

JUSTICE EDGE

by Rex Bolt



Chris Seely Vigilante Justice
Book 10

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 Palm the Ball**
- 2 Bistros**
- 3 Counterpart**
- 4 Before Proceeding**
- 5 Thoroughfares**
- 6 For Kicks**
- 7 Directional Setup**
- 8 Been Harnessing**
- 9 End in Gear**
- 10 Start Popping**
- 11 Back Joking**
- 12 Any Doofus**
- 13 Your Bubble**
- 14 Waterways**
- 15 Calculating It**
- 16 Radar Before**

17 These Flatlands

18 Aspect

Chapter 1

“This doesn’t feel like it’s gonna work,” Chris said.

“Little tight,” Ned said.

“For Goodness sakes,” Holly said, “I’ve never heard so much hemming and hawing.”

“Really,” Rosie said. “What it is, they’re afraid to expose their inner selves.”

Finch said, “Okay people, let’s focus, if we may. We have our first handout.” Holly took the folder from him and distributed the paperwork.

The only one who hadn’t said anything, pro or con, was the new guy. Ralph Salvatore.

This was the New York guy Ned referenced last Sunday.

Who happened to show up in Manhattan Beach, looking, as Ned put it, ‘for a little clarification’ on the events that transpired back there . . . throwing a monkey wrench on any celebration that Kenny was out of his jam on the Emma-husband deal. The Kenny part was still fine, that wasn’t it, but now you couldn’t relax otherwise.

Those *events* being Chris’s cross-country excursion to Manhattan, Yonkers, and specifically a little sliver of the Bronx that you didn’t know existed called City Island.

This was a month ago, give or take. Chris ended up maneuvering a guy named Paul Albanese’s face into a gas fired barbeque grill he was tending to on the wrap-around patio of his house on Earley Street, half a block from the Long Island Sound.

In fact Chris hadn’t dwelled on it at the time, but the view was impressive . . . you had the bay and then the city in the distance crystal clear, you could name the famous buildings, and beyond all that you had

the Statue of Liberty sticking up . . . at least he thought so, that part was a little fuzzy.

The other thing he hadn't focused on that night -- since it was pretty imperative to get the hell out of there -- but unfortunately had been reminded of a few times since . . . was Paulie's flesh did give off its own aroma when it met the coals.

At any rate . . . Chris had been doing a favor for Ned. Which would have been highly unlikely given their initial relationship . . . except Ned *had* gone out on a limb for Chris with the serial doofus, no apparent strings attached . . . and Ned hadn't *wanted* Chris to do the favor, tried to stop him, but when it was over Ned was admittedly relieved.

Except for now, they had this Ralph in town, which you'd categorize as logical fallout.

Chris hadn't known much about Paulie Albanese except that he was hounding Ned about something and it was coming to a crossroads. His guess would be Paulie wasn't like a mafia godfather or don. . . nothing *that* level for God sakes . . . but he wasn't a two-bit street thug either.

So Chris figured he'd be opening a can of worms, and sooner or later there'd be a ripple effect, and here you were now. What could you do?

He'd met Ralph a couple nights ago in the Crow's Nest, the guy one of those roly-poly types who laughed a lot and his midsection jiggled, and for all you knew on the surface, it was old home week around here for Ned.

In fact Ned had told Chris when he'd introduced them that night that they'd known each other since 3rd grade. And could Chris figure out Ralph's nickname?

Ralph seemed embarrassed and Chris said, "Number one, that's a dumb question, especially with no hint whatsoever, and number two, he doesn't want to go there."

"Do you?" Ned said to Ralph.

Ralph tilted his head, like whatever, and Ned said, "The Elevator."

Ralph did smile a little and Chris said, “So . . . your last name, they sort of rhymed it?”

“Sure,” Ned said, “that’s part of it. But this son of a bitch could dunk a basketball . . . I mean not in 3rd grade, but eventually. Before he gained the weight, where you see him now.”

Ralph put a hand up. “I couldn’t technically dunk it. I could roll it over the rim.”

Chris saw that he did have real big hands, could likely palm the ball easily, *among other things*, and here you had these two old buddies getting ready to tell East Yonkers playground stories.

Chris decided he was getting too old to be dancing around stuff, and he said to Ralph, “So what brings you out here, man?” Leaving out what Ned told him about Ralph *clarifying* things.

Ralph was smooth, you had to give him that. “Not much,” he said. “We’re working a real estate deal in Portland, so I’m on your coast anyway, so why not drop down and see my old friend Neddy. He’s extended the invitation, for what . . . 4, 5 years?”

“I’ve been here 12,” Ned said. “In fact 14 counting Hollywood. You never took me up on it until now.”

Ralph shrugged his shoulders so Chris said to Ned, “You say Hollywood? That’s when you were trying to act? I think you mentioned something about that, that first time.”

“*This* guy,” Ned said to Ralph, “We first make our acquaintance on the Strand. A ladies’ beach volleyball match is underway. You believe the first words out of his mouth? *How do the bikinis stay on, all the leaping and lunging and diving they’re doing?*”

“That’s a fair question,” Ralph said. “How *do* they?”

“How do *I* know?” Ned said. “You’ll have to ask one of ‘em.”

“A different answer than you gave me back then,” Chris said.

“It’s nice here,” Ralph said. “You’re right, I should have visited sooner.” He was arching his head to the left slightly, where you had the view of the ocean through the middle window during the day, but even at night there were a few lights out there and you were aware of it.

Soon Ned excused himself and headed to his corner table and met with someone, and Ralph took a seat at the bar, and you had both Cindy and Rory back waitressing tonight, which hadn’t been the case in a while, and it would have been a perfectly comfortable scene if it didn’t include Ralph . . .

Now Finch was asking for a show of hands for something, and Chris couldn’t quite believe he was in this situation, and he couldn’t pinpoint exactly who talked him into it.

They were in Finch’s motel room, of all places, Finch pacing around holding a clipboard, and Rosie and Holly on the bed and Chris and Ned and Ralph in these folding chairs that Finch said he borrowed from the breakfast buffet.

Finch said, “Good then. Do I have a volunteer to lead off?”

“I’ll go,” Rosie said.

What was happening, they got railroaded into a writing class. Or Chris got railroaded into it, and told Ned to join the fun, and amazingly Ned did, and he recruited Rosie.

They had found out this guy Finch was a semi-famous writer once -- meaning back in the 80’s when books were a bigger deal -- and Holly had started looking at him as a mentor, and admittedly Chris got in the act as well, trying to get him un-stuck on that final novel he supposedly had in him, called *Monte* something-or-other.

Then it started as a joke, *this* part, Holly telling Finch, “Hey, you should teach a little workshop” and Finch laughed it off like you’re out of your mind . . . and that was a couple weeks ago, and here everyone was.

Looking around the room -- and man, it was stuffy in here -- the one component you wouldn't have pictured was Ralph. Even Ned, you figured okay, he might have a story or two in him, but Ralph . . . and Chris figured it was Ned dragging him along, or it may have been as simple as Ralph was bored tonight.

This was a Friday evening, April 6, 2018, now -- 14 months since he'd gotten his diagnosis . . . or 427 days to be exact . . . and Chris was feeling a notch more confident every week, that he was out of the woods . . . and fine, he'd gone along with Finch's pre-first class assignment and written a one paragraph summary of a novel *he could see someone writing about him*.

It wasn't very good, he hoped he wouldn't get laughed at -- but meanwhile he had to admit it could be interesting to hear what the others came up with -- and Rosie stood up and cleared her throat and started off.

'If a person wrote a novel about me he would make me one of those performers you see at the circus who fly on the trapeze. When I was 8 my mom took me. It was downtown, the Garden. The announcer was very loud. Not just for the high trapeze part but for all of it. After, my mom complained about the noise to some person and they gave her a number to call. I don't remember this. She told me a lot later.'

People shifted around a little, and Chris assumed they were waiting for more -- which *he* was too -- and then it took Rosie a minute to sit back down, which added to the possibility -- but then she did plop back onto the bed.

Finch cleared *his* throat and said, "Well, Rose . . . I call that a wonderful start."

Jeez, *him* now with the *Rose* business too, and this was the thing, Chris already felt a bit out of the loop . . . even though it was he who *started* the dang loop, bringing Rosie here from West Harlem to ostensibly get a fresh start, and being the one to hook up with Finch too, when he asked him to hold the valuables on the pier as a prelude to he and the other idiot jumping *off* it.

“I second that,” Holly said, pinching Rosie on the shoulder.

“Wonderful premise, I’m seeing several directions the line can take.”

“Well thank you so much,” Rosie said.

“What happened when your mom complained?” Ned said.

Chris said, “Yeah that. And the *line*?”

“*Storyline*,” Holly said. “Plot points. And whether we’re talking omniscient narrator, stream of consciousness, or another point of delivery. It’s all fascinating.”

“You’re full of shit,” Chris said.

“I agree,” Ralph said, who you didn’t expect to hear from. “But anyways,” he said, “I like the set up. Reminds me when my Uncle Rocky took *us* there, we’s about the same age. Took the train from Eastchester to 42nd Street, then we had to walk though.”

“Same thing then!” Rosie said. “Me and everyone, we took the 1 train. Though you could change to the express at 96th.”

“Where’d you grow up at?” Ralph said.

“Let’s stay on course, if we may,” Finch said. “Not that the backstories aren’t interesting, but who is next?”

“I’m fine,” Holly said, and she stayed seated on the bed and pulled a folded up paper out of her purse. She seemed tense.

‘I’m a wife in a bad relationship. The setting is 1950’s Culpeper, Virginia. My husband is cheating on me, and barely

attempting to disguise it. I wish to cheat on him too, but I'm unable to . . . and it proceeds from there.'

Again you could hear Finch clear his throat. This time he paced a bit more and you assumed he was formulating some positive commentary, but meanwhile Ned spoke up. "I like it," he said.

"I do too," Chris said.

"That makes three," Ralph said. "I'd keep reading, at least 'til it slowed down."

Finch said, "An interesting point. How would it proceed to slow down ineffectively, in your view?"

Rosie said, "Why can't the woman cheat on the man?"

"I haven't established that yet," Holly said.

"You mean, she wants to," Ned said, "but can't come up with a willing partner?"

"Or she's screwed up physically," Chris said, "and *has* the partner, but can't."

"Or mentally maybe too," Rosie said. "She wants to . . . howyoucall . . . intellectually . . . but there's a little lightbulb that holds her back."

Holly said, "I hadn't thought of it that way -- but Gosh, that may be the best one."

"Which one *were* you leaning toward?" Chris said.

"Ned's way. But I see now, that was dull and cliched compared to Rosie's way."

Ralph said to Finch, "Answering your question. It would slow down when she started *thinking* about stuff too much, instead of *doing* shit."

Chris said, "Why the Culpeper, Virginia? You ever been there? I mean, is it even a real place?"

“I have not,” Holly said, “but I believe I’ve heard of it, so it must be real.”

Ned said to Holly, “You ever been to a shrink?”

And more shifting around and another throat or two being cleared, and Holly said, “That’s a nervy question. I’d ask what gives you the right, but I guess I don’t mind.”

“No need to upset the apple cart, hon,” Finch said. “No one’s unwillingly on stage here.”

Chris didn’t care for the hon, but it was what it was, Finch was a harmless old guy with some new life injected into him, and it wasn’t surprising that he and Holly had developed a benevolent-uncle relationship.

Holly said, “I’m fine with it. We’re among friends, I feel . . . Yes, I’ve been in therapy.”

Ned took a moment. “Only reason I ask,” he said, “*your* type set-up, isn’t it what the psychoanalytical folks have a field day with?”

“I see what he’s saying,” Ralph said, “could there be more to it.”

“Like a dream you mean,” Rosie said. “How would it be explained? Like you’re a human being, now, in this room . . . but you go a different direction, and create a different world -- but it’s still you in it -- and what’s the reason?”

“Oh boy,” Chris said.

“I’d love to say that I’ll ask my therapist for an interpretation, but we cut ties two years ago,” Holly said.

“Good move,” Ralph said, “you look fine.”

“He’s probably right,” Ned said.

“Could very well be,” Chris said.

“Next?” Finch said.

“I got it,” Ned said, and he stood up, and found what he needed on his phone and started reading.

“My guy -- you want it to be me, so fine -- my guy’s Czechoslovakian. On his 21st birthday he gets a trip together, go back there and find his roots. (I shoulda said, he lives in Florida.) The problem being though, there isn’t any more Czechoslovakia. He finds out they dissolved it. There was a revolution in 1992, it turns out, which he should have paid attention to in school, but didn’t -- and they disposed of the place . . . or deposed it -- or the government -- however you phrase it. So anyways he gets to the airport, finds this out, and the check in girl is quite nice, explains they didn’t get rid of it, exactly, they just split it into two. My guy gets this, but it’s not the same, finding his roots is shot, and he doesn’t want to travel. But he asks the check in girl how about we get a drink when you get off work.”

Ned waited. Holly spoke first. “That’s a novel?” she said.

“In there somewhere I was thinking, unh-huh,” Ned said. “No?”

“I think it’s brilliant,” Finch said, and you could see him right away regretting the use of that word, implying he liked it better than the other two.

“I wish I thought of it,” Rosie said. “In a different form of course.”

“I think it’s a bunch of gobbledy gook,” Chris said, “but I have to go next.”

“So your *honest* opinion is worse?” Ned said.

Chris said, “My honest opinion is -- all that build up, when all your guy is seeking out . . . is a piece a ass.”

“I would agree,” Ralph said.

“Well I wanted to redirect it that way, yeah,” Ned said. “I don’t know enough about other countries to keep it interesting.”

Finch said, “Chris, can you conclude for us tonight?”

“Do I have to stand?” Chris said. “Because I really didn’t have a chance to put much thought into this.”

“Listen to this guy,” Ned said.

“Yeah, now the shoe’s on the other foot,” Holly said. “We had more time than you?”

“Yes get real Chris,” Rosie said. “Our ones so far, they sounded like we worked on them for days?”

“You definitely didn’t,” Ralph said, nodding.

Finch raised a hand again. “Before we hear what Christopher has to offer, I will say, from personal experience -- positive *and* negative -- that often the first incarnation of an idea works best.”

“What I think you’re getting at,” Ned said, “is like those achievement tests in school. If your first inclination is B, then don’t over-think it into D.”

“Exactly,” Finch said. “James Joyce would work all day trying to get one sentence just so. Marcel Proust, for one, could write half a dozen chapters in the same time.”

This ground any momentum to a halt, Chris afraid Finch was going to continue on this tangent, especially if anyone prompted him further.

“Okay we get it,” Chris said. “My deal, well, here goes, what can you do.”

‘My character is Archie. That’s me disguised, I guess is how we’re working it. Archie doesn’t have a lot of friends so he joins a chess club. This is in Kansas City, where he ends up after running out of gas, while running away from alimony payments in Oregon. He’s the worst chess player in the club but that’s okay,

because he starts getting more attention -- people trying to help him -- than if he was the best player. One guy in particular tries to help him the most, gives him a couple books on basic strategy, and Chris thanks the guy by inviting him and his family to a pool party. (He doesn't own a house of course, it's an apartment complex, but still.) So the guy does show up with his family, but one of his kids is wild and mixes it up with another kid in the pool who lives in the complex. The other kid's dad comes down to the pool and Archie's chess guest dad confronts this guy. By now some drinking's been going on, at least with the chess dad, and the two of them kind of bear hug and plunge into the pool with their clothes on. Archie knows he should do something -- but he also wants to see how it unfolds, so he just sits there on the chaise lounge. And long story short, the one guy drowns."

"Oh no, *which* guy?" Rosie said.

"The guy who lives there," Chris said, "but let me finish. **They think he drowns. They drag him out and lay him on the side of the pool, there's a crowd by now, and some little guy pushes his way to the front and does something to guy's chest, and stomach too, and son of a gun the guy spits out water and is okay."**

"That it?" Ned said.

"Almost. Archie thinks he recognizes the little guy, and that the guy's been tailing him from Oregon. So the next day Archie tries to get back at the guy by asking his girlfriend out on a date. She refuses, so Archie gets in the car and moves on. Probably to Little Rock, Arkansas. That's not clear yet."

“Hmm,” Finch said finally. “*Anyone?*”

“Not really,” Holly said.

“No,” Ned said. “Except you used my part, the guy putting on the moves . . . But the dude’s own girlfriend, isn’t that kinda out of bounds?”

“Especially when he did you a favor and saved your friend,” Rosie said.

“Not his friend, necessarily, but I hear you,” Ralph said.

That was about it. Holly brought out the usual cookies that Chris assumed were part of these meet-up deals, and Rosie helped Finch bring six little cups of coffee back from the machine they had in the lobby, and everyone shot the breeze about trivial stuff -- the Dodgers outfield prospects after they traded Matt Kemp, the new regulations in Manhattan Beach where you had to walk your bike on select parts of the Strand because some guy got run over, a fourth ice cream shop opening in town and how was it going to make it.

“Well I have to say, this has been better than I expected,” Ned said. “You got me thinking different ways here.” And he thanked Finch and the others did too, including Ralph, and Finch asked Ralph if he wanted to contribute a novel idea of his own, even informally, and Ralph said no, but he’d take a rain check, and maybe next week.

Finch gave out the next assignment, which was to skip ahead and write the very final scene of your novels, where you finish it off with **THE END**.

“I must say, Terry,” Holly said, “that goes against the grain of your personal approach, does it not?”

“It does indeed,” Finch said, and he left it at that, and Chris figured that’s what a good instructor does sometimes, he keeps you off-balance, and that’s never the worst thing.

Chapter 2

It was around 9 when they got out of there and Chris supposed he could have talked someone into going for a drink, or even a bite to eat, since the cookies didn't cut it . . . but no one asked *him* to do anything so why push it.

He didn't quite feel like going home just yet either, so he drove downtown, got lucky with the parking, and walked down to the beach and did something he never did, which was take off his shoes and socks and stick his feet in the water.

There were actually a couple kids boogie boarding out there, using the light coming off the pier, and you had to give them credit . . . not to mention admire the carefree spirit of youth. You could try to recreate that shit at age 43, but it was never the same, was it.

This was his first taste of real spring down here. Stuff was flowering and you could smell it nice and sweet and pungent, and the air temperature hovered around a respectable 60 degrees all night long.

Also, no mosquitos, that was another plus. You could leave your windows wide open all the time, taste the ocean, no screens required.

After a while Chris walked up to Highland, and there was a brick stoop in front of one of the bistros, and he sat his ass down and took in the action, and it wasn't bad, people were generally in good moods here, and there was always a little something going on that got your attention.

Right now there was an older woman and a younger guy, and they were standing on the corner jawing at each other, and they were both pretty sunburned, like they'd been hanging out at the beach all day and didn't go

home yet . . . and Chris couldn't tell if they were seriously arguing or just kind of posturing, and then another guy comes around the corner who seems to know them, and this guy has a Tuxedo on . . . and now you have a three way thing going, and it's getting pretty loud . . . and the woman turns to Chris and puts her hands on her hips and says, "What do *you* think, Buster?"

So the point was, it could be strange here but it was at least eventful, and Chris didn't answer but got to wondering for the umpteenth time -- not about these three people necessarily -- but in general, what everyone *does* down here to make enough money to *live* here.

He didn't have a handle on that. You of course had the USC alumni crowd occupying some of the houses in the hills, which you knew because on football game days they'd drape their cardinal and gold TROJAN banners off their balconies.

Then you clearly had big money -- we're probably talking billionaires -- who'd taken modest beach houses and converted them to mini Greco-Roman palaces replete with columns and fountains, which didn't fit at all -- and the thing there being, these folks never seemed to be around. Meaning it was their third or fourth or fifth house.

So fine. But the bread and butter Manhattan Beach folks, did they commute to high-end financial jobs in downtown LA . . . did they sit around at home in their slippers and miraculously make millions on the computer . . . were they trust fund babies . . .

And who cares, why was he obsessed with this repeatedly? Dang.

The misfit threesome took their argument across the street to the ice cream place and it was after 11 and Chris figured you call it a night, and Gee, he was a little stiff getting up, it must have been those flimsy folding chairs in Finch's room . . . but he made it home okay.

Nothing going on by the pool -- there were a couple of new tenants, Canadian guys, and they liked to play cards out there but not tonight, which

Chris wouldn't have minded joining in on, and the fact was he wouldn't have minded some socialization period, since Ken had now made a clean break.

