

“Randomly?”

“Yeah. She’s like a crafts person. There’s shit online unfortunately . . . It didn’t seem as big a deal, until I ran across someone tonight, something similar happening to *them* . . . Got me thinking I downplayed the first issue.”

“*You* . . . being the *key* person who downplayed it.”

“That’s it.”

“Hmm.”

“It sounds goofy, I know,” Chris said. “What I’m asking you, what I’m hoping . . . you can provide the name and basics on the individual . . . as well as the incarceration status.”

“How should *I* know?” Chandler said.



“You’re playing with me, and I know it’s not the most pleasant task -- but if you can look into, I’ll really appreciate it.”

Chris gave him Gilda Spinnaker, and that she said she filed a police report 6 months ago . . . and that this likely would have been in Marin County.

You could hear Chandler taking a note. “That *do* anything?” he said.

“She said it stopped it. Nothing *since* .”

A slight pause. “I wouldn’t take that to the bank,” Chandler said.

“No,” Chris said.

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Chris met Kay for breakfast on Sunday and they kept it local, downtown Long Beach, and she brought along Alvin, Chris figuring this was the ‘girlfriend’ she was staying with, but it turned out Alvin was the girlfriend’s *roommate*, and a flaming gay guy, very candid, who said he was crucified growing up in Fallon, Nevada, and got a new lease on life moving out here in the ‘90s.

The guy was decent company, plenty of enthusiasm and when he asked you a question he listened attentively, unlike most doofuses these days with the electronic withdrawal symptoms kicking in at about the 30 second mark of your answer.

Kay on the other hand didn’t look great. Chris hadn’t been privy to what she may have consumed last night in the Crow’s Nest, but he asked her how that went.

“I *love* that man Finch,” she said. “He encouraged *me* to start writing. And to email him my work. Can you believe it? . . . Except he couldn’t remember his email address, but he said to ask you.”

“There’s a pattern there,” Chris said, and his phone buzzed and he excused himself for a moment.

“Okay what we have,” Chandler said, “white male, 32 years old, repeat offender, sentenced to 6 years at Lovelock, Nevada. Aggravated assault . . . You know where that is?”

“Yeah. A little shy of Winnemucca. Isn’t the where your friend ended up?” This was getting off topic quick, but Chandler had once consulted for the defense during the OJ Simpson trial, and that a-hole, for some other infraction in Las Vegas later, spent a bunch of years there.

“So you know it. But it’s irrelevant, he was released last July. Not Simpson, *your* guy.”

“Fuck.”

“He did 4 1/2 of the 6 . . . what can I tell you.”

“So . . . where is he now?” Chris said. “And *who* is he?”

“My contact didn’t know for sure, but the guy’s hometown is Cook Creek, Montana. Even though he transgressed in Nevada.”

“Thanks . . . and a *name* on the guy?”

“William White, is who your friend reported on.”

“Holy Smokes.” Bill White. Could the guy have a more vanilla name.

“Is that it?” Chandler said.

“Hey, man,” Chris said, trying to add the right measure of appreciation without sounding sappy . . . but Chandler had hung up.

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Chris said to Kay, as he slowed down for the exit. “I *typically* like to stop in Colfax. Distance seems about right, before you have to start up Donner Summit. How about you?”

“I’d never thought about it,” she said.

“One time,” Chris said, “now mind you this is beginning in the Bay Area, not LA, but still -- I rented a car, a compact to save a few bucks, but I thought it would be a reasonable size. When the rental guy produces it, it’s one of those micro jobs, with the tiny wheels? I mean a couple gym guys who pump iron could pick it up and move it.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Kay said.

“The point being, I drove it, Petaluma where I used to live, straight shot to right here, Colfax, and I topped it off and it cost me 5 dollars and change. That was like 3 and a half hours of highway driving.”

“That’s impressive,” she said.

“You’re moody,” he said. “It’s been fun though, for the most part.”

“I guess it has. What’s your *story* anyway? I never asked.”

“Now you’re going weird on me.”

“I’m serious. Why you ran out of the hospital in the middle of the night and such. It didn’t seem appropriate to follow up.”

“So you answered your own *question* . . . Let’s stay in touch, you never know.”

And they gassed it up and Chris grabbed a couple slim jims from the mini mart and Kay thanked him and ate hers, but conversation was minimal the rest of the way to Reno.

And whoa . . . dropping her off, her *neighborhood*, this felt uncannily close to where the guy clocked him with the fireplace log.