What happened there, Monday in fact, the day after Mancuso informed Chris that Ken's issue with the police had been resolved -- the kid shows up in the morning, all business.

Chris wanted to ask him a few questions . . . starting with, *Were you hiding out in Bolinas by chance, where I busted my tail like an idiot trying to find you, all based on a throwaway comment you made one time . . .* but the timing didn't seem appropriate and Ken simply gathered the few things he had left in the apartment and thanked Chris for the hospitality and told him he had a place now but would see him around.

No big hug, not even a handshake . . . and Chris admittedly thought it was over the top the few times Ken did get emotional and thanked him for stuff . . . but now you kind of hoped for a little of that, and you got zip.

And the fact was, Chris was pretty sure he didn't want a roommate when he offered Ken the couch for a few nights back then until he got it together, but then Chris got used to it, and the kid did inject some life into the place, and now this week with the clean break, it was a little lonely around here. Chris was man enough to admit it.

He got in the recliner and hunted around on YouTube, and he found one he liked with a guy who rode his 4-wheeler on the dirt roads near Area 51 and mounted a camera on the handlebars -- and what else was new, you try other documentaries and themes and subjects but you mostly bring it back to the high desert in southern Nevada.

A storm was moving in on the guy and there was a bit of suspense, would he make it back on the 4-wheeler to his truck in time, and the Area 51 gate security people, which everyone called the 'camo dudes', were playing cat and mouse with him as well, and they *were* kind of scary, because they supposedly had the right to shoot you with no questions asked

if you venture one inch over the barrier onto classified land, and the barrier extended up into the mountains but it wasn't marked great, and you could picture some YouTube guy not paying attention, trying to get a good video capture, and venturing across it and getting shot.

He never did quite catch the resolution -- did the guy dodge the storm okay, did the security guys stop him at all, did he capture any video of unusual aircraft out there . . . and meanwhile you obviously knew the guy didn't get shot, because how would you be watching this video.

So Chris dozed off before the conclusion, the laptop blaring away with the guy narrating . . . and he was in the perfect spot between slumber and deep sleep where everything was colorful and clear and simple, and (hopefully) pleasant dreams were brewing . . . and unfortunately the phone rang. And it was Ned.

"Uh," Chris said, blinking his eyes hard. "You kinda caught me."

"Take a minute," Ned said.

"I'm good now," Chris said, and he was going to ask what's up, but a big yawn took over.

"Listen," Ned said, "you mind giving me a hand with something?"

"Now?" A dumb question probably, but you hoped Ned meant help him powerwash the sidewalk tomorrow outside the Strand house. *That* kind of something. Which seemed unlikely.

Ned said, "Well yeah, next hour or so'd be good. If you can."

"Sure I guess, no problem," Chris lied, and Ned said they could grab a bite first, since that's what Chris usually wants to do.

"Not urgent then, you're saying," Chris said.

"Sort of that," Ned said. "But actually waiting might be a little better."

This wasn't making a lot of sense but Chris was alert enough where it didn't seem like a good idea to ask too many specifics on the phone, and Ned said they could meet at The Kettle in twenty minutes.

The Kettle wasn't exactly a go-to spot for Chris -- it was a little pricey and he leaned toward the few ethnic dives you could find in the south bay, but The Kettle was an institution down here, family owned apparently since 1973, and the place had barely changed since day one, and that was worth a lot.

Chris got there first and saw Ned out the window parking the SUV, and that was one good thing about getting dragged out of bed, or the recliner, at this ungodly hour . . . you *could* at least park.

Chris checked his watch and it was 10 to 2.

Ned came in and sat down, part of his all-smiles act on display, but not completely. He did give Chris a low five.

"You want my honest opinion?" Chris said. "You look kind of fucked up. Not booze-wise, necessarily. Maybe it's just the time of day. Your biological clock ticking down."

"You caught me," Ned said, trying to smile, but again not pulling it off too well.

"Well . . . you wanna order something first? And then break it to me why we're gathered here? . . . Or reverse it?"

"Order me a chef's salad please," Ned said. "I'll be right back."

And the waiter came, middle-eastern fellow, darn pleasant demeanor for having to work the graveyard shift, and Chris was tempted to ask him his secret, but you didn't want to go too far off topic.

Ned came back. Chris wondered if he'd made a phone call pertaining to why they were here . . . and decided Jeez, stop assuming everything's a big deal, and let the man take a simple leak.

The food came and Ned looked around and lowered his voice. "I had to take care of Ralph," he said.

Chris had ordered the soup of the day and it was hot and he was blowing on it, and he froze, the spoon suspended in front of him.

Ned nodded. Chris said, "Take care of . . . like his bar tab -- his return flight itinerary -- you found him a woman for the night . . . you scheduled a yoga class for him in the morning? . . . Any of that kind of taking care of?"

"No."

Ho-ly Toledo. Everything seemed fine and dandy at Finch's earlier. Didn't it?

You had to ask . . . the unfortunate question . . . "So where's he at? Currently."

Ned looked around again and leaned forward. "In the back." Using his head to point out the window of The Kettle to the white Chevy Tahoe across the street.

Chris couldn't help reacting to this one. If he wasn't fully awake so far, he just got slapped.

He tried to get his own good look inside the SUV, hoping that all this would boil down to was Ralph was sitting in the thing, that he wasn't hungry. But from the looks of it, no one was sitting, or laying back, on a seat in there either.

Ned picked up on Chris's confusion, and said, "Tarp."

And he pushed what was left of his chef's salad away -- which was all of it -- and lit a cigaret.

Chris couldn't think of anything to say, and he might not for a few minutes, so he figured you might as well at least stay busy -- while you were trying to wrap your head around this insane development -- and he finished his soup, and started in on Ned's salad as well.

Finally Ned said, looking around again first, "I'm not sure where to stick him . . . Thought you might have some input, regards to that."

Chris did have an idea actually, in fact it was shocking how clear-headed and effortlessly it came to him . . . especially with him being an innocent bystander in the matter and just now having this load dropped on him.

“You would think,” he said to Ned, “someone would typically -- how do they put it? . . .”

“Proceed with the end result in mind, you mean?” Ned said.

“Yeah.”

“You get that in the movies, at least,” Ned said.

“Meaning . . . real life, it happens less predictably, you’re saying?”

Ned nodded. “More spontaneous.”

They were both looking around like a couple of idiots before they spoke, and Chris did it again. “So you what . . . like, *sott* the guy?” Leaving out the h, not wanting to use the actual word.

“Wire,” Ned said. “Home Depot.”

You didn’t need to nitpick here, even though you were admittedly curious -- was the spontaneous part that he stopped at Home Depot, Ralph waiting in the parking lot, and when Ned came back he threw something on the back seat and proceeded up and around Ralph’s neck?

Or was it that Ned happened to have the roll of wire, a previous Home Depot purchase -- something unrelated to Ralph completely, maybe he had to tie back some fencing on the upper patio of the Strand house -- and the spontaneous part was he noticed the roll laying back there and decided maybe he should use it on Ralph instead.

So the details really didn’t matter, the how and where. You still had the why.

Chris said, “I must admit, when you told me a New York fellow was in town -- in conjunction with giving me the good news that Kenny’s okay -- and I raised an eyebrow . . . you said ‘we’ll figure it out’. Like it was no big deal, and don’t worry about it . . . Then you’re best buddies. In the Nest, and you bring him to the writing business -- where he was actually pretty good by the way, some thoughtful comments.”

“He was,” Ned said. “But what can you do?”

What Ned was leaving out, obviously now, was despite all the backslapping and frivolity and Ralph seeming like an okay guy -- that it wouldn't have ended well, in Ned's view.

And Chris knew that included Ned looking out for *his* ass too, which you had to appreciate.

Chris said quietly, "Now there's going to be some serious fallout. No?"

Ned said, equally quietly, "We already *had* that. That's what's laying in back." Ned pointed to the SUV with his head again, and Chris had to admit the guy was right.

They were so caught up that they almost walked out of there without paying and the poor middle-eastern guy waiter had to tap Chris on the shoulder by the front door, and Chris only had a fifty on him but it didn't seem like a great idea to use a credit card, you never know, so he handed it to the guy and said thanks.

Chris couldn't help it when he got in the Tahoe, the first thing he did was take a whiff. And yeah, there was a blue tarp, starting in the way back and coming forward, a bit of a shape in there.

"Not yet," Ned said. "But so . . . where to, do you think? . . . Any ideas on that?"

Chris said, "You know something, you're normally pretty sure of yourself. Now you got me wondering, is that an act?"

"I'm just saying," Ned said, "two heads are better than one."

"This reminds me of something," Chris said. "You ever watch those home shows, like This Old House?"

"Used to. I liked it better when they stuck to Boston, before they branched out."

"Me too. Anyhow one of the show guys, he's a contractor, he builds his own house, *separate* from the show. Guy writes a book about it . . . What I'm getting to, they get the foundation in, he's ready to frame it -- guy

has to go in the yellow pages and hunt for carpenters. Like any regular doofus.”

“That would be surprising,” Ned said. “All his connections? Being in the middle of the trades and such.”

“That’s you,” Chris said, “with this deal.”

You could see Ned massaging it around, not just the concept, but trying to come up with something, and it was clear he couldn’t, or maybe just wasn’t thinking clearly the last couple hours, and fine.

Chris said, “You know the old military installation? Down past Torrance?”

“Yeah?”

“They developed part of it, of course. But you have that back area. Not much doing there. Especially at whatever time we got presently.”

“Quarter to three,” Ned said. “I think I know where you mean . . . they got the Panda Express in front? And that Big Men’s clothing place?”

“Yeah . . . and honestly, sitting here may not be as favorable as doing *something*.”

You could see Ned agreed with that, and he started her up, and made the left turn onto Manhattan Avenue and up the hill, and a little quick for Chris’s taste, and he glanced back to make sure the tarp was still doing the job.

Chris did feel obligated to point out, “Giving you the thorough evaluation, though -- bottom of the ocean’d be better.”

“It would. So would cuttin’ him up and dispersing him.”

Ned was inferring obviously that those weren’t viable options tonight.

“Short of those, then,” Chris said, not feeling 100 percent confident in this, now that they were acting on it. “I mean other people? Might have wanted Ralph . . . out of the way too? . . . Besides just you and me?”

“Oh yeah, that part we’re decent,” Ned said, not elaborating . . . and Chris had learned by now that with the Ned Mancusos of the world, sometimes you just had to take their word for it and proceed.

There was no traffic, just the early street cleaning trucks and a few middle of the night delivery vehicles, and that was good and bad, since there weren’t a lot of choices to pull over if a cop was so inclined, but Ned drove respectably the rest of the way, which was down past Polliwog Park under the 405 into Lawndale, then the right onto Prairie Avenue, a couple miles to the left onto Del Amo, and then you were in warehouse district that surprised you when it opened onto the strip mall with the Panda Express.

There hadn’t been much else to talk about on the way, so they’d actually gotten on the *subject* of Panda Express, Chris mentioning that he’d tried this particular one a couple times and it was good, better than most. Ned said he thought they were all the same, being a franchise, and Chris said no, this place used less sugar, and Ned said he’d have to try it himself some time, that he didn’t like it either when Chinese restaurants oversugared stuff for the white population.

Now here you were, and you looped around the back, and yeah, son of a gun, this wasn’t bad. It felt a little like the remote parts of the Presidio of San Francisco . . . some beat up buildings with old paint flaking off them, some cement stuff in the ground that felt like the remnants of old bunkers, even a little marshy pond, though you wondered if that would be deep enough.

Ned parked back there and shut off the engine and opened the tailgate and handed Chris a pair of gloves. “DNA,” he said, like he was delivering an earth-shattering discovery . . . and Chris would have said, “*Tell* me about it,” except Ned had the tarp off Ralph now, and the guy looked heavy.

“Again,” Chris said, “if I could suggest, the end result first? Like you were saying?”

“I was thinking the water,” Ned said. And yeah, that wouldn’t be the worst choice, even though Ralph probably wouldn’t drop below the surface.

At least the water might mess with the DNA you likely both were going to put on him, despite the gloves -- and of course Ned with the previous neck work, even a greater chance of a deposit -- and they hauled Ralph out of there and stumbled around for the first ten yards until they got the right grips squared away . . . and there was the *one, two, three* swinging him business, and they let fly, and Ralph didn’t go far, but at least he was partially submerged and some mud kicked up and covered most of his head, and other areas . . . and what more could you do, really.

Ned took the freeway back, leisurely, driving about 50. He said, “Well, that should work. You think? . . . And just for my own information -- how’d you come up with this place?”

“Chandler. If you can believe it. He ever tell you the story about the CraigsList guy?”

“Nope.” Chris wasn’t sure about that, Ned might be totally playing along, but apparently he wouldn’t mind hearing it again.

Chris said, “I’m not dying to go into it, but it’s entertaining.”

“By all means. What else we got going the rest of the night?”

Chris said, “I may be a little off, but he’s selling a motorcycle. Which already surprises you.”

“Oh big time. Didn’t know he had it in ‘em.”

“No. He’s asking like 4 grand. Some guy offers him 3 and wants more information. Chandler -- we know how he can come across -- he asks the guy -- sorry, more information for what? Since your offer’s too low.”

“I can see it,” Ned said.

“Yeah. If he just altered his tone a little, he’s accomplishing the same thing, without unnecessarily ticking a guy off.”

“Always a more diplomatic route,” Ned said. “Why pile on complications?”

“There is. Bottom line, the guy slams down the phone . . . then starts up his own ad on CraigsList . . . except using the photo of Chandler’s motorcycle, and his seller info . . . and asking \$500 for the thing.”

“Ooh,” Ned said.

“Exactly. So Chandler’s phone rings off the hook, and he may have gotten in trouble with CraigsList, I can’t remember -- but the crux of it is, he arranges to meet the guy and make the sale after all.”

“Uh-oh. Meet the guy . . . as in, where we just came from?”

“Yeah. So the guy can test drive the bike, which Chandler points out isn’t street legal at the moment. He tells the guy he’ll consider his 3 grand offer, but it has to be cash.”

“Hmm.”

“Except Chandler brings a couple guys with him. Shady characters, is the impression. And what ends up happening, they rob the guy -- and otherwise teach him a lesson.”

“Holy shit . . . *Our* Chandler, you’re talking about?”

“I know. He said he couldn’t help it, the guy hit a nerve . . . which I suppose I can understand. But still.”

“Wow.”

“So to your answer your question--”

“You just did.”

“No, your question *before* that. Will this work, what we just came from doing.”

“Ah. I think I said that should work.”

“But you left it off with a question mark, did you not?”

“I don’t remember now.”

Chris said, “I’m a little surprised though, you didn’t want to revisit your animal trainer’s place. The lion pits and all.”

“I considered it. Probably best not to repeat yourself, if you can avoid it.”

This was true, obviously. Chris said, “So now?” Bringing it back to when Ralph’s people . . . or Paulie’s people . . . or *whoever* the fuck . . . get wind of this latest episode . . . what’ll the story be then?

Ned took a moment. “We’ll figure it out,” he said, and he turned and winked at Chris, and the full smile was there and the personality was almost back to normal . . . so, it really was time to call it a night.

Chapter 3

It was close to 4:30 in the morning when Chris got back to the Cheater Five, and he was halfway up the steps to his apartment when he noticed a lone figure out by the pool, looking like a shadow under one of the patio umbrellas, but definitely a human -- and he thought about it, hesitated, thought about it again, decided you better at least unobtrusively make sure someone's okay -- and went back down and tapped on the gate, and the person looks over, and it's Marlene.

"What the heck?" Chris said.

"Oh, hi," she said. Her voice box quality wasn't the greatest, understandable for the middle of the night, but even so -- so Chris let himself in and sat down with her.

She was an attractive woman, no doubt, even here with baggy workout clothes and a hoodie thing covering her head. In fact you might as well ask. "Let me guess. You can't sleep. So you're starting your day a little early. Going for a jog."

Marlene tried to manage a limp smile. "It's not that simple."

If it were the middle of the day he probably wouldn't have, but at this hour it was more *anything goes*, so he took her hand to see what would happen, and she got up and came sideways and sat on his lap.

"Now that's a first," he said.

"You're silly," she said, lightening up just a touch. "I've done it before."

Chris tried but couldn't come up with it. "Really? You better refresh me."

You couldn't see her eyes very well but Chris assumed she was rolling them at him. She said, "The country music awards show? You made me watch it. It was awful. I climbed on you . . . that sort of saved it."

"Man, you got me there . . . I don't typically *like* country music. A little bluegrass now and then, and the traditional guys, fine -- the Merle Haggards, the Lefty Frizzells, the Bob Willses."

"This was the modern stuff."

"And . . . you climbed on me . . . I mean like fully clothed? Or *different*?"

"Different," she said, and it was a bit of a purr, which you had to admit, was never the worst utterance.

"Welp," he said. "All interesting -- even if you might have me mixed up with someone else."

Meanwhile, she was of course sitting on him currently, not stripped down or anything, but he couldn't help imagine it, and he said maybe they should go upstairs at that, since you never know what might be on TV at this hour.

Marlene had a funny look now, was likely starting to get some clarity, and she said, "Chris I'm *very* sorry. This is hugely embarrassing. I don't normally get confused like this."

"Don't mention it," he said. "We're all humans here. Jeez."

And without thinking about it much more, she got off his lap and followed him up there, and they headed straight back, no issues . . . Chris deciding along the way that this may be a world record for him in the ease of pursuit of an accomplishment category.

A half hour later, lifting up onto an elbow, Marlene said, "I needed that so bad."

"*Thank* you, you mean?" Chris said, and she looked at him funny, and Chris said he was kidding, for Gosh sakes.

"You *say* that," she said, "but I can tell you *do* want to be thanked."

“Fine, if you put a gun to my head, I wouldn’t mind.”

“Really,” she said, raising up more now. “This is interesting. Did you not enjoy yourself?”

“I did.”

“And did I not express *myself*?”

“Well you said you needed that. No reference to the -- interlocking counterpart -- really.”

“You’re a nutcase. I don’t mean it necessarily negatively.” She started stroking the back of his neck, so there were no hurt feelings apparently -- but dang, hopefully she wasn’t initiating a Round 2, since there’d be no way tonight, on his end, and he was happy just to have Round 1, since he couldn’t even *remember* the last time . . . oh yeah, Rosie probably, but that may not have counted.

Chris said, “I’m going to fire a question at you, and you can give it to me straight, man to man. So to speak. -- Is my unit smaller, in your estimation?”

Marlene laughed, kind of a hoot, a little over the top, which Chris hadn’t expected. “Compared to whose?” she said, quite a grin on her face now.

He hadn’t thought of that, he wouldn’t mind actually, hearing how he stacked up compared to others -- maybe, though maybe *not* -- but that was beside the point. “Compared to mine,” he said. “From before.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

Chris said, “That wasn’t my question, and I wasn’t worrying exactly, I was just asking.” Though that *was* the point, he *was* concerned.

She laughed again and stuck up her index fingers and put them a certain distance apart, and Chris didn’t know if she was making fun of him or not, and she said, “As I alluded to, it worked.”

And that was all you were going to get on the subject, at least right now, and Chris couldn't help trying to think back, was the *before* that she referenced, prior to his experience in the Strand house, or after.

That could make a big difference, the *prior to* period, him feeling free and easy and reasonably confident all around in this area . . . as contrasted with the *post*-Strand house era, where he was weighed down by intimidation.

And God dang it, he was still psyching himself out.

He'd even tried to introduce the subject with Dr. Moore, but she didn't take the bait and try to help him, did she . . . she used it as a springboard to ask about his relationship with his mother. Or maybe that was something different . . . either way the session didn't help, and admittedly he should have directed her to the unit issue better.

On the other hand . . . come on, like Marlene inferred, things worked out okay tonight. Or this morning. So why continually beat yourself up.

"It's not all about you though," Marlene was saying, a bit more grim unfortunately, and Chris said she was kind of reading his mind, and sorry about that.

"That's okay. Shall I put up some coffee?"

"Gee. If you need to. I was more thinking I'd hit the hay for a while. But I forgot, you have to go to work."

"Today's Saturday," she said. "What were the police doing here by the way? Those couple of times?"

Whoa. "You *saw* all that?"

"Everyone did, are you kidding?"

Chris hadn't considered it that way, which was stupid, or he had blinders on -- it would be hard not to be aware of what was going on in the rest of the Cheater Five, especially out in the open.

He was trying to remember -- did he bring Kay over here too? Was he going to get grilled about *that*?

He said, “The police were looking for Ken. It’s all straightened out.”