A couple of *you take cares*, and Chris continued east toward Wells, three quarters of the way across the state actually . . . and from there you’d cut off onto old US 93, one of those two-lanes he never liked . . . and then at Twin Falls you had 86 to Blackfoot, and finally I-15 north into Montana, and luckily Cook’s Creek wasn’t that far in, situated on the edge of the Beaverhead National Forest in the southwest quadrant of the state.

You had to tell Kay something of course, why you had to leave bright and early Monday morning -- and that you could give her a lift if she wanted -- and it was you had an old friend in Pocatello you were paying a visit to -- and Chris hated to lie, but maybe you *could* stretch the truth, *stop* in Pokey on the way back, since he did like it there.

Google maps showed 10 hours and 28 minutes from Reno to Cook’s Creek, and if the mutant wasn’t there, that wouldn’t be fun . . . but you did

what you had to do. That meant an overnight somewhere unfortunately and it was after 4 when he dropped Kay, but hey, try to go halfway at least, and he pushed it a little better than that, 7 hours to Burley, getting in around midnight, and he woke up at 4 for some unknown reason, and that was it . . . the good thing being you might as well get in the car . . . and he rolled into Cook's Creek around 8.

It was a working town, things were buzzing, you had the impression people went to bed early and got up early and handled their business.

You might as well start simple, and the breakfast place had an old fashioned pay phone booth, the wooden one you went in and accordioned the door closed and a light came on and you had your privacy. And hanging in the bracket below was a paper phone directory, Loggerhead County, and everything was in good shape . . . and this was why Chris admired towns like this, they didn't need to be replacing stuff left and right, because people didn't mess stuff *up*.

You had a Trevor White in Dustin, a Angus F. White in Melrose, a Potter and Ethyl White in Parango . . . and a Werner White right here in Cook's Creek.

This wasn't the greatest sign right now, no specific William, but you might as well call and find out . . . and of course Chris caught himself, even from a pay phone you were taking a risk, such as the guy might have caller ID for starters . . . but the lack of sleep and the dragging his ass out here *period* didn't have him in the greatest mood, and he figured you could dance around a *few* of these rules he'd imposed on himself the last year, couldn't you? As long as you exercised reasonable judgment.

So he dropped in the fifty cents and a woman answered and Chris said was Bill there, and she said no, he was at work and could she help him . . . and he made a snap decision, that *yes please*, it was Ike Randall from the Lovelock Correctional Parole Board conducting a welfare check.

The woman hesitated, and said he'd be home at 5:30 and she'll be sure to inform him, and Chris said thanks, nothing urgent, just routine, and please have a nice day.

So you established *that* -- what do you know -- and now you had the day to figure out what exactly to do about this prick.

People were super-friendly in Cook's Creek, he had to admit, and one old guy he met in the town square was telling him fishing stories, throwing in some Grizzly scares for good measure, and it was all interesting. Both the stories and the guy -- who you'd label a throwback to simpler times, except Chris suspected *all* the old guys were like that around here.

There were three motels in town and he'd checked into one and parked way in the back, for whatever it was worth, since no point flashing the California plates in the face of everyone who passed by. From the motel you could almost walk everywhere, and he put it together that the White people's house was 14 blocks from where he was talking to the old guy -- so not a stroll in the park exactly but you might as well mosey on over there in a while . . . see what's going on, get your bearings . . . at least size this one up.

The thing being, they were all different. There was no best approach, best timing, best method -- none of that. You'd assume you'd learn, one to the next, but it didn't work like that.

Chris had the Czechpoint in the right pocket of his jacket just in case, and around 5 he had to cut the old guy off in the middle of another story -- except it was pretty clear you didn't *do* that around here -- not that anyone was going to hold it *against* you, but the point being everyone had time for everyone else, and *this* guy would have certainly have let you complete *your* story, and *then* some -- so you give the man his due and hear him out.

Making it about 5:20 when Chris left the square, and you didn't want to *run* exactly but you wanted to move it -- so he shuffle-walked his way over there, and he could see he wasn't going to make it by 5:30 but that

might not matter, the main thing is you follow through . . . and at 3rd Street and Ravine, 2 and a half blocks from the White residence, the phone rings and it's Chandler.

"You sound nervous," Chris said. "*Agitated* at the very least. Slow down."

It was out of character for Chandler to be anxious, unless he was on the tennis court. The guy prided himself on keeping things smooth and organized and being in control.

"Where are you?" Chandler said.

Chris thought *around the corner from the guy* might be too descriptive so he said, "I'm in the ballpark. Loggerhead County. Why do you ask?"

"Okay *stop*," Chandler said. "Whatever you're *doing*, halt right in your tracks . . . Thank God."

"*What?*"

"I heard from my *guy* again. A revision on *your* guy, it turns out."

"Huh?"

"We had the wrong William White. The *correct* mope was hassling your friend from *Folsom*, not Lovelock . . . *That* facility. Up the delta."

"I *know* what it is," Chris said. "But say, *what the heck* now?"

"I just *told* you, *separate deadbeats*, both incarcerated, but we had the *erroneous* one as the stalker . . . This second one's worse than the first guy hands down. Guy has a rap sheet that's a laundry list of adventures . . . You take our liberal court system, not giving him a *quarter* the time they should have -- and factor in the parole idiots -- there's your end *result*."

Chris felt around for the firearm in his pocket, which curiously felt a whole lot more dangerous now that he wasn't going to be using it tonight for sure, or likely any time soon.

"Gosh," he said.

"Sorry about that," Chandler said.

“So what I’m hearing . . . you referencing the *parole idiots* . . . this mutant is loose *too*?”

“I’m afraid so. A more recent ill-advised re-entry into society. This one’s been sprung on the world since February 12th, if I’m repeating my source correctly . . . We have his hometown as Beacon, down the Central Valley toward Fresno.”

Chris knew where that was too, but didn’t want to be a jerk.

“So we good?” Chandler said. “Whatever you might have been intending . . . to speak to *either* gentleman about? *Capiche*?”

Chris said they were, and the old guy in the plaza had recommended the best place in town if you wanted a steak, and you *were* in Montana . . . nothing you could do about that fact now, so you may as well make it count.

## Chapter 15

Chris did some soul-searching on the way back to California.

Could you somehow just *monitor* this guy and leave him alone for now?

The 6 months and counting, of him not bothering Gilda, that should count for something, correct?

Unfortunately . . . nah.

You monitor a guy like this, while he supposedly continues his 'reformation' as a free man . . . You hope there's no way it would ever cross his mind to drive the three or four hours from Beacon to Bolinas some day . . . for a little follow up visit. Up close and personal this time . . . Except it could.

Chris was comparing the wait-and-see approach to sticking a band-aid on a hematoma -- or whatever those things were that festered from the inside.

Guys don't want to take the *heat* . . . then you know what? Don't threaten innocent people.

Chris wished the answer wasn't *nope* -- but it was.

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Beacon was quite a bit larger than Cook's Creek. No point looking it up, but getting the lay of the land currently it felt populous enough that you might have two high schools. One good thing, there were multiple lodging options including a Super8 right at the exit off 99, and Chris always liked those. Beacon was between Turlock and Chowchilla.

Hard to know what people did around here if they didn't work in agriculture -- and the town logo on the entry sign was a horse dragging an



old manual plow. Chris had noticed on Google, just trying to find directions, where they threw in the fact that most of the fruits and vegetables in the United States are grown in the Central Valley.

You were starting to waste a lot of days, running around like a chicken with your head cut off. He'd left Montana bright and early Wednesday morning, and was of a mind to pull a Mancuso -- that's where Ned sat his rear end in the vehicle and essentially drove it from Manhattan Beach to South Dakota without doing anything else except getting gas.

This wasn't *that* kind of superhuman effort, but still Chris was determined to go straight through, Cook's Creek to Beacon -- except in western Nevada the news shows were all screaming about a small plane getting in trouble and having to set down in a field somewhere east of Truckee, and Highway 80 was affected . . . and Chris said screw it, that's enough for one day, and he spent the night in Reno off all places.

So now you had Thursday, March 29th, and no point looking back at the wasted time, you had a couple hours left of a Beacon public library being open, and he found one and got down to business, back in his comfort zone, signing in to the library computer anonymously and not leaving (at least you didn't think so) any tracks of your actions.

This was a little simpler so far, *this* mutant. It turned out there was an inmate *locator* site, a government one actually, and you agree to the terms of service, yada-yada, and there was a lot of raw information there. You combine it with a couple private sites that were popping up as well . . . and Jeez, even the old online phone book was paying off here . . . and twenty minutes later you had an address for the guy . . . maybe.

What concerned Chris was it could be an old address of course, from before the guy went away . . . and what had Chandler said, he served 4 1/2 of a 6 year sentence? . . . Or was that the *first* guy, and was he getting the two guys confused now *himself*?

It was an apartment, you figured, because there was a number 463 after the address, and the street was called Elmwood but that was deceptive, it was right on a parkway, two lanes each direction, one of your busier streets in this otherwise fairly peaceful town.

So yeah, there were multiple apartment complexes there, similar, modern but looking kind of shabby, and Chris decided he better at least park a few blocks away if he was going to be bold enough to ring a bell.