“Ah,” she said. “That I did know. I was simply wondering, those couple of occasions, if it had anything to do with you.” Letting that baby hang. Maybe playing with him, maybe not.

Gee, what a possible cross-examination suddenly. Had he left something on the table, so to speak, that she was aware of? This was a concern from way back, during the early days of his diagnosis and his list, that he may have been calling out items in his sleep.

Whatever. It *was* clear Marlene was somewhat in the loop if she had everything straight on Kenny . . . and you weren’t going to pry into that . . . though it did make you wonder. He did remember that time in the Crow’s Nest, following the group trek to the tennis tournament in Indian Wells, when Marlene and Cindy the waitress seemed to be cozying up pretty tight . . . and you might not think much of it, except Marlene had mentioned, or at least implied, her bi-sexuality element more than once . . . and that part Chris was fine with, and even intrigued by.

But bottom line, Cindy would have the inside scoop. And again, none of his business, except why did Marlene bring up the cops looking for him out of thin air? *Could* they have stopped by and talked to her when he was on hiatus in Eclipse, Arizona?

He said, “You know something *I* don’t, I’m always game to *hear* it.”

And she changed the subject, so you moved on, she was looking now for a sugar substitute, reminding him he had one of those before and asking where he kept it, and Chris said try the right cabinet on top, and she got a chair and reached up and around and found it -- and Chris, for whatever reason, hadn’t focused on the fact that she was doing it all completely nude.

“Will I get slapped if I make an understandable, hormonally-charged comment?” he said.

“What?” she said, holding her position for a moment and looking down at him, waiting.

“Well what are you, about 31, 32?”

She looked at him like he was an idiot, and put one hand on her hip.

“37,” she said. “And?”

He figured she was about that age, maybe she even told him once, but try to butter her up at least, which might not be working. He said, “Okay the risky comment -- you really don’t have any cellulite. Like zero, that I’m noticing.”

“Thank you,” she said, “I guess,” and she came down with the sugar substitute and started pouring the water through the grounds.

He said, “I mean I’m enjoying it, don’t get me wrong, but do you typically parade around like this?”

She said, “When I feel like it, and I’m not cold. You’ve never seen a woman natural and at ease in her own house? That would be highly surprising, given the premium you seem to put on entertainment value.”

“I never really asked you, but do you work out? Consistently? I was kidding you earlier about taking a jog, but dang.”

“Well I do have Finnish roots, on my mother’s side,” she said, Chris figuring she’s coming around a little bit now, explaining why everything still *is* pretty darn tight.

“Tremendous work ethic in Finland,” he said. “Plus they’re always jumping on skis for transportation.”

“Snowshoes too,” she said, smiling again just a little more, bringing the two coffees to the table by the couch, and this time -- son of a bitch -- climbing onto his lap the way she mistakenly referenced it during the country music awards show.

What could you do.

Chris said, a little quieter, “I couldn’t help it. I was comparing you to the one other time that did happen in my kitchen. Not here, a different one . . . I go out for an early morning walk, pick up some pastries, and

someone who had stayed over, who I thought was still sleeping, is in the kitchen . . . similarly reaching for a cup, and also dressed the same.”

“She was *nude*?” Marlene said.

“Well yeah. Which you just pointed out, is no big deal.”

“Well did anyone see?”

“I was a little concerned about that myself, since it was daylight, sunshine flooding in. She assured me that I was over worrying, that she’d closed the shades.”

“Had she?”

“I guess.”

“I mean, was she nude when she *closed* them?”

“That occurred to me. I didn’t ask her.”

“How old was this person?”

“Mid-twenties, I think.”

“Gosh,” Marlene said.

Chris said, “What are you doing? . . . You sure?”

“Most definitely,” she said. A distinct slur to the words now, Chris thinking Holy Moly, I brought this on myself.

“Describe this person,” Marlene continued, slurring worse, and Chris did his best -- and this would have been that time on Broderick Street with Allison of course -- and he threw in that even being a full decade younger than Marlene, she may not have been as fit as Marlene -- which wasn’t necessarily true, but it apparently did the trick here, and continued to fuel the fire.

Eventually they got around to the coffee, and Marlene took a shower and did put something on this time, a robe out of Chris’s closet, and Chris said, “Let’s back it up, if we may . . . My bad for not addressing this until now. *Why* were you huddling by the pool at 4:30 in the morning?”

“I lost my job,” she said.

“Oh--kay,” he said. “But Gee, that spells the end of the world? And what job? I didn’t even know you found one.”

And he kind of regretted that remark, since when she’d first moved in to A-3 downstairs she told him she was looking for a teaching job, and he even gave her a couple suggestions. These last few months, they weren’t hanging out -- fine -- but he should have at least been interested how that stuff was coming, shouldn’t he have?

She said, “It’s a pattern, I’m afraid.”

“Give me something here,” Chris said. “You mean you keep getting canned?”

She nodded. He said, “It’s starting to come back to me -- to prove I do pay attention sometimes -- didn’t you say your last teaching job, that propelled you out here, was in Saginaw, Wisconsin.”

“Appleton. Saginaw’s in Michigan. But thank you for paying attention.”

“Fine. Seems harder to get fired back there, for some reason. Maybe I’m off. What’d you do?”

“I had an off-site relationship with a student.”

Chris’s eyes got big, and she had his full attention now. “You gotta know -- something like that -- around here, probably anywhere -- you could go to jail.”

Marlene waved her hand. “Not *that* kind of a relationship, for crying out loud . . . All it was, there was a young man in my 4th period class, he was struggling terribly with math. My fear was he’d be held back, forced to repeat the year. I offered to come over on Sundays and tutor him, and his mom and step-dad were thrilled.”

Chris said, “In that case . . . seems reasonable *enough*, probably.”

“The student improved dramatically, and he won a math award at the final spring assembly. Unfortunately some complaints trickled in, that I was favoring one pupil over the rest of the class.”

“Ooh. So they let you go? That is pretty cold-blooded. Yeah.”

“They didn’t let me go, but they didn’t retain me for the next term. Same difference.”

“But,” Chris said, “advancing to your deal out *here* -- same kind of thing?”

“Sort of. I wasn’t accused of favoring a student this time, but again complaints from parents did me in. They didn’t appreciate it that I was discussing the ‘N’-word.”

Chris didn’t like hearing this either. “So why *were* you? You couldn’t educate today’s youth, without bringing *that* to the table?”

“Chris, this is middle school now. These are 8th graders. Social studies. The ‘N’-word is a significant part of our cultural climate. To sweep it under the rug would be irresponsible.”

And she gave him a look, like what’s the *matter* with him, when all Chris was thinking was, play the *game* just a little for goodness sake. Even if it means, fine, not upsetting the apple cart. That’s so difficult?

“Where is this joint?” he asked.

“The school? It’s in Sigma Beach.”

“Wow. That’s . . . all the way up past Malibu, right?”

“I know where you’re going. The traffic. How do I handle it? Or how did I . . . You have a one-track mind when it comes to southern California transportation.”

“What I was ask going to *ask*,” Chris said, “that sounds like a pretty liberal area, no? Big money, the movies, celebrities and all that.”

“It is,” she said. “But parents complain everywhere these days.”

Chris had to agree, she had that part right unfortunately. “But the administration -- they caved in, just like that?”

“They did. The principal. Unh-huh. That was the end of the month, before spring break. Now I’ve got a mark on my record, and my

employment prospects for the fall are null and void . . . So yes, you caught me by the pool in a reflective moment.”

Chris processed it. He said, “Tell you what, let’s go for a walk.” And Marlene got up and said she’d take a rain check, and there was a little peck on the cheek but she wrapped things up in about 30 seconds and was out the door.

Man, there was always one more thing on your plate . . . wasn’t there.

Chapter 4

How would you find this guy Roland?

That was something that did need to be addressed, it was a bit more dire than someone losing a job . . . even though admittedly Marlene's deal sounded pretty hokey, the way it went down.

But here, the situation you had: Roland might kill Holly.

Chris knew, as in some of his other cases, he could be projecting way off the charts -- and that two phone calls Roland made to Holly, when she and her supposed husband decided they'd wait until there were *three* to take action -- that those could be it . . . forever . . . and the mope had moved on.

But the problem a lot of these came down to, was the *maybe not*.

So if the guy persisted and assaulted her -- which let's face it, he threatened to do -- then it's hard to live with yourself from here on out . . . that you had control of it -- theoretically -- and you sat on your rear end, assuming bad people could transform themselves into good ones.

Chris thought back to his last conversation with Holly. Of course there was last night, the writing group thing, but forget *that*.

Where she laid it on him -- and where he should have been more alarmed, except that the parallel triggered more urgency with the guitar maker gal up north and overshadowed the Roland threat that was right in your face -- was in the Nest, Kay's last night, after the four of them had dinner and Kay and Finch got their own table and Finch started waxing philosophic and Kay barely moved a muscle.

Chris got to know Holly a little bit then, and finally got around to asking her about the ‘disturbing development’ she’d referenced at the pastrami place regarding her trying to *dig* on the homicide case from Finch’s motel.

Chris had assumed she’d uncovered a related crime, or some disturbing information on how this one went down.

But no that wasn’t it, it was the Roland mope, whose name Finch had overheard as a possible lead -- Holly tracking him down, and him telling Holly yes he had some information for her, and her meeting him in South Central LA against her better judgment -- and Roland, no surprise, not *having* anything for her.

Holly’s description to Chris in the Crow’s Nest was something like:

“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 was going to fuck the daylights out of me.”

She pointed out of course that she didn’t speak that way typically, but was replaying the encounter with Roland for accuracy’s sake.

Holly had continued telling Chris that when she got back to the newspaper office a senior reporter told her to call the cops . . . which she did, and she was informed Roland was a convicted felon but currently free and not in violation of anything.

The police follow-up suggestion had been to simply not contact him further, but that’s when the phone calls from Roland started.

Then, she said, a female officer did sort of take her case, and the woman seemed concerned and suggested a restraining order.

Holly said she considered the pros and cons, that she might be making a bigger deal out of it than necessary -- plus the hassle -- and that’s when she and her yacht broker guy from Armonk made the decision to wait

for three more before proceeding. Meaning restraining order, private investigator, the whole nine yards.

There had of course been the two more calls but not third -- the second one a month ago she said, which made it closer to 6 weeks now.

And that's where we're at, Chris thought.

Holly did point out that her editor said let it go -- meaning the homicide story -- and let the LA Times and the cops figure it out, that a beat reporter earning minimum wage at the weekly Daily Gull didn't need to be a hero.

She said that's how she was handling it, and frankly didn't seem real concerned anymore. She was certainly playful enough at the writing thing -- though man, her own piece that she read really wasn't very good, was it.

Guys like Roland though -- you knew them. They didn't just fade away. Sorry.

Sure, it's conceivable Holly would never hear from the mutant again.

But what -- If that was 75 percent certain, you were going to roll the dice on the other 25?

Nah.

And what about the inevitable someone *else* that this guy sooner or later would be similarly going after?

You could tout your prison reform until you were blue in the face -- and Chris was convinced the system was doing its best, and that many of the convicts deep down did want to improve their lives -- but he was also convinced there were humans born evil who weren't going to be reformed.

It was also hard to dismiss Chandler's reaction from a couple weeks ago, when Chris asked him for a lead on Gilda Spinnaker (the guitar maker gal's) pursuer, and Chris mentioned she'd filed a police report on the guy.

"That do anything?" Chandler had said.

Chris answered that Gilda said it stopped it. Nothing since.

Chandler said uh-huh, and that he wouldn't take that to the bank.

The point being, Chandler had been around these guys a hundred times more than Chris or anyone else he knew. Chandler had put a ton of these guys away, also defended a whole bunch of them -- who knows, maybe even enlisted a few of them for his own dealings, such as the Craigslist motorcycle fool -- but one thing for sure, *Chandler didn't trust these guys.*

So back to the issue of how you find Roland Villanueva.

That much he'd gotten from Holly -- the last name and where he was at, at least the day Holly met him.

Chris supposed one way was drive over to South Central and start asking questions, except he figured you'd get robbed or carjacked or killed . . . or all three.

You couldn't simply ask Holly, for obvious reasons, since if something *did* happen you can't be the one coincidentally poking around for information.

You could ask Finch -- and Chris had a hunch that yes you could trust that son of a bitch to keep his mouth shut, that he did have a bit of a streak in him.

But Finch likely didn't know more than he told Holly -- which is he heard the murder victim and her alleged boyfriend utter the name Roland a couple times the night before the incident, in the motel lounge where they served the complimentary happy hour appetizers -- which Finch had to add in weren't bad, there was in fact a barbeque involved.

The point being, you could expose yourself to Finch as being interested in this Roland, with probably no upside. So no, forget him too.

Holly was obviously pretty resourceful, and dug around the way journalists do, and did locate the guy . . . and Chris was one of those once, but there were obviously tricks of the trade that modern newspaper folks had at their disposal. Not to mention sources.

Speaking of which . . . could you actually impose on Chandler again?

Chris decided you couldn't right now. Chandler was your once and future tennis partner, and let's face it, you'd done little or nothing for the guy in return, considering the jams he'd helped bail you out of. At least indirectly.

Sure, you could tell Chandler enjoyed playing lawyer again, that retirement wasn't entirely floating his boat -- but there was a limit.

Especially after the last one, where first of all you woke the guy up a few times in the middle of the night, but more to the point, where Chandler had to make the desperation call to you, explaining he gave you the wrong William White, when you were 2 and a half blocks from what you assumed was the *right* William White's house out in Montana.

So nope, not this time . . . and Chris knew you had to go old-school, which was hit a public library for the *umpteenth* time . . . and Gee, the day was getting on, it was after 3, and he hoofed it up the hill and down into town, but had to stop at Starbucks first, and one thing led to another, and he got into it with a guy about the latest college admissions scandal, how USC football always seems to wipe their hands of that stuff, when they're probably the worst offenders -- and it wasn't like the other guy was going to stand up and bring it blows or anything, but it took plenty of time off the clock.

Chris came up for air, man what a dumb argument, and asked the guy what time he had and the guy said 4:38 and Chris flew out of there, and luckily the MB library was open Saturdays until 6, but still.

You could try the normal channels -- you google the deadbeat's name, you try the white pages, the other people searches -- you try to put it together . . . pain in the ass, is what boiled down to, especially at the end of the day when there were multiple better things you could be doing . . . and all that nonsense being performed, odds are you come up short or finger the wrong guy.

Chris got up from the computer and made a second trip to the water fountain, all that scrambling around just to get here giving him a thirst -- and this time there was an Asian kid getting a drink. High school age, plenty of acne, black solid-rimmed glasses.

He'd seen the kid here before. They had these glassed in cubicles in back, on the third floor, like small offices, that you could reserve by the hour. You'd see group study sessions in there, and other stuff too -- seniors doing art projects, people recording YouTube videos, kids sometimes lounging around with their skateboards on the center desk.

But this Asian kid was all business, which Chris admired, seeming to reserve the cubicle for himself alone, and likely working some upper calculus project that would feed into an application to Stanford or MIT soon enough.

Chris stopped the kid and said, "You ever do research projects? I mean not math or science, but more human interest?"

"Yeah," the kid said, amused, like is the Pope Catholic, and waiting for the punch line.

"Okay good then," Chris said, "if you were going to interview . . . I don't know . . . like, let's say, someone coming out of prison on their adjustment to civilian life . . . for example . . . And you were looking for a specific person to speak to."

"How *would* I?" the kid said. "Or *have* I?"

"Wait -- you have? Done that?"

"No. I'm trying to establish your question. Let me look." And he pulled up his phone and it took all of 20 seconds, and the kid says, "Try *find an inmate dot org*, and good luck with it," and the kid headed back to the cubicle to probably continue his calculations on how you'd fly a Tesla to the moon.

Jeez.

The website was one of those open source jobs, plenty clunky to navigate, but eventually Chris pieced together a couple dozen Villanueavas from the California penal system archives . . . and when you narrowed it down to the *R Villanueavas* as a subset, there were 9.

You had to click on each one and wait for a screen to load, and then link to a second screen, but he whittled it down to 3.

And then he noticed he wasn't reading carefully, that two of them were Ronald instead of Roland -- so Bingo -- maybe. The Roland was a Roland R.K., listed with an address on Vermont Avenue, which, without looking it up and figuring out the cross street, sounded in the ballpark of South Central.

Then, quite unfortunately, Chris realized that second screen somehow had linked with the generic White Pages sites -- and all you were doing now was looking for non-inmate Roland Villanueavas -- and Chris decided again he was getting too old for this stuff, and he really did have to consider moving out of the country so he could retire in peace.

But here you were, and it was getting close to six, and that would be it for the library until Monday -- and he googled Ronald RK Villanueava by itself, and a taxi service came up, again on Vermont Avenue, and it wasn't worth trying to figure out.

He almost threw caution to the wind and pulled out his own phone and called the place, but downstairs they did have a house phone, sort of like the old hotel lobbies, where you make local calls for free -- and it was an odd set-up, why would anyone need this, except this was MB and the library had recently been facelifted and maybe they were trying to keep some of the old ways alive. It still didn't make sense, but Chris went downstairs and dialed the number.

"Bottom," the answerer said. It took Chris a second, and the guy almost hung up on him, but Chris remembered that word in the cab company name someplace, and he asked to speak to Roland please.

Nothing from the answerer but it seemed like Chris was on hold for a second and then, “Roland speaking, may I help you?”

Gee now. Could this, just like that, actually be the guy?

Chris said, “Are you Roland R.K? If you are, this is Mr. Wiggen from Sky Designs. You’ve won a trip.”

“Uh-huh,” Roland said.

“That bad, unh?” Chris said.

“Yeah, you gotta give it a little build up there, Pal. What do really need?”

“Sorry about that, then,” Chris said. “You’re a good sport. Any other Rolands in the neighborhood? Same last name? I got the wrong one, evidently.”

“Hang on now. You asked for me. Roland R.K. -- Why would you do *that*, you’re looking for someone *else*?”

The guy had a point, and there wasn’t much value in disputing it. “Beats me,” Chris said. “It’s been a long week.”

“No, that part I do hear you, amigo. Not sure what your game is, but least you honest about it. They do mix me up with a Roland *R*, by itself, no *K*, the mail sometimes, Hoover, that’s all I can tell you. Later bro.” The guy hung up.

And who knows what that meant, but it was like 5 to 6 and Chris hustled back upstairs to the computer and simply googled Roland R. Villanueva Los Angeles . . . and boom, there was one listing . . . and on *MyLife*, where they typically tried to sell you stuff there was one small section with past addresses, which you hope might include a current one as well, and the guy showed up on W. 67th Street which Chris had a feeling location-wise was in the South Central mix.

There was an announcement on the intercom that the Manhattan Beach library is now closed, and to please exit the north east door . . . and he did one more quick crosscheck, this time against the *find the inmate* site

the Asian kid gave him. . . and sure enough, Roland R seemed to be on target . . . You'd have to confirm it, like always, but Chris had a decent feeling about this one . . . and now you had to figure out how to get over there and visit the guy, but it was Saturday evening, clear sky, balmy, very little breeze, and *Earth, Wind and Fire* of all people -- what was *left* of them -- were apparently playing a free concert tonight at the Redondo Marina, and there were worse ways to pass a few hours, Chris supposed.

Chapter 5

Chris had a dream overnight that he had an old-fashioned white cadillac and was posing as a chauffeur and he drove to Roland's neighborhood and there was a bocce ball game going on in the park . . . except when he got closer they weren't tossing balls, they were tossing doll heads that had 100-dollar bills taped to them.

It was a weird and unpleasant dream, and Chris could feel himself sweating, but it continued a bit longer, Roland finishing the game and flagging him down like he was a cabbie, and Chris turning on the AC caused Roland to gasp and grab his throat and keel over in the back seat . . . and Chris was fine up front, maybe he had his window open a slit . . . hard to tell why.

At any rate, the point of the dream, Chris supposed, was in it, he now had to call *Mancuso* at 2 in the morning to help *him* get rid of Roland . . . and they ended up at the same place, the ex-military plot past Torrance, and they threw Roland in the little marsh same as the other guy, Ralph, except it was more like quicksand this time, Roland hit the surface, bobbed for a moment, and then got sucked under, except the whole marsh got sucked down too, to where when they drove out of there, you had a hole as deep as the Grand Canyon.