The apartments were off inside hallways, though there wasn't a door per se on the *end* of the hall, so the wind whipped through as you tried to find the unit. Chris had opted for a Detroit Tigers baseball cap that happened to be in the trunk, and sunglasses, which he rarely wore. This approach was more direct than if he had unlimited patience, but he didn't see where he was setting anything up to backfire later. Still . . . don't let them get a great look at you, and don't let them see you driving away.

There was no bell or buzzer so he knocked loud.

"*What,*" came the voice from behind the door, a throaty woman's, who probably smoked . . . and the ubiquitous TV was doing its thing in the background.

This wasn't bad, if he could keep it this way. She obviously *could* get a look at him through the side window if she wanted, but the angle wasn't that great.

"Yo, where's Billy at," Chris said. "It's Bobo . . . from Sac-Town way." Chris didn't know if the Sacramento expression was current or hip, but he went with it . . . Sacramento of course being next to Folsom,

There was a pause and the woman said, "Well *you* should know, then."

Chris was thinking, Holy Smokes, could there really *be* a Bobo from Sac-Town? But clearly she was playing it coy, and tough.

He said, "Listen, I know he ain't living *here*. But where's he working at? It's important."

“Same as they all do,” she said, and he heard the lock clicking from inside, thinking uh-oh, she’s going to open up after all, but it was the opposite, she was dead-bolting the thing, and a minute later you heard the TV volume raising, and this conversation was obviously over.

It was after 6 when he got back in the Camry and darn, that was something *else* you could try looking up now, as he pieced it together . . . the *you should know* from the woman triggering a possibility. . . and the library from earlier was closed but he found one in town that was open late on Thursday nights, and that was actually adjacent to one of the high schools . . . and as he looked around crossing the parking lot he was thinking *this* is how you do it. The school and the whole campus too, looked brand spanking new and clean and inviting. Some guy was machining the football field at the moment, and despite the rainy season, that turf looked like you could eat off it.

Plenty of pride in these small towns, Chris was thinking.

At any rate, you had the Beacon Herald, and then of course the Fresno Bee covering your local news, and he started with the Herald.

What you were trying to find -- the woman in the apartment implying that if he, Bobo, knew Billy from the joint, he’d know where guys fresh *out of the joint* might get a first job in this town -- so was there any reference to maybe a halfway house around here. . . and he took his time.

Finally there was something from 2012, an article -- actually more of an obituary -- on a man named Roger Kincaid, who was apparently a beloved benefactor around town, a guy who’d married into money and kind of donated his life to all kinds of charitable causes.

The article focused on Kincaid but there was a mention of a Strawbridge Junction, and a quote about Kincaid from someone who’d gone through their program and now wanted to give back as well, and how Kincaid had inspired him.

Strawbridge Junction was worth a look, and on the home page were various photos of youngish guys working the trades -- electricians, plumbers, auto mechanics -- and Chris clicked on the **About** link and the **Testimonials** . . . and there was more to the operation, they didn't exactly advertise it, but they found jobs for what they called 'those in need' . . . which Chris wanted to translate to some ex-cons.

So you never knew . . . and he took the address and headed over there, and the place was in what felt like a warehouse district on the edge of town, near a go-kart racing franchise and a mini-stadium that might be a rodeo grounds.

It was late but a few guys were still milling around out front in orange hardhats, and Chris watched them a few minutes, and they got into two pickups and Chris figured you might as well follow along.

They didn't go far, maybe a mile before they both turned into a strip mall, and of course there was a bar, with the fancied up name of *Club Royal* on the sign, along with a neon cocktail waitress holding a tray.

Chris followed them in, sat at the bar with a bottle of beer, and observed the interaction.

Two Hispanic guys, two white guys, they didn't look like the greatest of friends, and Chris figured they were lumped together by these circumstances. Meaning all of them likely working on a fresh start.

After a while one of the Hispanic guys went to the men's room and Chris followed. And the guy was washing up and Chris made a little small talk, and you couldn't pinpoint what an ex-inmate might look like, but this guy *felt* like one.

Chris said, "I'm overhearing you fellas. Are you part of, I don't know like a work release deal? . . . Ignore me if I'm butting in where I don't belong."

"No, that's cool," the guy said, and they left the men's room and there was an alcove full of cartoons on the walls and assorted memorabilia, and

the guy stood there a minute. He said, "I'm trying to turn *my* life around, I'm not ashamed to admit it. I can't speak for these other clowns." And the guy smiled but you couldn't tell, he might have *meant* it about the other guys.

"Interesting," Chris said. "Turning it around from *what*? You seem fine. Head on straight, and all that."

"Thank you . . ." The guy spoke softer. "But I've been away. I was mixed up with a gang, we did some things we shouldn't."

"Oh. So . . . is it a requirement then? This job corps thing I hear you fellas referring to?"