Chris tried to dismiss the dream in the morning as idiotic, and sat around in his robe watching baseball highlights, all the announcers saying the ball was juiced this year, replays pointing to light-hitting infielders hitting the ball out the opposite way -- especially ATT Park in San Francisco

where that never happened, which was now playing like Coors Field in Denver, which was a mile high.

The dream was cocymeneyed obviously, but it was idiotic *specifically* because Chris couldn't see any way you drive up to Roland in South Central and work something out. A white guy in a Camry interacting with Roland -- much less persuading him into your vehicle -- is going to stand out like a sore thumb.

Chris had some LA maps, paper ones that you could spread out, that he'd picked up from Triple A when moved down here, and he put it together that the *Hoover* that Roland R.K. referenced on the phone -- and hopefully what he meant was that was part of the address where the *wrong* Roland mail that came to him should have gone -- and it appeared on the map as *South Hoover*, but same deal . . . the good thing being, W. 67th Street, out of the inmate database, connected to it.

Meaning . . . as he switched to StreetView and looked closer and spun it around like they let you, it was a corner apartment deal, low rise, one story, but you could see an entrance on both S. Hoover and W. 67th -- and Chris had encountered this before a few times, even his place in Teaneck that year, both addresses were valid, and could be interchanged.

Again, enough was lining up here -- not to mention Roland Villanueava period being somewhat less common than Carlos Gonzales for example -- that you had to at least give it a shot. Didn't you?

Chris spent a couple minutes trying to talk himself out of it, especially after zeroing in and getting a better feel for the neighborhood on StreetView. It wasn't anywhere a nerdy looking white guy would go, by choice or being dragged there . . . *neither one*.

What he was in the middle of trying to do -- and that's why presently it was 5:30 in the morning, just getting light out -- was *time* your appearance.

Meaning get there about 7. This was a Sunday morning of course.

Chris was following the lead of a guy he knew up in Petaluma who wheeled and dealt in rental properties in East Oakland and Richmond.

Statistically these were war zones, at least certain blocks, where the cops themselves didn't want any business with -- and Chris did wonder himself about the guy's sanity, even though the guy was picking up foreclosures and REO's in those neighborhoods for pennies on the dollar.

The one trick the guy told Chris, the guy joking that it kept him sane (and maybe alive) was he only went to the properties between 7 and 9 in the morning. His theory was the drug dealers (and bad guys period) had finally gone to bed by that hour, and their crime sprees typically wouldn't resume until mid-morning.

Chris had a bowl of Special K, made a few preparations, took a deep *here's goes nothing* breath, and got in the car.

He figured you should ease into the neighborhood, try to develop a feel for it, but at the same time stick to the bigger thoroughfares, and the fastest way by far would be the 405 to the 105 to the 110 -- but then when you got off *that*, it could be pretty dicey right off the bat.

So he took Rosekrans to Hawthorne Boulevard to West Florence, 3 or 4 miles on it -- and Gee, you passed the old Forum where the Lakers used to play -- and the neighborhood got increasingly sketchy after that, and Chris turned left on Vermont and right on W. 68th -- and a block up you had the possible Roland location.

It looked a little different than on StreetView, the place had been painted a dark blue, and it was an improvement over the original yellow but Chris was pretty sure you smelled re-development money either way. Meaning the spread-out southern California version of a housing project.

You did confirm that it was a corner property and that there were indeed entrances on both streets . . . and it didn't look too bad at the moment, criminals-wise, the streets being pretty dang dead period coming

up on 7:30 in the morning, and his real estate guy may have been onto something.

There were two guys over in the weeds across the street, the back lot of a commercial building, but they looked more like homeless guys and hopefully relatively harmless, and Chris parked and kind of gulped and was set to take his chances on Unit 18, the one that the convergent databases list Roland at.

But then he thought, you know what, this isn't good, wasn't that my point in the beginning, that I'm standing out like a sore thumb? Even though it's quiet right now . . .

So he didn't park after all, and started cruising the side streets, and it was all rough and a crapshoot, and he was a bit twisted around where he even was in relation to Roland . . . but then there was a block that had all single-family houses, some palm trees on the sidewalk, pride of ownership showing in most of the front yards, and there was a hall at the end of the block, boarded up, maybe a church at one time, but plenty of space to park in front of it without ticking off some resident in front of his own house . . . and Chris shut off the engine, grabbed his backpack and slung it over his shoulder, and locked it up and hoped for the best.

He was pretty sure he was angling in the right direction, and a couple of those front yards that looked neat and tidy were a bit more menacing, as Chris got challenged twice by pit bull situations and luckily you had fencing . . . but, not that you could take your time and actually appreciate it, this kind of block did conjure up old, classic LA.

These were the bungalows you'd see fancied up in the gentrified neighborhoods, going for big bucks, and they were impressive, typically wood shingled or stucco, L-shaped porches, plenty of architectural detail in the trim, most of them probably built before 1940.

But the business at hand . . . Chris guessed correctly with a left and then two rights, and now you were back at (hopefully) Roland's, and the day

was getting on, it was after 8 . . . and you only lived once, right? . . . and Chris found 18 and rang the bell.

Roland answered -- Chris had to be convinced of that until proven otherwise, and he matched Holly's description pretty close, the tattoos ranging all over the exposed flesh, which was way too much, given the wife-beater t shirt and boxer shorts, and up onto the neck and head as well, as Holly pointed out.

Chris said, "Are you Roland R.K.? If you are, I got a prize for you."

"Fuck *who*?" Roland said, rubbing an eye.

"The *taxi* guy?" Chris said. "That's not you, right? I tried to drop it on *him*, he directed me to *you*."

"Yeah?" Roland said, a little chuckle behind it. "Where's my prize at then?"

"I have it," Chris said. "But first I need some ID. Can I come in?"

"Be my guest, motherfucker," Roland said, almost hysterical now, and Chris stepped in and Roland closed the door . . . and damn, it smelled bad in here. A combination of garbage that needed to be taken out, awkward cooking smells, like some kind of fried fish, and heavy lingering marijuana smoke.

It looked like a 1 bedroom, and Roland went in back for a second, re-closed the bedroom door and produced a hefty-looking blade and pointed it in Chris's direction.

"Let's you and me do a little business," Roland said.

This was no fun, a rapid escalation of events, but you had to make sure, so Chris said, "The newspaper girl sent me. She needs more information on the case. She's afraid to come back here, because you're going to fuck the daylights out of her."

Roland smiled and rubbed his lip with the non-knife hand, as though pretending to refresh his memory, and then you could see him latching onto it, amused that he had conveyed that to her.

“She *fine*,” Roland said. “She your lady?”

“She was. We broke up. I wasn’t ethnic enough for her, she said.”

Roland squinted, still smiling. “I told ya she got good taste.”

“You didn’t. You said she was fine. That was it.”

“Now you putting words in my mouth . . . I’m man enough to roll with it though. You best get down.”

“On the floor? What for?”

“We find out soon enough,” Roland said.

“Will the prize help?” Chris said.

“Cut the bull shit, dude. Comedy time is expired. *Down*.”

Chris said, “That’s fine. Do a few dollars count? This neighborhood and all -- no offense -- I got my money in my shoe.”

Roland was to back to being amused. “That,” he said, “the first intelligent thing out of your mouth.”

Chris reached down as though to untie the shoe, but at the same time slid the sickle out his backpack and straightened up and whipped it into Roland’s throat before he’d fully reacted.

The guy staggered around for a minute, eyes popping out of his skull, not that different than the way they do it in the movies, which Chris always thought was over-dramatic and lasted too long.

But Roland gave it a good 30, 40 seconds of wandering around before he pitched forward and plunked down, the kitchen counter bracing his fall for a moment and then him slinking to the floor.

The immediate problem was Roland was making a weird gurgling sound, pretty dang high pitched if you wanted to know the truth -- and Chris had no idea if there was someone else in that back bedroom, but you certainly didn’t want to initiate a wake-up if there *were* . . . and Chris fumbled around in the backpack and came up with a roll of grip tape, and shoved it into Roland’s mouth, and that seemed to do the job.

Then he tried to pull the sickle *out* of the throat region, since you're better off taking that with you, and maybe Chris didn't have the best angle but the sucker sure seemed wedged in there, and he tried to wobble it out but he couldn't . . . so he left it . . . and closed the door behind him, and tried to remember the best way back to the car.

One small positive was he wore gloves, not the bulky variety but the thin ones that early-bird workout people used to keep their fingers toasty, even in southern California, and the gloves didn't attract much attention because you saw them around. These days of course, your safest bet (foresncis-wise) in engineering something like this would be a full Hazmat suit -- but short of that, at least keep your fingerprints out of the equation.

He turned the corner and it started looking comfortably familiar, and Chris could picture it now, 1 more block, you go left, you cross over, and you're back on the block with the bungalows and the Camry at the end.

The way he'd worked it, he wrapped the handle of the sickle with some of that grip tape that everyone uses now in tennis, and paddle tennis, and whatever else . . . and you couldn't fit the whole sickle in the backpack so you put the blade part in first and left the handle sticking up out of the thing, which may have raised an eyebrow except the grip wrap made it look innocuous enough . . . At least Roland hadn't questioned it, that was the main thing.

For a moment Chris sort of panicked, that Jeez, I got the wrong block here after all . . . and this was going to be no fun backtracking and straightening it out . . . but the more he looked at the boarded-up old lodge-church building, it sure looked the same . . . and then parked across the street, a low-rider vehicle of some sort, with decorative cursive on the fender spelling out the word *Boo* in red and green -- the car unfortunately familiar . . . and he began to conclude with a sick feeling that you didn't find one of those on every block, even in South Central LA.

Meaning . . . the Camry was gone.

You could cry about it . . . or you could accept it as fact, and get a move on . . . and Chris was more aware than ever of the real estate guy's timetable, that the bad guys don't wake up and resume their crime sprees until mid-morning . . . and the day was *getting* there.

Chris made one of those snap decisions -- that first of all, calling a cab this close to the scene could easily come back to bite you.

So no good, you had to walk it. Secondly, you'd be better off heading toward the 110, than the way you drove here, even if that meant heading back toward Roland's to *get* there.

All you could do at this point was keep your head down and stick one foot in front of the other -- it was as single-minded a pursuit as he could remember -- and he thought of turning north on Vermont to circle *around* Roland's, and give it a little distance -- and fortunately that connected with West Gage, and that did put you under the freeway and the name changed to East Gage, and then some signs told you the neighborhood changed to South Park, and then Central Alameda, none of it looking tremendous frankly, but he at least found Slauson Avenue, and that was a pretty substantial through-drag, and the heavier traffic was comforting in hopefully reducing the threat of a street crime.

Eventually up ahead was a familiar sign, In-n-Out, and Chris could normally take those or leave them, but he was never so happy to see one.

He took his time eating, trying to deflect the events of the morning from entering the frontal lobe of his brain, and after a while the blood sugar *was* stabilized a little better, and Chris was thinking reasonably clearly.

And now you'd put sufficient distance on the situation that you most probably *could* safely call an Uber or taxi, and he began scrolling around on his phone.

A guy at the next table started talking to him, pleasant fellow, plenty of tattoos himself, in fact Chris was thinking from a white man's perspective

he sure did look a lot like Roland, didn't he . . . which was unfortunate . . . but the guy had a spirit and energy that you had to admire.

Chris didn't want to get into a social thing, but you had to respond to a few comments he made, and Chris ended up asking him what he did, since the guy had work boots on in here on a Sunday morning, and a pencil behind his ear, and the look of someone going to work.

The guy said landscaping, that he'd started off doing it all himself, and now had a couple guys working for him, and they had some decent accounts, and to keep up with the competition, you had to go 7 days a week . . . and the guy seemed fine with it.

They got into the Lakers, and what was wrong since they acquired LeBron James, and the guy said he was a Clippers fan anyway . . . and Chris never liked to impose on strangers . . . but Gee, it would *still* be nice to keep yourself off the Uber or taxi radar today, period.

So he asked the guy where he was headed and the guy said Bel Air, and Chris could go for *that*, and before he spit out the question, if the guy'd mind giving him a lift, the guy answered it *for* him, and said it would be a pleasure . . . and they continued in the guy's work truck talking sports, and a little politics, all the way to Bel Air, the guy never once questioning what Chris was doing at In-n-Out vehicle-less.

When they hit Sunset Boulevard Chris said that right here was fine, and he thanked the guy, and the guy said *no*, the other way *around*, it's always good to have some company, especially when you hit traffic . . . and of course Chris would agree with that one, and meanwhile this time he did flag down a cab and it was a long way to MB, and it ran him \$77.20 on the meter, but you dealt with it.

Chapter 6

Monday morning Chris figured why not try Dr. Moore again, that the last session hadn't been *that* unproductive *had it?*

Yes, there *were* the couple instances where she rolled what he wanted to discuss into something else, but you were never going to get the full package out of these people, that seemed a given.

And maybe their training limited them, didn't always let them think outside the box -- or maybe they just wanted to keep the upper hand on you.

Either way, not much on the agenda today . . . and Chris called the office.

Which rang funny after the first couple rings, the way it does when you're patched through somewhere else . . . and there was a pause and then a "Dr. Loren Moore speaking."

"Jeez," Chris said. "You answer your own phone now?"

"It's been known to happen," Dr. Moore said somewhat cautiously. "With whom and I speaking please?"

"Chris Seeley. I'm a little disappointed now, you didn't catch on. The anxiety in my tone alone, that should have been the giveaway."

"Hello Chris," she said, "is everything all right?"

"You know something," he said, "this is getting to be like a broken record. You and Dr. Stride both -- Bruce -- every cotton pickin communication represents a crisis of the tallest order."

She was quiet for a minute and unfortunately probably already taking notes. She said, "Chris it's okay if it's not. How are you doing?"

“Fine, couldn’t be better, if you want to know the truth. I even jogged a little this morning. Not on the beach or anything, like I used to, but over to a new coffee kiosk they got, in the parking lot behind Taco Bell . . . until that place opens up for the day. Then they have to move it.”

“That’s encouraging. May I ask how far?”

“Is this, like a medical question . . . or for your own information.”

“Both.”

“Why,” Chris said, “do you work out yourself?” Like a one-track-minded 8th grader, he couldn’t redirect himself from Dr. Moore’s anatomy, the abnormally large chest, and now that jogging was on the table, what would *that* have been like, exactly, in her case? . . . Both her participating in it, and others witnessing her efforts.

“Chris, what can I do for you?” she was saying now.

“Well like I say, I’m surprised you picked up directly,” he said. “No big deal, but since I have you on the line anyway, can you work me in?”

“Today?”

“Well no, I wasn’t expecting that . . . You do have time today though?”

“I’m going to need to check, and I’ll call you back.”

Oh boy. All he figured, once again, stick your name in the rotation, stop in for kicks, maybe in a couple weeks. Why were these therapists such drama kings, and queens?

Chris shaved and the phone rang, and Dr. Moore said she could see him at 12:15.

“I guess,” Chris said. “If you insist. Hopefully you didn’t discombobulate a real patient on my account.” She said she did not, and she’d see him then.

Chris went back to morning TV, and this was the thing, it was all pasteurized these days, even the local shows, like this guy and gal on KTLA right now interviewing someone starting a winery from their back yard in

Holmby Hills, using a software program and special solar netting to cram two growing seasons into one -- and of course both hosts are yukking it up.

Chris looked at this kind of 'human interest story' as an example of what you'd find on similar TV in Columbus, Ohio . . . or Athens, Maine . . . or Bargesville, Indiana, or Alamo, Nevada . . . or Cobalt, Ontario, since the Canadians were losing their distinctive cultural ways as well.

This was what the mainstream considered progress, he supposed, and he flipped to a replay of the Masters golf, Tiger Woods looking older and bulkier on the 12th hole, but still driving the shit out of the ball . . . but golf didn't do it for him either, and he was going to go out for a paper to kill an hour and a half before Dr. Moore -- when he realized he didn't have a car.

Yikes. He apparently conveniently left that fact out of the equation when he went to bed last night, and maybe it worked, no bad to dreams to contend with, nothing like the weird one the night *before* Roland.

Anyhow . . . one option -- the only one -- would be to use another car service for the appointment . . . unless . . . and that was that used car place a quarter mile down on Sepulveda, the block before Sharif's motel.

The guy always said hi, friendly enough, when Chris walked past, which hadn't been for a while, but still.

So he hustled over there, the original guy wasn't there any more, the replacement guy said, but that guy seemed okay too -- and Chris said, "It doesn't matter what it looks like. Just don't gouge me on the price, and don't let me drive out of here with something unreliable."

"Of course, sir. Any other criteria?"

"Yeah, we gotta close this in like a half hour." And he'd obviously just thrown away any leverage he might have in the price department . . . but life *was* too short sometimes, and there'd been another real estate investor guy one time -- not the catch 'em before the drug dealers wake up guy -- but this other guy with a sensible outlook too: that if money makes a problem go away -- spend it.

One thing you *weren't* going to do was report the Camry missing, for obvious reasons.

You never knew though, one time an old couple, where he grew up, Pacific Heights, they got carjacked in front of their house, middle of the day, and it was a traumatic event of course, but they reported it and the cops came up empty so they went and bought a new car, and then a month later they're driving down to Fillmore Street and they spot the old car on Steiner and Pine. Nothing wrong with it, the a-hole had apparently driven it a few blocks after carjacking them, parked it there, and that was it.

So yeah, conceivably the Camry was around, maybe someone jacked it up and ripped off the wheels alone -- but you wouldn't count on it. There was a bit of sentimental value there, Chris conceded, big hunk of metal with some rubber and vinyl and plastic mixed in, but even so, it represented plenty of memories, corny as that sounded. She had been a good friend, had taken care of you, 260,000 miles and going strong, the timing belt changed not once but twice.

But you moved on . . . and Chris drove off the used car lot in a 2012 Chevy Malibu with a couple of dents here and there that didn't seem like they'd affect anything. Chris liked the name of course, and was happy to buy American when possible, but he was worried about the reliability and this guy Delf, the salesman, assured him that all the parts came from Asian technology these days, that they essentially duplicated what was under the hood in your standard Honda Accord . . . which Chris had his doubts about, but he didn't press it.

One criteria, which he hadn't mentioned to the guy, had been the wheel well in the trunk that had served him well in the Camry, meaning you could store appropriate shit in there under the spare tire, without creating a huge lump on the trunk bed, and the Malibu seemed to work . . . and Chris hesitated for a second coming out of the lot, should he stop back home first or go straight to Dr. Moore's -- and he nearly got sideswiped by a UPS

truck, and that guy -- even though UPS drivers were the nicest ones around -- gave him an extended finger out the window, which he did deserve.

Dr. Moore ushered a patient out at 12:12, went back in the office, and greeted Chris on the button at 12:15.

“You run a rightfully tight ship,” he said. “Would that be Type A behavior, if it were a patient? Something that would qualify for you making a note?”

“It would depend,” she said, “whether it was an extension of other compulsive behavior, or an isolated example of the patient behaving responsibly.”

“How do you tell?”

Dr. Moore smiled. “You should become a psychologist. You’re quite curious how we operate.”

“What did you study before that?” Chris said. “Or that was it.”

“Gosh no. I was a linguistics major. I spent a decade in St. Louis. Didn’t come to this until well into my 30’s.”

“I’ll give you credit then, dang . . . Something bad happen at that point, that turned you introspective?”

“No. I had a boyfriend. We took a summer, hiked the Appalachian Trail. Thought things through. We came back, applied to PhD programs together.”

“How’d that work out?”

“Things don’t always go completely as planned,” she said. “But here I am.” Nice comfortable smile, obviously at ease with her decision from back when, despite the bit of mystery with the boyfriend.

Chris sat there a moment. He of course tried not to stare at her chest -- and maybe it was just coincidence, or the light -- but her get-up today -- a cream-colored cotton blouse buttoned down the front -- seemed to accentuate the situation worse than last time, when he made the unfortunate couple of comments.

Of course you'd assume the woman just went in the closet every day and put something on like anyone else, no deep-rooted thought to that aspect of the presentation -- the reality being, in her case no matter what she wore, it wouldn't help her out that much . . . and for God's sakes give the lady a *break*, none of us can control the luck of the draw when it comes to physical features.

Dr. Moore said, "Is that enough about *me* this afternoon? It's *your* dime of course. But my sense is you had a different motivation in reaching out this morning."

"There you guys go again, with the reaching *out* . . . But fine. For starters, something that's been bugging me lately . . . I had a friend with large breasts one time. There were issues." What a surprise that he'd lead off with this topic, whether he consciously had wanted to or not -- but it was on the table now.

"Uh-huh," Dr. Moore said.

"She wasn't, like a girlfriend. She was older."

"Might she have been someone's mother? Who you knew?"

"Oh brother. We can't get past this. Now you have me in the womb again, or fresh out of it. You're going to ask me if I was breast fed."

"Were you?"

"I would assume so. But honestly, it was never brought up. And it won't be. My mom's not around. Neither of my parents, unfortunately."

"How old was she, your mom?"

"When she had me? Or when she passed?"

"Both."

"Let's get back on topic here. This friend, it was a summer during college, one of my roommates got us jobs in Florida. We had a band too, nothing official, just kicking it around a little, and then someone hires us to play . . . not the wedding obviously, but what do you call it when girls have a bachelor party?"

“A bachelorette party?”

“Probably. Not even that, it was when they all came back after. We played in someone’s apartment.”

“Do you play an instrument currently?”

“You’re not complicated, you know it? I know where you’re going, that music is good therapy, yada yada. Let me finish this.”

She was taking a note.

Chris continued, “One of the people from the party -- she *wasn’t* someone’s mother-- not that kind of age difference -- but she might have been like a big sister or family friend. I never established it frankly.”

“Umm-hmm.”

“Anyways. When we’re packing up the instruments she asks me if I give lessons. I never had, but I said sure, it seemed harmless enough . . . and only when the lessons began and we’re both sitting there with the guitars on our laps, and you have that certain angle . . . then I noticed it, or them, you couldn’t help it.”

“Hmm,” Dr. Moore said.

“And you know how when you purposely try *not* to call attention to something? And your eyes are roaming every which way *but* there? How that makes it worse?”

“Continue.”

“So fine, I must have given her a half dozen lessons, it wasn’t hard, she wasn’t a rank beginner . . . and then the final one, she announces that she can’t come for a while because she’s going in for some minor surgery.”

“Ah.”

“So I figured that was it, I picked up a few bucks spending money out of the deal and I moved on. But then one day my roommate tells me he heard she was going in for breast reduction surgery.”

“Uhn-huh. And that bothered you.”

“Very much so, are you kidding? So I called her up. I tell her, it’s none of my business, and it’s fine if you hang up -- but what the hell are you *doing* here?” Or *had* she done here, assuming it’s too late already.

“Yes?”

“She was embarrassed, but she addressed it. She said she had second thoughts, she’d received some negative advice from a few people, and put the procedure on hold for the time being . . . I told her that was a wise decision . . . and did she want to set up another lesson in that case, and she said she’d let me know, but I never heard from her again.”

“I see,” Dr. Moore said. She looked at her notes. “You prefaced this discourse by labeling it ‘something that’s been bothering me lately’. How so?”

“I never got closure, is why. For all I know she went in a month later and took care of it. I know it sounds silly, and you probably think I’m a nut case.”

“Let’s explore that for a moment. How many years ago was this?”

“20. Give or take.”

“Would you characterize this experience as having been on your mind often, since then?”

“Not really. Only when something reminds me of it . . . like in a porno flick once in a while, that type thing.”

“And why do you think it still disturbs you occasionally? Is it a lack of control?”

“I think you got it,” Chris said. “I can’t stand it when people don’t listen to me. In certain cases.”

“And you feel this woman did not.”

“Put it this way. She ignored me, which is worse.”

“And why do you feel that?”

“She canned the lessons, for starters.”

Dr. Moore made a note. “Did it occur to you that she may not have returned for the guitar lessons because you touched on a sensitive subject?”

“Fine, that too,” Chris said.

“Did you have sexual feelings for this person? And part of your frustration stems from not being able to explore those further?”

“Fine. *That too* . . . plus it was like, if she shrunk her situation, right in my face so to speak, she wasn’t giving anything a chance to play out.”

“And you wouldn’t have been as attracted to her, if she’d had the reduction procedure.”

“Again, you’re going to shake your head . . . but correct.”

“Have you been involved in any relationships with older women?”

“I thought I was once, and I got dumped pretty quick.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Nah, it’s not worth it. But okay in a nutshell, I worked at a newspaper once. When you start off they stick you on the late shift, 5 to 2. Some gal comes in after midnight, I say can I help you, and it turns out she’s a roving food critic, turning in a restaurant review. This is before the internet was in full swing at newspapers, a lot of people still turned shit in.”

“And a brief relationship followed.”

“Yeah, about 10 minutes later, if you know what I mean. That late shift, it was pretty dead in the newsroom, and there were empty offices and so forth.”

“I see . . . So that was the extent of it.”

“I didn’t want it to be. I bought Warriors tickets for a couple nights later. I picked her up, it was all good. But she left in the 3rd quarter . . . No idea how she got home. I guess she took BART.”

“What was your age difference?”

“I was like mid-20’s, she was probably early 40’s? . . . Right about where *I* am now, in fact . . . Jeez, weird to think of like that.”

“So . . . anything else you can add Chris? From any direction that might be helpful?”

“Yeah well, I was in the central valley not too long ago. Do you like small towns?”

“Sometimes. I grew up in one. Do you?”

“I hear you. Good place to be from, might not want to live there though? . . . I’m taking care of some nonsense there, it’s running me a few days, I’m in a hotel, the staff is friendly, it’s not the worst thing, you know what I mean? You’re not in a major rush to get out of there, but even so.”

“I believe you’ve mentioned your affinity for hotels before. Why do you think you’re comfortable in that environment?”

“No, no. The womb stuff *again*? . . . Security? No responsibility? They even make your bed for you and clean up?”

“I’m detecting sarcasm.”

“You’re wondering if truth is sprinkled in though. Fine. I’ll add when you’re on the road, residing in those type places, your commitments are less. Normally.”

“Life is not as complicated for you, I believe you’re saying.”

“Yeah. So I meet this high school kid, he’s probably 18, he’s a senior, he’ll be out of there in a couple months. Guy has a good name, Pike Gillette.”

“He does. It’s catchy.”

“What I did, TV was bad one night so I found the high school track. I figure 4 laps to a mile, so if I go 8, I’ve done a little something. I’m talking *walking*, of course, no big thing. I stop at 6, but anyway I’m sitting in the bleachers, this kid comes along, putting on running shoes and we start talking, and I can tell he’s fine with it, because you always want to procrastinate your workout, it’s human nature.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Nothing monumental, except I found myself envying the heck out of this kid. He was athletic, all-American features, genuine smile. Polite, well-spoken. Everything ahead of him, is what I’m thinking . . . It also made me want to turn back the clock myself and do it right.”

“High school?”

“Sure. It had its moments, but plenty of stuff to straighten out. Wouldn’t you?”

“Please re-direct,” she said.

“So I’m assuming this kid’s got it all squared away, and the sky’s the limit . . . and I even tell him this -- and I’m paraphrasing -- but it’s like, take it from me son, you don’t always know how good you have it, until you get some perspective later on . . . and my unsolicited advice is keep right on having fun, and not waste time worrying about what comes next.”

“How did this Pike respond?”

“He seemed to consider what I was saying, and then he shifted gears. Which surprised me. Maybe me being a stranger. That he figured he could open up, it wouldn’t come back to bite him. Who knows.”

“How did he shift gears?”

“He told me a terrible story. There was an accident. A drunk driver ran up on a curb and killed a woman. The Pike kid knew the family, went to school all through with one of the daughters. It happened last fall, a lot of people were still reeling bad, he said.”

“And?”

“How did you know there was more? Isn’t that enough?”

“I didn’t.”

“Well there is more . . . Pike is having enough trouble wrapping his head around it. A couple weeks later the daughter is going through her mom’s things, and she comes across a diary and some letters. Bottom line -- and don’t forget, it is a small town, but she informs Pike that her mom -- and Pike’s dad -- were having an affair.”

“Currently? At the time of the accident?”

“That wasn’t clear. They tried to piece it together, it may have ended a while back, or it could have been one of those on again off again deals. Eventually the daughter tells Pike that she figured out the timeline, and the affair had already been over for some time.”

“But he didn’t necessarily believe that.”

“Correct . . . You must be tough to go to the *movies* with. You’d be one of those people who keeps *calling out* what’s about to *happen* . . . Would you ever want to *go* to the movies by the way? I mean I know you’re married, you said that, but this is 2018.”

Dr. Moore took a moment. “Are you saying -- to pick up on that -- that you, for one, behave differently therefore? That in 2018 anything goes?”

“I don’t know *what* I’m saying. Pike finishes telling me all this, I sort of apologize for assuming his life is all idyllic Camelot, since it’s clearly anything *but* at this point, and he leaves off by saying -- pretty darn matter of fact, too -- that he has the ability to do something *about* it . . . and he’s going to. And he says good night, and takes off on his jog.”

“What do you feel he meant by that?”

“You’re supposed to tell *me*. I don’t know if he was serious, or joking, like as a defense mechanism . . . or being symbolic or some shit.”

Dr. Moore was writing something down, drawing an arrow it looked like, connecting a couple things. She looked at her watch. “We’re going to need to conclude. In about 6 minutes. Anything else, Chris? What possessed you to call me this morning?”

“None of this. Jesus . . . But if you *need* one more topic . . . I guess that could be: If a guy had a terminal disease -- but he got better -- but he kind of changed his general approach while thinking he *had* the terminal disease -- and yes he may really *be* disease-free -- but the new approach he developed *remains* -- is that *okay*.”

Another note from Dr. Moore. “How did he change his approach?” she said.

“I don’t know . . . More aggressive with others, perhaps? More impulsive? Less concerned about ramifications? Less worried whether people like him? More apt to move on?”

“As opposed to dwelling on a particular?”

“I guess. But that’s *it*? I listed about 6 *things*.”

“Do you feel he should alter his current approach?” Dr. Moore said.

“Well,” Chris said, “in a perfect world, sure.”

“Does he feel liberated by the new approach? The qualities you alluded to, they represent a sort of freedom, do they not?”

“Yeah? Could *be* I guess,” Chris said, rubbing his chin, giving that one a going over, no one quite putting it like that before.

“Does this person have a best friend?” she said.

“I don’t think so . . . If you define it as a couple people he can count on in a crisis, then maybe.”

“Does this person consider himself out of the loop, socially?”

“Now and then.”

“And that partial degree of alienation -- he feels it’s the result of the current approach?”

“Maybe.”

“Under the original approach, he was more prominently in the social loop then?”

“I told you,” Chris said, “*maybe*. What part don’t you understand?”

Dr. Moore cleared her throat and straightened up her notes. “That’s sufficient for today, Chris.”

“*I’m* sorry. That was on me, getting worked up for a second. Nothing to do with you. You’re doing your job.”

“Thank you.”

“Did you call the police on me though? Last time?”

“I did.”

“Oh . . . How ‘bout this time?”

“I’m not planning to.” They stood up.

Chris wanted to give her that hug last time, even brought it up, and who knows, maybe that was part of the deal, why she did call the cops.

But she opened the door for him, and he hesitated a second and then reached around and gave her one . . . and like a good human being, flicking the switch on the therapist role for just a minute, she hugged him back, and it sure felt real.

Chapter 7

There was a text from Ned when Chris left the office: **Let's talk.**

What could *this* be now?

Whatever soothing resolution -- even an inflated one -- Chris might have walked out of Dr. Moore's office with -- that was now history.

What did we have? 2 o'clock Monday afternoon?

So we're talking . . . Friday night? The guy in the pond? Ralph?

It was running together a bit, but yeah. By the time it was consummated, that was deep into Saturday morning -- so what, 50 hours ago, give or take?

The only saving grace, which kept Chris's heartbeat and hyperventilation mechanism in check . . . was if it's real serious -- like life or death -- Ned would have phrased it slightly differently.

More along the lines of: *We got a problem.*

Chris still took that deep breath, and called him back.

"Hey!" Ned said. "What's shaking, man?"

"You have a way," Chris said, "of sneaking up on people, and brushing it off, while the other guy doesn't extricate himself quite as quick."

"Not following you. Listen, you got a half hour?"

"Okay you're doing it again."

"Take it easy, we're good," Ned said.

Chris said in that case he might fit it in, and they settled on the pizza place in Hermosa Beach.

There was another message, and he could relax now and give it the attention it deserved . . . and son of a gun, this was Shep. So Chris called *him* back.

“My brother,” Shep said, and you could hear glasses clinking and plenty of conversation, Weatherby’s busy enough for a Monday afternoon.

“You got me nervous,” Chris said. “You *never* text.” Not *Ned-quality* nervous, but still.

“All’s we have,” Shep said, “That tenant I found you? Well it didn’t take so great, the relationship.”

“Ah.”

“So I hope you don’t mind, I took the liberty of uh . . . well, I kind of took a page out of your book.”

A beat. “I don’t want to ask what that means.”

“Yeah. The roof business again . . . We came to the requisite meeting of the minds.”

“Holy Smokes, I’m not believing this . . . Honestly, that place, the karma may not be there, Shep . . . Should we just hand it back to the landlord? I mean I probably won’t ever need it again.” Though you never did know.

“Are you *nuts*?” Shep said. “With the *upside* we got? Do you know the median one-bedroom in the city now, is \$3690.”

Chris *had* seen that the other day, the New York Times picking up the story because it was so outrageous.

“And they showed examples of that median *version*,” Shep said. “A basement dive off the Panhandle, and a worse dive in the Mission, where everything’s security screens. We got a gold mine here, believe me.”

“If you say so,” Chris said, “totally up to you . . . Sorry for the hassle.”

“Don’t mention it. Wasn’t the worst thing, throw a little tough love around up there. I’ll be honest, I seen where you’re coming from.” Shep said he had to go.

Chris felt himself shaking his head at *that* conversation as he started up the new-used Chevy Malibu -- and there was admittedly a slight knock in the engine as he accelerated onto the 405, but he told himself think positive, and you need to get past worrying about a dumb car if you're going to tackle the bigger problems.

Had he been *that* transparent with Shep though? Jeez. What was that part where he saw where I was *coming* from? Sure, the list, way back in the beginning, that got some indirect mention, over a couple Anchor Steams, across the bar -- but had he really related dangling that guy off the *roof*?

Or worse? Had someone *seen* him do it, and word got around the neighborhood, and back to Shep.

Ooh boy . . .

Ned was all smiles, had the corner table in back, same directional setup as in the Crow's Nest.

Chris sat down and said, "I don't need to look at the menu. These days I either go with the whole combo pie, bring home what I can't eat and have it for breakfast -- or go with the pepperoni calzone."

"See now *calzones*," Ned said, "and are you any part Italian, or not, I may have asked you."

"I'll have to go on Ancestry.com," Chris said, "spit in a cup, I may surprise myself." That was the wrong analogy, because it reminded him once again of the ill-fated DNA test and the hacker Mark, still waiting for it. Maybe.

"What was I saying?" Ned said. "Calzones -- me being Italian doesn't mean I eat 'em."

"I'll eat yours then."

"On a list of cheap eats . . . they'd be near the bottom. I don't care that they originated in 18th century Naples. They're too dry."

"What's below 'em?"

"Huh?"

“On your list.”

“General Tso’s Chicken for one,” Ned said. “Do you know that stuff’s not even Chinese?”

They ordered and Chris said, “Not to insult anyone, and I’m sure he’s a friend of yours, but I hope the owner doesn’t come over.”

“Oh *that* guy. He’s a pain in the ass,” Ned said. And it was good they were on the same page, the owner a friendly enough fellow, a trace of a Brooklyn accent so you knew the food was authentic, but he loved to stroll table to table and talk . . . and if he got it dialed in at *your* table on a given night, forget it. Kind of amusing that Ned agreed, since Ned wasn’t typically bothered by that kind of stuff, meaning he must have had a bad experience with the guy.

“What I wanted to go over,” Ned said, “is the writing assignment. I’m trying to come up with final scene, like Finch wants, but I’m hitting myself over the head. I’ve worked around like 5 of them, and one’s more stupid than the last.”

“Whew,” Chris said. “Now I can complete that deep breath, no strings attached. Who would think, you needed me because of your *novel*.”

“Let’s not be a comedian, okay?”

“I’m serious. You’ve got one *in* you. You know it too, otherwise you don’t show up the other night at Finch’s.”

“Well what’s yours?” Ned said.

“You know what? I haven’t given it a thought. I’ll start working on it about 6:15 Friday night . . . Rosie okay with hers?”

“Oh yeah, she’s got a good one. Takes place in Louisiana, *her* character’s climatic moment anyway. Healthy imagination on that girl.”

“You guys making it then . . . or what?”

“*Us*? Nah. She’s got her thing going, whatever. And Chandler’s trying to get her into UCLA. Not the real thing, but the extension part. Starting with summer session.”

Of course it was Chris who suggested that, but no point butting in now . . . and of course Ned's answer, what was going on otherwise, that was a little shaky.

Chris said, "*Forget* UCLA maybe. She produces that novel, Finch with his screenwriting connections . . . who knows."

"I agree," Ned said. "Be honest, I was thinking that direction myself. For me. But I'm friggen *blocked*."

"Email it to me," Chris said, "I'll give you the cold-blooded evaluation."

"Which ending?"

"Your top two. Don't murder me with all 5."

"Okay. Thanks."

"If I could make a suggestion?" Chris said.

"Go for it."

"Well I liked your start. A lot of detail, you bring the international element into it, the guy seeking out his roots back in Czechoslovakia, the whole bit disguised as a vehicle to get to know the Pan Am check-in gal."

"Pan Am's not around anymore. They've been gone a *while*."

"Whatever. My point is, it's real so far. Keep it that way."

You could tell Ned was thinking about those 5 endings, and his face was scrunched up.

Chris said, "Like Chili Palmer in *Get Shorty*. I'm not saying you gotta portray the main character as a wise guy or something . . . but use that set-up as an example how to keep it *real*."

Ned said, "That was Travolta, at least the first one. I would have gone with a young Mickey Rourke."

"Doesn't matter. What I'm saying, the guy comes out here, knows nothing about the movie business, ends up dominating the action, hobnobbing with the Beverly Hills crowd."

“More like *Calabasas*. That’s where the Kardashians are now. Johnny Depp, Jennifer Lawrence. That group.”

“You’re pissing me off.”

“Nah, I get your point. Write what you know.”

“More than *that* . . . give your guy an edge that he doesn’t lose. Capiche? Or do I have to call the owner over, ask him how his week’s been going.”

Ned said that wouldn’t be necessary, and they finished up and crossed the street to the long block that they malled-off, meaning only foot traffic permitted -- some benches staggered around, outdoor restaurants spilling into the middle of the action, the Hermosa Pier at the end.

There was a street musician performing for tips and he wasn’t bad, he used recorded back up and sang high, and pretty sweet, kind of a modern take on doo-wop, and Chris and Ned grabbed a seat and listened.

Ned said, “I see what you’re saying. My character. He has to sustain it. His *act*.”

“Yeah,” Chris said, “now mind you, and I’ve seen it in some of the Donald Westlake books as well, that a minor character *could* present themselves better than you expected.”

“So don’t get locked in, you’re telling me then.”

“No, *do* get locked in to your *main* dude -- I mean that *final* scene you’re trying to come up with, it should be all about *him*, shouldn’t it? . . . His trials and tribulations having aired themselves out, in the scene *before*, and now you’re leaving the reader off, based on that resolution.”

“You’re bullshitting me. If you try repeating what you just said, it’ll come out different.”

“Fair enough,” Chris said. “But the *minor* character thing -- don’t fight it if it pops up, is all.”

“What would be an example, give me something.”

“Well . . . say you got this guy, he thinks his wife’s cheating on him. Not presently necessarily, but two years ago there was a party, and the wife and the other guy happen to disappear for a while.”

Ned said, “Where do they live, these people?”

“Come on, who cares? So the husband, he can’t get it out of his system, they’re shopping on Christmas Eve, he sees something that reminds him of the wife’s infidelity, triggers him bringing it up.”

“What’d he see?”

“How do *I* know, what difference does it make? Stop being so literal here . . . the bigger picture, Christmas comes and goes but the guy can’t take it, he finally gets up the gumption to confront the other dude.”

“The wife know about this?”

“Not sure. The point being, he does find the guy and confront him, the guy comes clean, doesn’t deny it . . . even throws in that he envies this first guy for having a lovely wife.”

“It would never happen that way,” Ned said.

Chris said, “Fine. Don’t write *yours* that way. But you ask me for an example . . . In this one, these two guys become friends. Little stiff at first, and eventually they go on a fishing trip together. Bond pretty good. The *cheater guy* ends up becoming more interesting to the readers than the *wife*. So the writer -- he lets the guy *go*, gives him free rein. Not letting him steal the *show*, of course, from the main guy. But right up there.”