"Oh yeah."

Chris should have thought of that earlier -- this wasn't rocket science -- it made sense that a condition of your parole was *you get a job*.

And not just anyone's going to hire an ex-con . . . so there's undoubtedly something similar to the Strawbrige whatever-it-was in most towns.

Chris said, "So, when you . . . start off . . . they train you in the trades? I see you guys came in with hardhats."

"That's down the line," the guy said. "Off the bat, you got two choices. Road crew or farm crew. Most guys go farm, because road crew works even in the rain, but farm, you don't always gotta work, depending on your supe. Road supe sits in the van so he don't care, farm supe's out in the open with you."

"Well that makes sense . . . When you say *farm*, you're *what*, picking fruit and stuff?"

"Not this early. Right now we got pruning, burns, mending fences, all that shit."

"Where's *that* at?" Chris said. "*Different* farms, or one?"

"This week and next, *walnut* one . . . The other downside, farm crew, we start at 6. But you get used to it."

Chris thanked the guy for all this, again it was *interesting*, and said he'd drop them a small donation, and the guy took the time to write down the name of the place on a scrap of paper, and Chris told him he was an excellent ambassador and to keep up the good work.

When Chris got back to the Super 8 he called Chandler.

"Listen," he said, "I may speak to that *second* guy, we'll see. But how *old* is the dude? You didn't give me any of that."

"I don't know," Chandler said. "30, 35, maybe 40. What's the difference?"

Chris said, "Do you *have* that?"

And it took Chandler a minute, and you could hear him exhaling a few times like this is a real pain in the neck, plus unnecessary . . . and he came back with the guy being 33, and Chris said sounds good, and that was all . . . and the NCAA basketball tournament was on, and Chris got into one of the games, which was never the worst thing, diverting yourself a bit, in these situations.

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Chris went back to the library on Friday. This could be a *total* waste of time, but you needed to at least look around in the old Beacon High School yearbooks, if such things existed publicly.

Chandler pointing out in the earlier conversation that Beacon was the fucker's home town could indicate a *few* things -- namely that it was his home town *before* he got in trouble, but not necessarily being his home town all the way back to high school.

On the other hand what was the expression, the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree?

So you give it a shot.

Your goal . . . such as it was . . . was to identify the guy . . . so you'd hopefully *know* him, if and when you saw him, without having to stick your neck out and ask someone.

And actually . . . even now Chris was a bit paranoid asking the librarian, and he roamed around the perimeter of the library, poked his head in a few back rooms, and yep there was a *local* room, some standing showcases and shelves with all kinds of stuff including the Beacon yearbooks from at least the 1940's . . . and you hoped -- let's see the guy being 33 now -- that they weren't missing the 2002 and 2003 editions.

This wasn't all that surprising. Libraries tended to work that way, at least his friendly Funston branch in San Francisco -- they had a similar area with Galileo High School yearbooks, and Marina Junior High ones too . . . It was only on that trek to Brisbane with Ken that they'd had to go into the basement of the administration building and use a human to help them locate them.

Chris pulled 2003 off the shelf, and he noticed another set of yearbooks to the right, and those were *Calderon* High, and the books ran from 2009 to present, so you'd assume *that* was the fresh school next door and that Beacon High was the original.

It didn't take long to find a William White in the senior class photos. Of course you're never sure, it could have been a different William White -- a normal *non-criminal* one -- and your guy still could have shown up in Beacon as an adult -- but you at least liked your chances.

Chris flipped through the rest of the book, and there was White on the football team, one of the biggest dudes apparently, listed as a *Tackle*, at 6'4, 250. He was mentioned as well in several of the game write-ups, as a standout performer.

Gee. Two random thoughts. When you're 6'4, 250 in high school and playing pretty well, you're typically getting some college attention. Chris's first thought being, maybe it didn't work out for the guy the way he was told it could. Who knows . . . that perhaps he failed in college football -- or flunked out -- or didn't *go*. And that started him off on the wrong path.

Chris *also* reminded himself -- that was irrelevant. However the a-hole ended up stalking an innocent guitar maker, you don't attribute it to a failed experience, or *anything*.

Thought number two, more significant, was he might be easy to find. You figure the guy hasn't *shrunk* -- if anything he's heavier than 250 now, and still at least 6'4 . . . So maybe you have something to work with.

Chris took a hard look at White's face, trying to commit it to memory, while projecting 15 years onto the thing, and after a few minutes he'd had enough of the guy period, and he got out of there.

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He cruised past the Strawbridge Junction headquarters at 5:30 the next morning which was Saturday, the guy in the bar having luckily mentioned that they worked 6 days a week.