“That’s not too bad,” Ned said. “What book is that from?”

“No real book. I made it up, just to address your question.” Though Chris was starting to think maybe I *didn’t* make it up, that I saw it unfold on one of those Lifetime made for TV movies.

They listened to the modern doo-wop guy a while longer, threw him a few bucks, and headed down the block to the pier.

Chris said, “So I hate to bring this up, perfect weather and all. I mean they couldn’t design it better for April.”

“You got *that* right,” Ned said, playfully punching Chris on the arm. “It took you 6 months to figure it out?”

“Why we *live* here you mean.”

“Unh-huh. We got the system beat. Mostly.”

“Yeah well. I see they still got snow up the wazoo in Buffalo.”

“Montreal even *worse*,” Ned said, “and how about Nebraska? Flooding out of their backside there, and it’s not even tornado season yet.”

“Just getting warmed up.”

“Yep,” Ned said. “So no need to bring up, what you don’t *want* to bring up.”

“And I wouldn’t ordinarily,” Chris said. “Except what’s next? What do we got?”

“Beats me,” Ned said. “Few minutes more, I’ll probably take a right, head back to the house. How about you? You still hit tennis balls with Chandler?” They were in fact crossing the Strand now, which *would* put Ned right back at the house, and meanwhile some intense 2-man volleyball was happening on the beach in front of them, mixed doubles this time.

“Do they work the woman, typically?” Chris said. “I never thought about that. That’s what they try to do in mixed doubles tennis.”

“Not as simple,” Ned said, “because you only get the three hits. By rule.”

They watched for a while and a couple of the players varied the serves with old-fashioned underhand jobs, except they were hitting moonballs, way up there, and you could tell when they came down they weren’t the easiest things to defend.

Chris said, “So what it *is*, we’re dancing around the concept . . . Aren’t we?”

Ned took a minute. “Ralph-wise, you mean?”

“That’s part of it. But you *know* what I mean. Which is why we both keep changing the subject.”

Ned took some more time. He said, “Chrissie, you’re a good man. You’ve proven it. I’d like to tell you I’m not going to forget it . . . Except I mixed you up in this.”

Chris took a second himself. “Not the point, either way. What I’m thinking -- I make a return visit to New York.”

Ned laughed, but it was more of a bad exhale than anything comical. He lowered his voice, even though it wasn’t necessary out here, and his tone was dead serious for the first time today. “And accomplish *what*, exactly.”

“I don’t *know*,” Chris said. “Just like, sweep out the *bullshit*. So we don’t have to entertain another Ralph.”

Ned smiled, but it was thin. “At least not before July or August, you’re saying?”

“Something like that. More like, keep it simple, let them know two can play the game.”

Ned focused on the volleyball again, turned back to Chris. “You should put this stuff in your book,” he said.

“I thought of it,” Chris said. “No one would believe *mine* though . . . How about yours?”

“So you’re saying,” Ned said, “the *Czech* guy, the reader already has to suspend belief? First *chapter*?”

“I think it’s suspend *dis*-belief, but no. They’re with you. Up to a point. So long as you don’t go off the deep end.”

“Keep it real, you’re saying, and the cream rises to the top?”

“Who do I see back there?” Chris said.

Chapter 8

Sigma Beach Middle School had a dedicated area in front, a circular patch off the parking lot with a flag pole and some tasteful flowers, and a plaque sitting flush in a manicured bit of grass.

Chris's first thought, getting out of the car, was oh no, there'd been an act of violence here . . . and he prayed first of all they weren't commemorating a school shooting he hadn't been aware of -- and that secondly they weren't honoring a law enforcement officer who lost his life here.

That would be unlikely, but he'd seen a similar designation someplace, he couldn't remember where, where a fallen officer was being remembered on the unfortunate spot where it happened.

Fortunately he read the plaque and it was neither of those things. The school in 2017 had renamed itself LJ Crank Middle School, after its beloved late-custodian, who on a daily basis exceeded the limits of his job description by leaps and bounds, it said.

It mentioned the guy's Alabama roots, being the grandson of slaves, and various hardships he endured, including polio as a child, and he recovered enough to play sports but was prohibited from playing on teams because of segregation -- and it was a feel-good story, with LJ honored by one of the wealthiest school districts in the state.

At that would be all good . . . except Chris noticed the lettering on the school itself still read *Sigma Beach MS* . . . so you sure hoped there was some justified logistical delay in getting the guy's name up there, and that they weren't honoring him in ceremony only but not where it counted.

There were two women in the office, one at a high counter and one at a desk, and Chris figured try the simple way first, and he said, “Good morning ladies. I’m here to see principal Haller please?”

The desk one looked younger and more naive and started to pick up the phone to call Haller (Chris had taken the time to look up the idiot’s name) but the counter one was more savvy and asked him if he had an appointment -- and what this was about.

He was tempted to throw out a name and pass himself off as a parent, like “Sure. I’m Bill Wheeler, it’s about my daughter Melissa” and that would have probably worked too with the desk gal, but not with the counter one, whose brow was starting to furrow more -- and it occurred to Chris for a moment, Holy Smokes, could she actually call the police, reporting a suspicious character?

So no, that was a bad plan, and you better adjust pretty quick, and thinking on the fly he said, “I’m the guy from the ACLPF commission? I spoke to Principal Haller in the past. On the issues with the plaque?”

“What *about* the plaque,” the counter gal said.

“There’s some news on that,” Chris said, “and we’re taking some heat from the media. It’s easier -- and frankly more appropriate -- that I speak to him directly. It’ll only take a few minutes, and then I can report back to the attorney.”

This time the counter gal walked around the corner, no buzzing someone on the phone, and a minute later came back with a fit-looking middle-aged guy in a snazzy blazer, who did look to have a bit of a hair weave, along with perfectly whitened teeth.

The guy extended his hand. “Phil,” he said.

“Bill,” Chris said, and that sounded kind of lame, he should have avoided the rhyming business but too late now.

Chris pointed with his head back to where Haller had come from, and it took a second for the principal to understand, and then he said, sure of course, and after *you* please.

Chris took a seat in there and the guy closed the door, and Chris said, “Where are we *at* with this? I’m all about a bottom line, and I’m busy, and I’m more than a *little* ticked off they sent me out here.”

“I’m sorry?” Phil said.

“The *NAACP* thing. They didn’t notify you?”

“Again I apologize, but no, I’m not following.”

“You let a teacher *go*, correct? For slinging around the N-word as part of a history lesson?”

“That’s true yes. But we were within our rights. Our district Counsel confirmed as much.”

“I see,” Chris said. “Except, you didn’t consult *nationally* evidently . . . Now we have a major problem . . . Are you tenured?”

“Am *I*?” Haller said, admittedly starting to look concerned. “Why of *course*.”

“Federal, state-wise or regionally?”

“Well certainly *California*-wise. That’s all that matters.”

“*Used* to be,” Chris said. “This little stunt you pulled -- not sure what the big deal was, why you needed to *go* there -- now we got the ACLU for once agreeing with the *NAACP and ACLPF* . . . I’m afraid we have a trifecta on our hands my friend. I do my best, these matters -- and the one in Kentucky worked *out* -- but I can only do so *much*.”

“Sheesh,” Haller said. “I had no *idea* . . . I mean, something can *happen*? As a result?”

Chris paused and rolled his eyes, trying for dramatic effect without overdoing it. “Put it *this* way. We’ve been harnessing the media, up to *this* point, on the story . . . Where we are -- pardon my language -- is one step away from all freaking hell breaking loose.”

There was a stack of blank paper on a shelf near the window, and Chris went over and got a piece and started taking notes, and drawing a few sweeping arrows as well, similar to how Dr. Moore did it.

“Well . . .” Haller said, and if this was a cartoon, sweat would be flying off his head like a sprinkler. “I’ll certainly need to consult with our Counsel again, ASAP it’s pretty clear.”

Chris held up his hand. “Don’t use any more abbreviations,” he said. “We’re all in enough hot water . . . Especially you, obviously, but *I’m* feeling your pain as well . . . You ever testified before an HPYOO committee?”

“No . . . I can’t say that I have.”

“You have to take my word for it,” Chris said. “That’s an experience that can rival prison . . . I can think of two or three off the top of my head, who testified and have never recovered.”

“Oh.”

“So you want to end *up* there -- sure, call your school district lawyer. Let him go to work running his mouth and filing papers like lawyers do. He did such a great job for you the *first* time . . . It’s not *his* ass in front of the HPYOO folks -- so who cares?”

Haller opened a desk drawer and there was some rattling around, and Holy Smokes, he had a bottle in there, or at least a flask -- and the son of a gun filled a plastic cup and took a healthy gulp.

The guy looked at Chris, embarrassed, but at the same time Chris wondered if he was going to offer him a drink as well -- which he would rarely seek out in the middle of the day, especially in the administrative office of a public school -- but wouldn’t have *minded* now either, with enough on his plate that this little stop really *was* the pain in the butt that he portrayed it to Haller as.

“I apologize,” Haller said, not offering that drink, but taking another good shot himself, draining the cup.

“Not at all,” Chris said. “My investigator and I, we put it together. Can you simply re-employ the teacher in question?”

“Likely not,” Haller said, and he was reaching around under the desk again, going for more beverage. “What I wish, is that I simply told those fucking parents where to go.”

The guy was doing better now, making more sense, and Chris figured why push the issue, them bringing Marlene back *here*, which *could* have built-in lingering issues -- just stick her somewhere *else*.

He said, “Phil, there’s a way out of this. Where we can effectively tell the ACLPF, and the HPYOO . . . and the New York Times and the Washington Post as well -- *all* of them -- effective where to go.”

“That’d be *good*,” Haller said. Kind of a giddy emphasis on the good now, but so be it.

“So all’s you do,” Chris said, “and start on this as soon as I’m out the door -- and don’t come *out* of your office or do anything else until it’s done -- all’s it is, you use your contacts, you work the phone, you get the teacher in question another job. Starting tomorrow morning.”

“Where?” Haller said.

“Anywhere. LA Unified, South Bay, even Long Beach. Just keep her out of the rough districts. No *South Central* for example . . . *You* know how to handle it.”

“I’ll get on it then, I *will*,” Haller said.

“Put her quietly back to work,” Chris said. “And thank *God*, we’ll be dodging a bullet.”

Chapter 9

Someone in Starbucks a couple days ago told Chris about a medical lab that seemed quick, and it was one of those typical retired MB guys in his 70's who were always lean and tan and fit, and looked like they could kick your ass in or out of the water in any sport you challenged them to.

The guy was friendly enough, though Chris was trying to get through a lengthy LA Times article on the changing face of Koreatown, which on the surface didn't sound that exciting but the writer was going a good job, had obviously put mounds of research into it, and the individual sub-stories were compelling.

But the guy wanted to talk so Chris conceded, and pretty soon the guy delved into his medical conditions, kind of surprising given that he'd probably been to Redondo and back already this morning on a workout . . . but the thrust being, he had diabetes now, on top of something else which Chris didn't want to process, and he sometimes needed to be tested quickly, and he'd tried all the labs, and the most efficient hands-down was in Gardena.

So on the way back from Sigma Beach Chris gave the place a call, on the off chance they did DNA, and the person said they didn't *used* to but they've *added* it . . . so Chris decided why not, and on Wilshire Boulevard he passed his favorite Thai place, hard not to stop, not being in Santa Monica all that often, and he regretted it when he got up around UCLA, but there was an Irish pub he knew, had been there forever, sandwiched between a dumb Blimpie's and a phone store . . . and man that draft Guinness hit the

spot, especially after watching the principal get semi-blitzed . . . and Chris felt a lot better and headed over there.

This time he was more organized too, than with the Hawthorne lab and resulting ultimate fiasco -- meaning now he was carrying around his fake ID, for situations like this, where even though you pay cash they still may need ID to release your sample *to you* -- which is of course what happened in Hawthorne, catching him totally off guard, though he got lucky, that part.

The fake driver's license had him as Jeff Masters. He'd grabbed it in the scramble out the door on the way to Bingham, and the license had never been required out there, a casino town where cash really *did* say it all, but he went by that name when people occasionally asked him, such as that nice group at the blackjack tables -- and frankly the name wasn't bad, he was starting to like it better than Chris Seely.

Then when he got back home after Bingham, he stupidly locked the fake license in his box at the bank, and he learned his lesson, you never know when you might require the thing -- and currently at the Gardena lab they were swabbing the inside of his cheek, and then someone tended to his paperwork and asked if tomorrow afternoon was okay, or did he want the *expedited* time frame, which would cost more.

Chris said tomorrow afternoon was fine, and *Jeeminy Christmas*, the Starbucks guy with the medical conditions was right, this seemed like a world record -- meaning you might as well get your rear end in gear, no point keeping the Mark hacker guy waiting any longer -- much less continue tempting fate.

That was another thing. Even though it killed him to do it, Chris felt an obligation to keep up on the latest in DNA solving old cases. Typically you could google *Cold Case DNA*, and every week there'd be at least a few developments, for example some 42-year-old case that everyone had given up on gets resurrected and solved on account of advances in testing -- but

especially in *familial matching* -- and that's what the retired northern California LE guy Paul Holes did with DeAngelo, the notorious Golden State Killer out of the 1970's.

Holes didn't figure it out himself, the method, it was done first in New Hampshire, but Holes was the first to make national headlines using it -- and since then the floodgates opened on jurisdictions re-working old cases.

The bottom line, Chris had relaxed to an extent, *his* stuff, because the time and resources were going into the *oldest* cases, not the current ones -- except last week in the paper he read this quote, and it unnerved him enough to save it.

"I think the agencies across the board are looking at cold case files and seeing where this might apply," he said. "There's now a trend toward active investigations. Why wait for a case to go cold? If you have an active offender, why wait for him to have another opportunity to offend?"

Chris wasn't sure who *he* was, that was speaking, or which case it pertained to, but the details didn't matter, did they . . . a highly unpleasant development -- a trend toward *active* investigations -- and you better get on this quick, once and for all.

So that was good, the lab part . . . you'll have your little thingamajig tomorrow, and you might as well leave this week, for up north, deliver it to Mark, let him go to town -- in fact you know what, might as well leave right from the *lab*, he was thinking -- especially now that he just re-read the damn *quote*.

Wow, there was always something to sweat out, wasn't there . . . and typically it had to do with timing.

What could you do?

It was 5:30 by the time he got back to the Cheater Five. He knew going in that it was going to take forever to nurse your way home from Gardena -- that going south and having to reverse yourself at rush hour was *one* thing, bad enough, but going south *and inland* and having to reverse yourself was something else *again*.

Meaning the whole day'd been kind of shot, one or two tasks, but the pool looked inviting and the temperature was just right -- you had to give them credit, they never overheated the thing . . . though that simply could have been Sharif trying to save money . . . but floating around in there did give you a tad bit of much-needed perspective.

Things could be worse. They always could, that was a given by now. One thing that bothered him, you'd be missing Finch's Friday night session -- which he fought himself to attend in the first place, but now was admittedly looking forward to . . . but even that maybe you could catch up with online.

One reason was to see what Holly came up with this time. You didn't want to say anything, but man, hers really was the weakest of the lot so far, wasn't it. She's this big journalist, supposedly, working on her own novel for years, she made it sound, talking MFA programs . . . and Chris was pretty sure Ned, and Rosie, and even Finch if he was honest -- and even Ralph too -- were shaking their head on that one, when the first session concluded.

Around 8 there was a knock on the door, and Marlene was standing there looking upset about something, and Chris welcomed her in.

He said, "I don't know if you realize it, but when you knock, it's always three times, with like a little staccato hesitation before the *third* one. You have a signature pattern."

"Oh well," she said.

"Tonight though, three right in a row, solid -- so I'm thinking something's off. Is it?"

“Do you still have that blender?” she said. “And any of that interesting booze?”

Ah, the blender, that had been from way back, the night he and Emma went to Big Wok and Ken was there too, at another table, and after dinner Emma re-directed things to Target *for* that blender and then to Ralphs for the liquor. Chris had rarely used it since the Emma thing fizzled out last fall.

Chris said, “That I do, yes. The *rums* and so forth, I’m not sure. One thing, the person who helped me pick ‘em out, sure took forever.” Which was true, Chris figuring *he’d* never tell the difference between brands but Emma pouring over each ingredient of about 20 labels, driving you a little crazy, honestly.

“Do you have any tequila, or no?” Marlene said, and before Chris could take a look she said, “*That’s* okay. Where I was going with it -- I was in Cabo once, and there’s so many varieties, you can get in big trouble just taste-testing.”

Chris had heard this somewhere as well, and meanwhile had a little something going in the blender, not really knowing what he was doing, but suspecting it wasn’t all that important, given that Marlene seemed funky tonight and likely wouldn’t notice the difference.

Chris dolloped out the final product, was going to have to fake-drink his, wasn’t up for it right now, and said, “So . . . your day. How’d that go?”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean,” Marlene said.

And oh boy. And Chris didn’t press it, and Marlene sat back, and after a while said, “Well, okay, something good.”

“Really?” Chris said.

“Yes. Well I walked into town, as you know I like to *do* most days.”

And that was a first, he didn’t know that, and he’d sure never bumped into her *doing* it, and in fact when he’d suggested it once, a while back, go

down and check out a skim board contest they had going on, a Saturday morning, she'd looked at him funny and said it was way too far.

Chris said, "So it was a positive, then? Your effort?"

"There was a little boy," she said, "and a puppy. You know Connie's Closet? That place?"

"I think I know where you mean," Chris said, "a couple doors down from the bikini shop, right? The corner of Highland."

The bikini shop of course being one of those unique-to-a-beach-town operations. The deal was, you had people already walking *around* in bikinis, going in there to check out *other* bikinis.

You were somewhat used to the atmosphere by now, the nonchalance of the locals toward the amounts of skin (male and female both) on display as a no-big-deal lifestyle -- but dang, some couple coming out here for a little R & R in the middle of winter, from say Rochester, Minnesota, would see it a little different.

Anyhow Marlene didn't acknowledge the place and continued. "They were eating ice creams, the boy and the parents and the sister. Hers started to topple off the cone and the mom and dad come to the rescue . . . but they lose focus on the puppy that the boy is holding at the moment . . . and I'm afraid the dog ran into the street."

"Are you torturing me here? Or did you save the day?"

"I did. I acted quickly. The puppy appeared to be on a mission, like on a scent, and he was moving every which way in the middle of the block -- and I say *puppy*, he was close to full-grown but young obviously, one of those labradoodles."

"No cars yet?" Chris said, needing a bottom line here pretty quick, Jeez.

"There was one double parked, coming up the hill, and he was letting people out, but there was a person behind him, who looked anxious, and the double parker appeared to be blocking the view of *that* person -- and I

was afraid that person any moment would rev the engine and come around right into the poor dog.”

“Come on.”

“So . . . I screamed at the top of my lungs: ‘Watch Out!’ . . . and the car in back didn’t seem to hear me honestly, I think he had music playing loud . . . but the dad did, and he pulled himself out of the ice cream business really fast and raced out there and scooped up the dog.”

Hmm. Chris thought he might have handled it differently, step out into the street right away yourself and just raise a hand to the back car like a traffic cop, *until* someone scoops up the dog -- or even just tell the *dad* right away, don’t watch it unfold *first* . . . but every circumstance was different he supposed.

“The main thing then,” he said, “and good for you, well done, everybody lives happily ever after.”

“They do,” Marlene said. “The bad part of my day, I found out I have to work tomorrow.”

Again, *hmm*.

“Work?” Chris said. “As in . . . what kind?”

Marlene looked at him like he was an idiot. “What *else* I have I done, in your experience?”

“You mean, like teach again? I thought they cut you loose.”

“This is something different,” she said. “I received a call from a vice-principal in Fullerton. They need someone to teach 7th and 8th grade Art and Health.”

“Like a sub then,” Chris said.

“No, the real thing. They’re hiring me for next fall, but they need me to start tomorrow, and finish off *this* semester as well.”

“Art and Health -- is that like its own subject rolled into one these days?”

“No. That’s the other thing, how am I supposed to teach art, I can’t even draw a cartoon face. And health, I don’t have a clue what that entails.”

She was actually crying a little bit, and wow, this sure wasn’t how you scripted it.

“Okay look,” Chris said. “Art, you figure out right away who the most talented kid is -- and you have *him* or *her* do all the demos, they love that . . . and Health -- whatever it actually is -- that’s a piece of cake, you stay a few pages ahead of the class in the textbook, and you got it covered.”