Tough to know, but you'd assume that White, if he *was* part of this operation, would go for the farm crew as opposed to the road one, just Chris's hunch that a guy who hassled a guitar maker from prison would opt for the chance of getting off early on rainy days -- even though the farm work did sound harder, unless you faked it . . . like you'd assume White would.

It was pretty dang dead for the next 20 minutes and Chris wondered if maybe they start right *at* the location, meaning the darn orchard . . . but about 10 to 6 a bunch of guys came rolling in and parked in back, and there was some noise inside for a few minutes and then they filed out and went around the side and got in a small bus which pulled up and idled.

There *was* one big white guy in the mix. 6'4 would be the minimum on the dude, though you factor in the boots. He had a gut on him for sure but it wasn't over the top, and he still moved with an athlete's grace, and if it *was* this guy you'd have to watch out.



Chris stayed in the Camry and kept the whole thing in view from a leafy stretch of sidewalk half a block away, and he let the bus pull out and build up some speed, and he followed along.

It felt like they were going northeast, and it wasn't far, there were railroad tracks you crossed and then the third right was a dirt road that paralleled a main one, and this pointed out how you certainly *were* in the Central Valley, with a significant growing region likely never far from any residential community.

Chris was calling the guy White now in his mind, no one else fit the bill, and from a distance his face and hair were at least a rough match as well.

The bus stopped at a gravel pull-out and the guys lumbered out, and you had to keep driving, you couldn't stop there too without attracting attention . . . and this was going to be a long day, wasn't it.

Chris drove around for a couple hours and passed by again, and he wondered if anything happened for lunch, meaning maybe everyone spread out and you could work in a little private time with the guy, but that was impossible.

So what could you do? Strangely enough there was a Barnes and Noble bookstore about a half mile back across the tracks to the left, which came up on you quick, one of those deals where the neighbors are a Target and Petsmart and the normal related franchises Chris figured you didn't need -- but B & N did have some comfortable chairs and he could stretch out and read, though when he went to the cafe for a snack there was a homeless guy in his comfy chair when he came back . . . confirming that was an issue even in a pristine town such as *Beacon*.

Chris kept looking out the window checking the weather, but it was a clear sunny day and you figured, they start at 6, they're probably off at 3 . . . and he passed by again at 2:45 and sure enough they'd about wrapped it up and some of them were already boarding the bus.

This was pretty brutal . . . and he followed the bus in reverse, you'd *assume* back to the headquarters . . . except the thing stops for gas at a diesel station a couple miles the wrong way . . . and the driver fiddles around and then gets into a conversation with a trucker pumping gas who he apparently *knows*.

Mercifully they get back to Strawbridge Junction and they unload . . . and then there's a long time where no one comes out, like close to an hour, and Chris is thinking, do they have like an *arcade* in there? Pool tables? What the heck. Wouldn't you want to go *home*?

Guys start to trickle out, and they head to the back parking lot and Chris determines now that White is driving a 1990's blue Chevy pickup, and the thing's making a fair amount of noise.

Anyway, White's by himself so you tag along, and the guy's making rights and lefts and at one point crosses a bridge over a decent sized river, and then he's driving at least 35 through an older neighborhood, and then hits the brakes hard, a little screech, and hooks it into a driveway.

Little crackerjack house, more like a 2 bedroom cottage, and there wasn't anything more brilliant to do than drive around the neighborhood. There was another pickup in the driveway in front of White's so ringing the bell wasn't your best choice.

It wasn't a bad neighborhood actually, when you took White out of the equation, and after three or four loops White got back in the truck and Chris followed him again . . . and the guy gets on 99 now, Jeez, and we're talking 75 miles an hour in a 55 zone, and the last thing Chris needs is a ticket for trying to keep up with the guy.

Fortunately after about 5 miles Chris still barely has him in sight way up ahead and the guy takes an exit.

And what did we have *here* -- In n Out burgers -- and White heads inside . . . and now this is too much for Chris to handle and he goes in and

gets in line as *well* . . . not recalling actually eating much today except for the little snack at Barnes and Noble.

White orders two double doubles, a shake and an animal fries -- and that seems like a lot, when you factor in the heavy sauce on those animal fries, and the guy of course picks up his order ahead of Chris and wolfs the sucker down and pops up and buses his tray . . . and Chris has to grab half his burger to go and hustle back in the car.

So where to now?

The guy gets back on 99 -- the *right* way, back toward Beacon -- except he *passes* the three Beacon exits and gets off on Covina Parkway West . . . and there's a major mall up ahead, and this *can't* be good if the dick-head is going to *shop*.

Maybe worse, when they get inside Chris notices him studying the directory . . . and the place is probably open until 10 . . . and this could be a long evening.