Marlene had some Kleenex going, but seemed to be processing it. “That simple, huh?”

“And let me see that smile,” Chris said, and he got right in her face, and gave her the dead pan stare until she broke into one.

“Not the end of the world,” he said. “Couple days under your belt, it’ll be like you didn’t miss a beat . . . The person who called you, they say anything else?”

“No. Just that she got a nice referral from my old district. Which is kind of shocking, since that guy was a true asshole, my principal. I apologize for putting it like that.”

“Well,” Chris said, “something I’m learning myself, people have more redeeming qualities than you might give them credit for on the surface.”

“Not *this* guy,” Marlene said.

“Anyhow,” Chris said, “no point over-thinking it. What time do you start?”

“That’s one *more* thing, they’re on the early schedule out there. 7:40.”

Chris moved closer to her on the couch, patted her knee, and said he was proud of her, that if you go with the flow -- which she did -- you tend to bob back to the surface just fine.

He was in the mood for a little more now, was hoping he could butter her up, but the compliments and knee business didn’t work at all, and she announced she had to be going, that she had so much to do to prepare, and

Chris noticed her wobbling slightly going out the door and he told her to take it easy on the stairs.

The night was still young, that was for sure, and Chris felt slightly discombobulated. That's what you get for trying to do what you assume -- without anticipating what the *other* person might assume -- is the right thing.

What else could you do, except head down to the Crow's Nest. Okay fine. If he *was* out of here himself tomorrow, which it was looking like was going to happen, he had some preparing to do too -- just like Marlene -- but forget her for *now*.

Ned must have been in between back-table consultations, because he was standing at the bar smiling about something with Cindy, someone else pointing to the TV and all three of them looking, so Chris did too and it was a ballgame, the Dodgers had traded another outfielder during the off-season and here he was tonight, first game returning to Chavez Ravine, and in his first at-bat he homers off Clayton Kershaw.

"Mixed emotions," Chris said. "The fans?"

"Hey Bud," Ned said, "good you dropped in."

"What," Chris said, "they cheered him when got in the batter's box, for old time's sake? But they booed him when he rounded the bases?"

"He's better off," Ned said, "and so are the Dodgers. Guy was always losing his temper."

"Ah. Bad for team chemistry then."

"Exactly, you can't have that, even if the guy *is* talented up the wazoo. You hear the one about the water?"

"No."

"He's out at third on a tag play. He comes back in, heads down to the clubhouse, is still mad about it . . . smashes his helmet against the wall, and

accidentally sets off the sprinkler alarm. The inning ends right then, and he goes back to left field soaking wet.”

“That’s pretty funny.”

“When they change sides again, the fire department is there, and he gulps and tells another guy to call his wife, figuring he’s getting arrested . . . Course he’s Dominican, you can see him thinking American laws are worse than they are.”

“Yeah,” Chris said, “you’d need more to really arrest someone . . . Speaking of which.”

“Jeannie,” Ned was saying, his hand on someone’s waist now, who apparently just showed up. “Meet my friend Chrissie. Have a drink. It’s all on me . . . Chris has some colorful stories. Ask him about when he tried to sell a piece of fake art on CraigsList.”

Chris was going to give Ned the look, but you didn’t bother at this point, and how could you fault the guy really, he did make this introduction, and Jeannie was young and certainly attractive enough, and she wasn’t saying no yet, to having a drink.

“Well,” Chris said, “I guess I could dredge that one up. We’d have to sit down though.” And that was no problem either, though Jeannie said she wouldn’t mind the chair against the wall, so she could keep an eye on the game.

“You ever play then?” Chris said. “Or your dad made you a fan, since he didn’t have a son.”

“Are you guessing?” she said.

“My cousin,” he said, “she’s like 45 now, my uncle’s dead and gone, but she’s still pleasing him anyway. Season tickets like 20 years in a row to the Miami Marlins.”

“They’re looking to move apparently. Attendance is terrible.”

“Gee. You do know your stuff . . . Is the ball juiced this year? I’m seeing more right handers hitting it out the opposite way, it sure looks.”

She nodded. "Tighter seams," and that made sense actually, though you didn't need to get into a further breakdown of the manufacturing process.

"So," Chris said. "What do you?"

"For real?"

"Sure. That, and for kicks too." Chris was surprised it just hit him, but Jeannie could certainly be out of Ned's stable -- meaning a porno actress participating in his ongoing activities at the Strand house.

"I'm a paralegal," she said. "I like to ride dirt bikes on the weekend. How about you?"

So maybe not . . . though you could juggle being a paralegal with 20-minute interactions, couldn't you? Chris said, "Do you know Ken? Chamberlain?"

"Oh I do," she said, no hesitation. "He's a sweet boy." *Boy*. The guy had to be 26 now, and Ken admittedly had a baby face, but she had to be that age herself, maybe even younger.

Chris said, "Well if you don't mind my asking, where *is* he? Currently."

"He was over there earlier," Jeannie said, pointing at the side wall that had the framed movie posters, but really pointing, you had to assume, in the direction of the house in question, a half mile down the Strand toward Hermosa.

"Oh," Chris said.

She said, "You didn't tell me what you do," Chris realizing she had asked, and always hated this, and he said, "I'm retired." Figuring slam the door on it clean.

"Now that's interesting," Jeannie said. "I started a 401k, I'm trying to set myself up as well -- 20-plus years away obviously -- but when my accountant projects it out, there'll be no way."

Chris had to agree with her, the normal routes probably weren't going to cut it these days. "So start your own business," he said.

"I'd love to," she said. "Except what would it be?"

"Something I'm on the lookout for myself. I mean, online stuff. Where ideally you don't have to go anywhere."

"You are preaching to the converted. But everything seems so saturated."

"Well," Chris said, "do you have any unique life experiences? That you could coach someone else on?"

"I never thought of coaching per se," Jeannie said. "That seems foreign to me."

"It does, until you start raking in the bucks. With Skype and so forth, you got a world wide victim pool out there . . . I see people giving music lessons that way, Skype yoga, the works. Of course I'm guessing the bigger money's in the direct *coaching*."

"You know you're *right*," she said. "People are willing to pay top dollar for self improvement."

"And like you say, yes, the life coaching stuff is saturated. Everyone and his brother can call himself one of those. No training required . . . But if you have something unique . . . that you're coaching them *in* . . . then the field's wide open."

Jeannie was nodding absent-mindedly and you could see she was chewing on the concept. Without bringing it up, Chris of course was framing it in terms of the porno business -- that there'd be more than enough clients out there to sustain a one-on-one Skype business, where your *coaching* consisted of answering their questions about the industry, telling a few stories, the sky sort of being the limit in terms of imagination.

Jeannie said, "This may be the jump-start I need, honestly. My routine, it's become a bit stale."

“Well,” Chris said, the gin and tonic he shouldn’t have ordered kicking in, “my door’s always open, you want to brainstorm. I’ll warn you, I’m not great on the internet, the subtleties.”

“But you’re a thinking man, that’s more important,” she said, and she took out her phone and asked Chris for his information and he dutifully dictated it.

“Well then,” a fairly substantial male voice bellowed, “what do we got, old reunion nite, it looks to be.”

“Oh hi Austin,” Jeannie said, and she angled her mouth just right and Austin planted a legitimate looking lingering wet kiss on her lips. “This is . . . *I’m* sorry.”

“*Chris*,” Chris said. “Didn’t you just type it in though?” Once again he was sticking in the needle for no reason, other than to see what might happen . . . and wouldn’t Dr. Moore call that destructive behavior? He made a mental note to ask her next time.

“Would appreciate,” Austin said, sitting down with them, “you addressing the lady, with less of an edge. We good?” And Austin laid a tough guy stare on him, and part of Chris was tempted to go in back and get a baseball bat or something . . . there *had* in fact been one leaning up in there when he and Ned had their little meeting that time.

Of course this would be way out of character for Chris -- you didn’t let personal insults set you off -- except it felt like enough was *enough* lately . . . or maybe it was just the booze.

But he kept his cool and asked Austin how *his* day was, and the guy lightened up a fraction . . . and something happened in the Dodger game, and they all three commented on it . . . and Jeannie re-told Austin Chris’s story about the player who got traded, and how last season he set the sprinkler system off on himself.

“That’s a good one,” Austin said. “Where’d you hear *that* at?”

“The LA Times had a big spread on the guy over over the weekend. Reporter did his homework, interviewed a dozen people, easy.”

Austin nodded and said, “I love true sports books. There’s less of ‘em now though.”

“There are,” Chris said. “I’m guessing on account of the players all being millionaires. They don’t need the income.”

“They don’t need to be spilling locker room secrets anymore, either. No upside to that.”

This was true, and this Austin guy wasn’t bad, he was on the ball. Chris said, “This is gonna date me, but have you ever read *Ball Four*?”

“I have not, and it’s been on my bucket list. I keep putting it off, because it’s all so far back.”

Chris said, “Different era on the surface, yeah. Guys had to sell insurance during the off-season to make ends meet . . . But the concepts are the same. The guy sits in the bullpen all season, doesn’t get into many games, but keeps this amazing diary. Plenty of provocative insights.”

“What team?”

“The Seattle Pilots. Brand new expansion team, their first year. That added an interesting dynamic as well, everyone trying to figure stuff out for the first time. Of course that’s not the current *Mariners*, the Pilots moved, didn’t last too long in Seattle.”

“Where to?”

“Jeez . . . you got me there,” Chris said, and Austin asked Jeannie to look it up, and she announced, “Milwaukee Brewers, it says.”

“No *way* I would have come up with that, if it was like a Final Jeopardy question,” Chris said, “though it makes sense I guess, the Braves in Atlanta by then.”

“Okay, well you got me roped in, on the book,” Austin said. “What do you do, if I might ask? Something in sports?”

Jeannie spoke up. “Babe we’ve been all through this, before you came. I’ll fill you in. Let’s don’t go over it twice.”

Austin gave *her* a look now. “J,” he said, “how ‘bout letting my *man* answer, does he mind going over it *twice* . . .”

“He’s such an asshole,” Jeannie was saying directly to Chris now.

“You see what I have to put up with?” Austin said, *also* directing it at Chris.

“So, you want to play games, is that it?” Jeannie said to Austin. “Where were you at 7? When you said you were picking me up?”

“Never *said* that Babe . . . I said I’d make an *effort*.” Austin was starting to talk through clenched teeth.

“That’s not what Sue told me,” she said. “Not even close.”

“Sue,” Austin said, getting more exasperated, “has no idea what I’m up against . . . She should try it some time. So should you.” And he gave Chris another look, like you believe this shit?

Chris said he’d be right back and he picked up his drink and pointed to the game, that Justin Turner just cleared the bases with a triple, and the Dodgers re-took the lead.

He headed over to Ned’s corner table and took a look back, and Austin and Jeannie’s eyes were big all around, and they were both using their hands as they spoke, and Chris trying to divert them to the TV game didn’t work at all.

Chris said to Ned, “She didn’t fall for your set-up, the fake Craigslist deal when you introduced us -- or she forgot about it -- either way, thanks for sticking me in the middle of something.”

Ned laughed. “She’s available, if that’s where you’re going. Don’t let Austin throw you off, he’s a big pussy cat at heart.”

“I got mixed signals, let’s leave it at that . . . Listen, reason I came down . . . I’m taking off tomorrow.”

Ned seemed genuinely surprised. “Come again?”

“What we talked about. After needing that hour to dance around to it, only to bury it again . . . But yeah.”

“No,” Ned said. “No good.”

Chris said, “You figure it out, you can reach me, the next week or so. After that I’m not sure, I may have to ditch my phone.”

“Why would *that* be?” Ned said, and Chris realized he was confused *himself*, this out-of-state stuff, between being on the run not *wanting* to be found . . . and the flip side, him finding someone (hopefully) who didn’t know he was *being* found.

There wasn’t anything left to say tonight, either one of them . . . and Chris polished off his drink and waved a thanks to Cindy, and he noticed Austin and Jeannie still going at it, and he gave them a wide berth as he headed out the door.

Chapter 10

He'd given Mark a heads-up that he was coming, and you could hear Mark reacting like yeah sure . . . since fine, Chris had flaked out on him the last few times -- but Chris could also sense Mark was up for the challenge, and he told him short of getting crushed by a log truck on the way up there, he'd see him sometime tonight.

Chris asked about Mel, Mark's dog, who he'd had a nice encounter with that one time, and Mark said he was good, but that you don't typically have to worry about log trucks coming up from LA, that was more up around Eureka, where *that* came into play.

"I knew that," Chris said. "I was making a general comment. Trying to emphasize, I'm good this time. I won't lose the zip file in a fast food place on the way up, either."

"Being *good*," Mark said, "that could be up for interpretation. Let's see how it plays out before we start popping the champagne corks."

"Agreed," Chris said, and Mark was handling it like a professional. No rosy predictions.

Now that they were going to find out for sure -- what the cops would discover if they ran they Chris's DNA (currently Jeff Masters by the Gardena lab) the same way . . . the cops not knowing of course *whose* DNA it was, and that was the whole point -- but now that it was a reality, Chris was nervous.

What if there were a ton of relatives deep in his family tree, who watched late night TV and said this sounds good and did their spit-in-a-cup due diligence and sent it off to Ancestry.com?

Taking it a step further -- Jeez, what if even Bonnie or Floyd got curious where the Seelys came from, way back in Neanderthal times, and *they* participated?

Traffic slowed down like it always did around Harris Ranch, halfway there, and Chris thought of the old John Madden line again: worrying about something (or even multiple things) that you can't control is a waste of time . . . and what the hay, he got in the right lane and exited, and took his time and sat down to a real steak dinner.

And it wasn't cheap. You were talking 38 bucks for a 14 ounce rib eye, but man it was good, just perfect, and he noticed an older couple splitting one, which they were certainly entitled to do, but it reminded him of a story . . . and the couple finished before he did and left, and Chris told the story to the waiter, a young Hispanic kid who probably had better things to do, but polite enough to stand there and listen.

Chris said, "I was in Chico one time -- not sure if you know it, but it doesn't matter. They have a famous steakhouse there -- one room, brick walls, about 12 tables, you need way advance reservations. But I'm passing by, looking in the window, checking the menu, and this guy's heading in with his wife, and she says *hey, they can split a steak*, like it's a revelation . . . The guy stops walking, turns to her real slow, puts his hands on his hips and says: I don't bust my tail -- getting up at 5 in the morning -- walking a half mile to the bus -- take that to work -- walk four blocks the other *end* -- sit in a cubicle all day wrenching my brain -- then reverse the whole thing back home the *other* way . . . to split a steak."

The waiter smiled and nodded and moved on, and Chris was pretty sure it didn't register the way it did with him, but it was fun to tell.

"Hey," Mark said.

They shook hands and right away Mel was saying hello too, and Chris had to bend down and take care of that . . . and this was the beautiful thing

about dogs, they always acted like they remembered you, even if they didn't.

"I suggested it last time," Mark said. "Get one. Or have you by now?"

Chris said he hadn't, and he almost volunteered to house sit for Mark if he ever required it, but they were going off topic and Chris handed over the plastic thing from the lab. "What do they call these again? USB sticks?"

"Yeah, or memory sticks."

"There's another term though, isn't there?"

"I don't know, a flash drive? Listen, we got bigger problems than naming the thing."

Mark explained that when he was convinced Chris was coming, he got started setting up the account, and there'd been an unexpected issue, and he didn't want to complete the set up to where it could come back to bite them . . . and Chris had no idea what this meant, and told Mark that was understandable and thanks again -- and what Chris was getting at now, was yeah, please don't fuck this up by jumping the gun.

Mark said he'd need to get a hold of someone, research it a bit . . . and how soon did Chris need this . . . and Chris said, a little more directly now, that he didn't need this at *all*, if it's not going to *work*.

He felt bad blurting it out like that, but Mark understood, and said, "Don't worry. Getting out of these jams, that's what I *live* for," and he let Chris out, and back in the car Chris was thinking these tech nerds, you need 'em, you appreciate 'em -- but do they have to turn it into a game?

Gloria said, "If I said I'm glad you called, would you term that an understatement?"

"Huh?" Chris said.

"Where are you?" she said.

"Uh let's see . . . Franklin and Bush . . . meaning the left turn on Lombard. Didn't they used to synchronize the lights on Franklin?"

“I believe so. And the inverse, Gough as well, going south. Why do you ask?”

And he didn't want to be a bore and complain about traffic yet again, but without mentioning it, at the next intersection he turned left on Pine and got out of this mess. “Forget *me*,” Chris said. “What's happening on your end?”

“Can we be a bit more exact,” Gloria said. “How long are you in town, and where is your destination, currently?”

“You know, the usual motel row . . . which I why I called you, maybe you want to meet in the Marina, grab a late bite.”

“Okay, stop what you're doing,” she said. “Get off Franklin, take anything westbound to California and Cherry, and you know exactly where I am from there.”

She had her no-nonsense authoritative hat on, the same as when Chris first got to know her (if high school itself doesn't count) at the 25th reunion -- and the woman couldn't have been more gracious that weekend, and and some others later where Chris leeches off her as well.

The point being, the past few times he'd had to be in San Francisco he didn't contact her at all, on purpose, because she doesn't take no for an answer re the accommodations, and it was getting embarrassing -- but Chris's experience last time at the Lombard motel -- when he was looking for Ken in Bolinas -- was so unpleasant that he hoped she'd pick up tonight before he got back to one of those places and had to check in again.

“Really?” he said now, and she gave him some sarcastic line, an *is water wet* type thing, and she was waiting for him out front on Jackson when he pulled up.

The big hug, showing him to his room, the covers turned back just so, like a 5-star resort, then the coffee brewing in the kitchen, the French pastries brought out and warmed up just right, and Gloria finishing it off by assuring Chris there'll be no one else around to worry about.

“My daughter,” she said. “It’s gotten worse. We can’t exist in the same room for more than 5 minutes. My ex -- for the sanity of everyone -- offered to take her full-time . . . and that’s essentially where we are.”

Gloria was one of those glass-always-half-full folks, and her positive vibes did rub off, Chris driving back to LA more than once deciding he needed to be more that way too, and what was his problem . . . but Geez, estranged from your own daughter, that had to be tough.

“Don’t mind me if I’m butting in on that one,” Chris said, “and of course never having been there myself . . .”

“I get that all the time, from my friends,” she said. “It’s not what you think. I sleep fine. There’s no guilt, no emptiness. It’s surprising, I know, and overly simple . . . but she truly is, a little bitch.”

Gloria had made a comment like this before, not sure on which visit, and Chris had assumed the sentiment was temporary, and would blow over in a day or two -- but, wow, obviously not.

He laughed though, he couldn’t help it, it was her unlikely outburst . . . and Gloria stared at him for a moment and then began laughing herself.

“How old is she again?” Chris said.

“16. And counting.”

“Okay. But the way you’re portraying her, your relationship, it’s almost like 2 sisters going at it.”

“Fighting over the same guy, you mean? It’s funny you mention that, because my sister and I, that *did* happen.”

“Really? She was at Lowell too?”

“She sure was. We were a year and a half apart, but the way the schools worked it, she was only a grade behind me.”

“Wow,” Chris said, trying to wrack his brain, was there another Johansen that he knew back then, and somehow didn’t connect to her being Gloria’s sister?

“Sigrid,” Gloria said, following along, what Chris was thinking. “Ring any bells?”

“Can’t say it does. What’s she doing now?”

“Three kids. Lives in Alaska. Works at an Enterprise auto counter. She’s unhappy.”

Chris flashed on a party one time, someone’s house in St Francis Woods, and son of gun, there *was* a Sigrid there -- and maybe Chris never connected the last names or was oblivious like you tended to be back then -- but *that* Sigrid was a very hot number.

“Well,” Chris said, “if she’s unhappy why not come back to the Bay Area?”

“It’s complicated,” Gloria said, and what else was new, and Chris asked about that guy Steve, who Gloria got together with on the reunion weekend.

“He’s in Georgia,” she said.

“That I did remember. But you guys were having a good time. No return connections?”

“No. By the end of the weekend Chris, I believe you liked him better than I did.” She was smiling, so it wasn’t a sore spot. Chris said, “He wasn’t bad. Something happened in freshmen football, some guy making fun of me because my cleats were too big, kept coming off during practice until I added a second pair of socks -- but Steve sided with the guy, came up with a couple juicy remarks of his own.”

Gloria said, “Until 25 years later.”