A couple stores into it White starts walking funny, and Chris realizes he's trying to find a men's room, and when he does, *that* takes a while . . . and Chris figured his instincts were correct, even real big guys can overdo it at In-n-Out.

An hour and half went by, the guy browsing but with a purpose, like he's on the hunt for something particular -- but mercifully he was finally done, and empty handed no less, and Chris figured he's going home for the night. There simply hadn't been a reasonable opportunity to confront the guy, and you had to accept that . . . and Chris wondered if he'd be too late getting back to the Super 8 to catch any more of the NCAA tournament and at least salvage something today . . . since otherwise it had been a complete washout.

Then White throws him a curveball. Instead of getting back on 99 and assumedly heading home to the little house in the older neighborhood, he hangs a left out of the mall and then left again on Hammerjam Road.

You're surprisingly out in the country again, it's dark now but you can feel open spaces, and after a couple miles he goes left once more and now it is more residential again, and this feels like a sprawling modern apartment complex, a series of identical buildings . . . and there are sets of car ports on the other side of it, down a little hill off by themselves . . . and White slows at the third one and sticks it in a space.

Chris is scratching his head now, and wondering is he paying someone a *visit*, and could *that* take all night . . . except he notices the carport slots are marked . . . and you'd assume the markings pertained to specific units.

Chris sort of knew the drill with that one -- the year he'd spent in Teaneck, New Jersey, he'd lived in a place similar to this, and the bottom line was if people *didn't* park in their assigned spots -- or if there *were* no assigned spots -- all hell could break loose.

So it was established, tried and true -- and likely here too -- meaning . . . now this guy is either visiting someone, and is in *their* spot . . . or son of a gun, *he* lives here . . . and was visiting someone *earlier*, at the little house Chris assumed was *his*.

The third option of course, he's visiting someone here but doesn't give a *shit* whose space he's parked in . . . but the way he slowed down and turned into it, it seemed like he'd earmarked a familiar spot.

Though either way . . . the mope could be done for the night, and that car wouldn't move until 5:30 in the morning -- in fact with tomorrow being Sunday, it could sit there all day.

Chris circled the complex a few more times and was getting ready, for the second time, to call it a night -- when White shows up *again* and gets in the car.

So . . . maybe he *was* just visiting someone, and it didn't take long, and Chris tails him once more, and this time White pulls up at a neighborhood liquor store and moseys on in.

Except now . . . he's got sweats on, comfortable baggy stuff, and Chris's first thought was he's on his way to a fitness place, that they've got 24 hour gyms all over now.

But maybe not.

As you thought about it . . . the fact that he changed clothes, period, made you think he *might* live in that apartment after all. And anything's possible, but guys don't typically hard liquor-it-up before they pump their iron.

At this point there wasn't a whole lot to lose except for a little more time, and Chris headed back to the apartment complex *ahead* of White -- you could see him through the glass at the counter making his purchase -- and Chris pulled into White's same spot under the same carport overhang.

He remembered it because there was a green Jeep in the adjacent space to the right, and the space to the left was currently empty, and if that didn't change it could come in handy.

Chris turned off the engine and waited.

It felt like it was taking about 5 minutes longer than it should, meaning the a-hole was going somewhere else.

And then White pulled up behind him.

Chris waited, studying him in the rear view mirror. White didn't honk, Chris had to give him credit for that, but he was waving his arms, the engine running, the lights on.

Chris didn't respond, and after a minute White gets out and Chris opens the window.

"Yo *Bud*," White said, "if I'm not disturbing you or nothin', you mind shifting your ass outa my spot?" You could smell liquor on the guy already.

Chris got out now and said, "I'm happy to. But can you give me a lift?"

"Say *what*?" White said.

"Over *there*," Chris pointed. "I left my keys."

And Chris went around the side of White's pickup and started getting in, and White stood there a second and then got back in the truck as well, either reacting automatically or deciding it wasn't worth trying to figure out what this guy meant.

When both doors were closed, before White threw it in gear, Chris said, "Johnny *Cash*, right? The *song*?" Referring to 'Folsom Prison Blues', an oldie but one that you'd assume Folsom inmates would have heard of, especially the white guys from small towns like this.

White smiled a fraction, and it was clear he connected, and Chris said, "What about Gilda? The acoustic guitar-maker gal you've been writing to? How's *that* going?"

Chris waited and again there was recognition in this guy's expression, the grin in fact getting a little wider now, and White started to say something, no doubt some kind of wisecrack, and Chris pulled the Czechpoint out of his pocket and shot him in the head.

What you did now . . . it seemed simple enough, things pretty quiet out there, not a lot of bright lights . . . and the firearm admittedly made some noise, but you hoped the combination of the truck engine running and the windows shut provided some decent muting . . . and Chris got out of the pickup and got back in the Camry . . . and again, the fortunate part being that space to the left was vacant . . . and he had to maneuver a three-point turn, and for a second it looked like one of the carport posts *might* be in the way, but he slid past it . . . and luckily he'd thought ahead, hadn't left anything in the room at the Super 8 just in case . . . and twenty minutes later you had the 152 cut-off at Chowchilla, and that meant you were pointed toward Los Banos . . . and soon enough traffic picked up and you could hear the hum of the interstate up ahead, which meant Highway 5 and home.

## Chapter 16

Chris didn't wake up Sunday until around 1 and he showered and ate something but he still felt in slow motion. He was counting it on his fingers and it didn't seem like it but he'd been gone a week.

He decided he better shake the cobwebs out, not to mention he'd gotten very inconsistent with his routine, so he put on some shorts and tennis shoes and made the left out of the Cheater Five, and first you had those couple of uphill, and then the commanding view of the ocean and coastline, and he zigzagged his way into town.

He hadn't been on the pier since the swim-race incident with the guy, and it was a bit like *deja vu* all over, and the last thing you needed was to actually run *into* that guy again . . . but it seemed a little late for that, based on the timeframe last time, and Chris stopped halfway to the end and took a look at the beach.

Always plenty going on, the water temperature rising, spring in the air. This had to be one of his favorite all-time places, it didn't ever wear out its welcome.

He never *had* consummated that Sunday brunch with Ned and Rosie, which got interrupted last time, first by the swim guy, and then by Finch . . . and Chris figured why *not*, and he gave Ned a call, see what's cooking in general . . . and specifically with Kenny.

"Hey my *man*," Ned said. "Meet me over here, why don't you." And it sounded like Ned had to go and Chris didn't have anything else on the agenda so he wandered down the Strand the half mile or so to the infamous house.

Chris rang the bell and Ned opened the door himself. “Come on up,” he said. “We’re working today.”

“Is that right,” Chris said . . . “I’m kidding, I appreciate it, but I’m gonna take a pass . . . but . . . any *updates*? I mean Chandler mentioned you were looking into it.”

Ned took a second, glancing at the ocean and then back to Chris. “I worked it out,” he said. “If you’re asking about Ken.”

“Wait . . . Kenny’s *back*? You’re not *saying* . . .”

Ned nodded. “He checked in from wherever he was holed up at, and I gave him the good news. Should be back at work this week.”

Chris felt his mouth dropping open. “Jeez then . . . just like *that*?”

“What we had,” Ned said, “the husband first reported that your friend Emma came at him with a garden hatchet. Meaning she *arrived* with the tool in her *bag* . . . That of course would be illogical.”

“Of course,” Chris said, not meaning any part of it but waiting for where this was going.

“Much more *logical*,” Ned said, “would be she shows up to have a civilized discussion with the guy. But things get out of hand, and she grabs whatever she can.”

“Which just happened to be a garden hatchet leaning up in the hallway.”

“Or on the kitchen sink, whatever. The main point here, it was *his*, not *hers*.”

Chris had the idea now. If Emma hadn’t *officially* shown up with the thing . . . and had procured it from inside instead . . . then you didn’t have Ken driving the getaway car, or whatever accessorizing they were *charging* him with . . .

Because all he was doing was riding over there with her while she talked to her ex.



There would of course be the issue of him running . . . but innocent people did that too.

Chris said, “The one small problem *being*, the guy reported it the *other* way though.”

“He did,” Ned said, “but he was in shock and doped up in the ER when he talked to the cops. More recently, he recalled the events more clearly, and revised his report.”

“You don’t say,” Chris said, scrutinizing Ned for any crack of a clue. “And how did *that* all get precipitated?”

“You know . . . a little friendly persuasion. Which everyone can appreciate. Things have a way of coming full circle, and we all move forward.”

“That apply to Emma? The moving forward?”

“No. Not that I’ve heard.”

“Hmm,” Chris said, and he absorbed this fairly amazing development, and you weren’t going to launch into a celebratory dance or anything . . . but dang.

“So there you have it,” Ned said.

“Except,” Chris said, “when I asked you if there were any updates, you said *if you’re asking about Ken* . . . That implies there’s some *other* update too. Is there?”

Ned did that gaze at the ocean thing again. “No big deal. Just one of the New York guys is in town, is all . . . You know, clarifying your thing you helped me out with. Back in Yonkers.”

“Ooh boy,” Chris said.

“We’ll figure it out,” Ned said.

**THE END**

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