“Yeah, you do hold dumb grudges. At least I do. That’s how it started off with Steve in your backyard . . . I’m waiting for the old incident to surface. But he’s kind of a philosopher back there, talking about weather patterns, and the wildfires up north, and different parts of the country he wouldn’t mind living -- a few ups and downs he’s had career-wise, *honest*

about those -- and by the end of the evening I'm inviting the sucker to come out and stay with me in Manhattan Beach."

"Has he?"

"Nah, I haven't followed up. He seemed interested, both the lifestyle and the fact that I don't really do anything."

"That's amusing," she said.

"What I didn't tell him -- actually I tried to, but he dismissed it -- is doing nothing is over-rated . . . and not necessarily that easy. The lifestyle part, yes I'll agree with him there."

"What ever happened to your date lady," Gloria said, "at the function?"

Gloria was polite enough not to dig in, directly, but you could tell she was having fun.

The scenario once again being Emma disappearing with that other guy -- Chris couldn't even remember his name now -- right off the middle of the dance floor, prime time, an hour to go before they cut the huge cake and called people up and made all these announcements and presented awards.

Chris said, "I'm glad I gave you and your friends something to laugh about on a rainy day."

"You did," she said. "We won't deny it. That was a first . . . And you handled it with good humor, I must say." And she was chuckling again herself, which was starting to get a bit obnoxious, but Chris knew there were certain occurrences that never did get old, and he could think of a couple himself.

"To address your question though," he said, "I lost touch with Emma after that night . . . but I did hear through the grapevine that she had an issue with her ex-husband, and may have been forced into hiding."

Gloria wasn't laughing now and her mouth was slightly open. "Are you pulling my leg? . . . My God, you're not, are you."

“No. I don’t mean like hiding, as in changing your identity, or moving to a different state without telling anyone.” Which is of course exactly what he *did* mean. “But just, I don’t know. They’ll probably resolve it through mediation, these things take time.”

Gloria seemed relieved, and said, “Well how’s Ken?”

And Chris had to remind himself that Gloria did get to know Ken, when she hosted them both on that Zodiac hunt . . . and there were a few things you were going to leave out of your answer at this point -- namely that he’d become somewhat of a porn star, and he was a wanted man after the Emma-husband deal . . . and who knows what the real verdict is, even now.

“He’s fine,” Chris said. “Good solid kid, doing his thing.”

“Wonderful values on that young man,” Gloria said. “I inquired about his upbringing and he conceded that it was a bit difficult, that he was raised by an aunt and uncle.”

Ken had told Chris he was raised by his grandmother, and ooh boy . . . but no point, *nothing* quite added up anymore, not just with Kenny, but period . . . did it?

“So,” Chris said, looking at his watch. “We can do something, if you like. You’re not going to bring up the Latin dancing place though, don’t hit me with that one.”

“Well they *are* open until 2, at least,” she said, playfull. “Unless you have a better suggestion?” And okay fine . . . you had to go along, the woman was taking care of you after all, and at least you could park on Columbus Avenue at this hour.

“I’m going to need one more day,” Mark said. They were on the phone.

“We’ve been over this,” Chris said, “take all the time you need.” *That* he didn’t mean, necessarily, with the trip back east dangling on his plate . . .

but the last thing you wanted was the guy feeling like you're looking over his shoulder.

But Mark was a little further along than Chris expected. He said, "Do you know a Frances Fergusson in Iowa City?"

"Huh?" Chris said.

"That's one of them. Your relatives. How a Michael Justice in Pensacola, Florida?"

"Never heard of 'em," Chris said. "You sure you're doing this right?"

"So far, yep, I'm pretty confident . . . Got your profile to run, finally, had to run our little snag by Vladamir."

Chris assumed this would be the consultant Mark referenced, when he was having trouble in the beginning . . . and that was just to get *in* there, correct?

"Lot of progress then, last 12 hours it sounds like," Chris said. Now that it was actually happening, Chris was thrown off by the cold reality of there *being* relatives in there -- but what did he expect, that's why you were doing this . . . But still, Fuck.

"For sure," Mark said. "Let's see . . . Pat (Patricia) Sindegard? It says Wheeling, West Virginia? . . . Bear in mind now, these listings, they show you where the individual was born."

"Oh," Chris said, and Jeez, what was the difference.

"There's a an optional box they can check though," Mark said, clearly in the groove and excited about the whole thing. "In those cases, they list where they live currently . . . Or at least where they did live when they submitted their DNA."

"Well whooppee," Chris said.

There was a pause. "Okay I get where you're coming from. Don't worry. If my approach (our approach) is on the money -- and I'll know soon enough -- we'll be wiping the slate clean of these folks." Mark said to check back tomorrow, and mentioned some *before and after* work, and Chris

knew what he probably meant, and let's not complicate this thing with unnecessary demonstrations -- but of course you didn't tell Mark that, you gave him a big old thanks and prayed for the best.

Chapter 11

“Listen,” Chris said to Gloria, “you doing anything special today?”

They were in the kitchen, Chris had come down after calling Mark, and she had griddle working, the middle of the stove, and hot cakes on there, and naturally with Gloria they weren’t your run of the mill Bisquick flapjacks.

“*Un*-believable,” Chris said, stuffing in the first bite after saturating the beauties with both the real Vermont maple syrup she brought out, as well an incredible blackberry jam from somewhere.

“Oh you *always* say that,” she said. “You’re my best fan.”

“And I’m betting you always say *that*,” Chris said, “because *whatever* you concoct -- unless the guest in question was born *tastebud*-less -- is going to leave them dripping in a state of orgiastic delight.”

Ooh. Ouch. Not only did that come out wrong -- he meant orgasmic, didn’t he, not quite sure what the other word even meant -- but why use any analogy remotely in the ballpark?

Chris remembered his dad once, at a dinner party, making a comment like that to an attractive guest, who lived down the block and was pretty tight with his mom, and who had gone through about five husbands.

His dad’s reference point wasn’t food, it was literature, and everyone had loosened up by now and his dad was quoting the woman a passage from Dostoevsky . . . Maybe that *wasn’t* it, the literature part, maybe his dad was relating *another* experience he liked to bring up, an archaeology trip he’d been a part of before Chris was born, where they visited one of the Egyptian collections . . . either way, there was the ‘orgasms of delight’ summation.

In the dinner party case, Chris wondered if his dad was making it with the woman, or might have in the future -- and she was one of those society people who attended the opening night of the opera in full formal get-up, but otherwise wore awfully tight skirts and could swing the heck out of her hips when she walked.

Since if you weren't trying to subliminally lead someone *on*, why would you, in the middle of a stack of pancakes, angle your reaction like that?

Gloria did seem a bit lost for words, and Chris said, "That popped out. Terrible faux pas, on my part. Very sorry about that."

"So you're not trying to seduce me?" she said.

"Wasn't planning on it, no."

"I'm glad then . . . I mean, in a next lifetime, who knows."

And they left it at that, and Gloria refilled and re-stacked everything, and Chris said he's going to have to walk about 20 miles to work this off . . . and the semi-serious moment had passed, and they were back joking around . . . and you really did need the Glorias of the world, didn't you, where stuff didn't invariably have to lead to *other* stuff . . . and where if *that* didn't work, you'd something screwed *up*.

"At any rate," Chris said, "what I was starting you off with there, would you want to come with me and visit an old teacher?"

"Which school?" she said, and yeah, he was forgetting obviously he could mean someone from high school, Lowell, who they both knew.

"No, this is Marina we're talking."

"Middle school?"

"If you need to. We still called it junior high. Much stronger."

"Who's your teacher?"

"Mr. Gullickson. PE. Very tough customer, would probably be in jail today, or least bankrupt from all the lawsuits. I mean if you weren't paying attention, he'd physically smack you. He's not doing well, I heard."

“Where did you hear this?”

“Gee. You’re giving me the 3rd degree . . . From one of those dumb Facebook groups I don’t like admitting to being in, something like We went to junior high school in San Francisco.

“I’ve seen that one. We have our own though, Giannini. Our alumni class is pretty organized.”

“What a surprise . . . This guy lives in Walnut Creek, Mr. Gullickson.”

“And you’re saying he’s in ill health now? And you had a fond relationship with him?”

“Are you kidding?” Chris said. “Like I was getting to, he kicked our asses for three years.”

Gloria thought about this. “So you want to resolve things,” she said.

“One more thing about my dad,” Chris said, easing the Chevy Malibu off 680 onto Ygnacio Valley Road, “he said when he was a kid, my grandparents brought them over here a few times on a Sunday, and they swam in the creek.”

Of course there was no sign of any creek now, or walnut orchards either, what that darn town was named after . . . the dummkopfs on these planning boards, in Chris’s opinion, cheerleading every move that could transform the town into as faceless a one as possible. You had 10-story steel and glass buildings sitting where any chance for a walnut or a creek were buried long ago. Even now, there’d been a couple of huge cranes doing something, a block off the exit.

“You sure about that time frame, your dad?” Gloria said, and admittedly Chris was not, maybe it was too late already if his dad was a kid in the ‘40s, but the story had a little pop to it.

A couple miles east they came up on a huge medical complex and Gloria looked at Chris and he shook his head, like don’t worry I’m not dragging you into one of these places today.

You hit a T at the base of the hills and turned right into a residential neighborhood that had seen better days, but was still pleasant enough. The houses were early tracts, late 50's early 60's you would guess, and many of them looked like 2 bedroom jobs, with one-car garages sticking off the front, the type of situation where a lot of folks convert the thing into another room.

There were some though, that had been spiffed up, and another story had been added, and you figured that trend was going to continue, as tech firms were vacating San Jose and moving out this way where the rents were cheaper, for now.

Mr. Gullickson's house wasn't one of the new variety. Yes the outside had been painted in the last 20 years and the roof had been maintained, but that may have been it. Everything looked pretty dang original, including the windows with those metal awnings hanging over them that you'd see in the old days in real hot places like Modesto.

Chris was thinking here goes nothing, and they rang the bell, and a very pleasant woman greeted them. She was no spring chicken herself, probably as old as Gullickson, but she had a youthful spirit and still moved pretty smooth.

"I'm Christian," he said, a little embarrassed by the name the last few years and he'd sort of buried it, but that's what he was back in junior high. And he introduced Gloria, and the woman (Dolly) said, "It's very thoughtful of you to come . . . He has his good days and bad days, naturally." And she ushered them in.

You expected it, but it was tough to take anyway, Mr. Gullickson looking so diminished. He'd been a towering figure back then, was supposedly in the San Francisco high school sports hall of fame, and he'd played college basketball somewhere too. Chris was placing it . . . if he was 12, 13 back then, and Mr. Gullickson was in his 50's, which seemed about right, that'd put him mid-80s now. He was sitting on the couch watching a

sporting event, Jeez, it looked like an English soccer match, the sound up pretty loud, and he was eating a sandwich on a folding TV table. He had on slippers and a robe, never the greatest sign in the middle of the day.

“Hello sir,” Chris said. “You probably don’t remember me, but I was telling Gloria here on the way over,” (which he’d meant to but had forgotten) “how you used to challenge the whole class with those shots from half court.”

This razed a bit of a smile out of Gullickson, and he was looking Gloria over, not worrying about Chris, but fair enough, maybe the guy was trying to place her, thinking he might have taught *her* one time too. Though Chris realized that back then male PE teachers didn’t teach any girls.

“Ronald was always proud of those mid court shots,” Dolly, the wife was saying. “Weren’t you dear?”

“Never missed one I guess,” Gullickson mumbled.

“Before we get to that,” Chris said, “I have to ask you -- you always hated soccer. You made us play it for punishment.”

“I still do,” Gullickson said. “But my grandkids play. I have to join the fun.”

“Anyways,” Chris said to Gloria and then the others, “yeah, on rainy days we’d be stuck in the gym. All three years, there was one day, same scenario. You’d grab a ball, announce if you missed from half court, you’d buy the whole class milkshakes . . . But if you made it, we’d have to run Funston . . . you gave us the option, up front.”

“Course I did,” he said. “That was the fun of it.”

“Meaning, you asked for a show of hands, who was in, on the bet. We all went for it every time, except maybe a couple kids who were in the chess club or something, where a milkshake wasn’t worth the risk of having to run. Unlikely as it would be.”

“How’d I do?” Gullickson said.

“Well, like I’m building up to sir . . . son of a gun, but you drained the shot, all three years.”

This got a laugh out of the old man, though it was a slightly aggressive one, and the truth was he did hit the shots the first two years, but the third year’s one clunked off the front rim. And Gullickson had been good to his word, sort of, with the rewards that time, though he sent a couple kids to the soft serve place around the corner and had them come back with cones, and not shakes.

“I must say,” Gloria said, “we never had anything like *that* happen, at *our* school.”

“Which one?” Gullickson said.

“Giannini, in the Sunset.”

“I started off there,” he said. “Marina was a better fit.”

“Interesting,” Gloria said, “how so?”

You didn’t necessarily want him to get started with this, and odds were it boiled down to his discipline style enjoying more free rein at Marina . . . and anyhow Chris figured he should bring up the one thing that had been bugging for 30 years, before Mr. Gullickson suddenly faded and had to take a nap.

“Sir,” Chris said, “I’m wondering if you really *remember* me. There was a baseball game against Denman. Playoff game. Jeb Caruso and Matt Fliker and Dave Horn were on that team too. You remember *those* guys, right?”

Gullickson was squinting at Chris now, and you couldn’t tell if this was good or bad . . . but Chris went forward with it.

“I was playing second, they had one guy on, their final at-bat, we were up by two runs. I make the play, I go wide and backhand it which wasn’t routine . . . but the throw to first, it kinda slipped . . . You might remember, it pulled Caruso off the bag for a second, and then he stomped around trying to find it, and wasn’t able to, and the guy was safe.”

Gullikson was squinting worse, if that was possible. He said, "Yep. We get that one, there's two down, we nurse it home. Instead of the flood gates opening."

"Yeah, well," Chris said.

Mr. Gullickson did start to stand up now, though he couldn't quite make it on his own, and Dolly helped him. He said to Chris, "Fuck you bring *that* up for?"

Chris didn't have a good answer, and it did seem like time to leave, and Gullickson was working his walker, you saw the back of him heading down the hall and disappearing, and Gloria and Dolly embraced, and Dolly thanked them so much for coming.

Gloria waited a while, until they were on 24 and passing Lafayette on the left, and she said, "What *did* you bring that up for?"

Chris drove a little longer before addressing it. "No good reason."

"Except that," she said, "you were hoping he had let it go."

"I guess either *that*," he said, "or was senile enough where he didn't even remember coaching baseball."

"You're trying to make a joke, the senility -- but there's truth to it. Correct?"

"You carry stuff around," Chris said, a little catch in his throat, which he hadn't expected.

Gloria reached over to him. "I admire you for trying," she said.

Chapter 12

Mark said, “I made a list.”

He was showered and shaved and everything smelled relatively fresh in the apartment. Which it didn’t always, especially when Mark was struggling with something. So this was a good sign.

“We’re in business,” Mark announced. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have had you come.”

“Gee,” Chris said. “Great news . . . I think. But you wouldn’t have had me come anyway? I mean I owe you, regardless.”

“I would have had you send a check then. I have my pride, don’t forget.”

Chris said he understood, and Mark opened a folder and there was a left and right page clipped to the inside, pretty organized actually, and there were a bunch of names on the left sheet and none on the right, only the heading there: **Chris’s Family Tree**.

“This is weird,” Chris said. “You got family tree on the blank one, and the one with the names, you got nothing up top.”

“Stop nitpicking,” Mark said. “See what you think.”

And there were about 15 names on that left sheet, with other information attached. Chris said, “I feel like I’m in the twilight zone here. I’m assuming . . . these folks are all *related* to me?”

“5th cousins and better,” Mark said proudly. “Keep in mind, we’re talking nearly a million genetic markers in play, with the autosomal technology.”

“Oh.”

“As compared to the old method -- still in play in most police crime labs, where they’re limited to about 12.”

Chris thought he understood the concept, originally, and didn’t want to get confused with extra information, but now he might be.

“If you could cut me to the chase,” he said.

“Fine. I hacked ‘em out. That what the right sheet represents.”

“Meaning . . . I have no family members left, in the Gedmatch database, you’re saying? . . . Holy Toledo, that’s a miracle!”

And he felt like hugging Mark or something, but he stopped short . . . but man, all that worry . . . since at least Eclipse, Arizona -- actually probably way before that.

“Well I’m glad you’re satisfied,” Mark said. “That’s *my* reward.”

“What it was,” Chris said, “I was reading all these articles, how they captured the Golden State Killer, and I was blown away, like *any* doofus true crime buff, from the cheap seats.”

“Until it dawned on you, they might apply it *your* direction,” Mark said.

“Yeah. A wake-up call for sure . . . I don’t know what to say, man . . . I can start living like a normal fellow again.”

“I hear you,” Mark said. “Course the way I’m following it, they’re going after the cold stuff first, putting the resources in the major ones that have been stewing on their plate.”

“Frustrating them,” Chris said. “That’s what I was kind of thinking too. But you can’t be too safe.”

“That’s for sure,” Mark said. And Chris didn’t mention the most recent article he’d read -- no point throwing that in -- but where some police figure is telling you exactly the opposite -- that they *are* starting to apply to technology to the newer cases.

“So what do we got,” Chris said, picking up the folder and scrutinizing that left column.

“I’m stating the obvious,” Mark said. “But this is only a fraction of your complete family tree. But these are the ones that count, who were curious enough to do the Ancestry.com or 23andme thing.”

“So just so I have it straight, one more time,” Chris said. “If someone -- like law enforcement -- happened to run across some DNA -- and they didn’t know whose it was, and they wanted to find out, so they run it through, just like *you* did -- and for whatever hypothetical reason the DNA happens to be mine . . . bottom line, they won’t be able to figure that out now?”

“You’re a little long-winded there -- but correct. They get the *right* sheet. That’s it . . . They get *stuffed*, like in basketball . . . I had on the Celtics-Pacers, first round playoff . . . a guy drives the lane, goes up for the dunk, some other guy comes flying out of nowhere and blocks it. It’s normally the surest play in sports, and the dude comes away stuffed. The guy *stuffed* the *dunk*.”

“Okay take it easy, whatever. My deal, there’s still technically a family tree *in* there, right? But the cops, or such, they don’t *see* it. Because none of those people, remaining, they didn’t submit any DNA -- so there’s nothing left for mine to *match* to?”

“Correct. In fact, you got a *big* old family tree, were you aware of that?”

Chris said he wasn’t, and the left column of those offenders who *had* submitted their DNA -- and you had to take Mark’s word for it, that these were the only ones you had to worry about, read:

Justin Hagersham, 49, Twin Falls Idaho

Wilson Preston Tuckenbath, 64, Meridian Plains Wisconsin

Elizabeth B. (Watson) Sistrunk, 29, Bath Maine

Henning Variface, 70, Dahlonega Georgia

Bryce Waller, 43, Redding, California
Hargove Dexter Sigenfuss, 78, Aberdeen South Dakota
Cora Ellen Makin, 36, Nauvoo Illinois
Richard R. Gentry, 22, Winthrop Washington
Jeffrey R. Tuckenbath, 61, Cedar Key Florida
Patrice Susan Watson, 34, Van Buren Maine
Grayson Robert Lauerplann, 55, Silver City New Mexico
Rose Archer Remmingon, 38, Boone North Carolina
Monrose F. Variface, 72, Rancho Mirage California
Frances P. R. Fergussen 84, Iowa City, Iowa
Michael Justice 68, Pensacola, Florida
Patricia Jaycee Sindegard, 29, Wheeling, West Virginia

Quite a list. The final three of course, with more information added this time, were the names Mark had run by Chris over the phone when he was in the middle of battling the hack.

But a dozen others too, none of which he recognized.

“Jeez,” Chris said. “Not to challenge you or anything -- but are you *sure* these folks are connected to me?”

“Bud,” Mark said, “one thing you don’t want to do, is insult my intelligence.”

Chris understood -- at least intellectually. That when Mark had uploaded his profile into Gedmatch and hit *Search* -- and then the machine had done its thing and spewed out the matches -- that these 15 folks were scientifically linked to *him*, specifically -- as opposed to anyone else in the database of a million other people, even remotely, was how he understood it.

But still. “Didn’t mean to insult anyone,” Chris said. “Wouldn’t you expect at least one Seely in there though? Or even my mom’s maiden name. Weeding?”

“It’s a crapshoot,” Mark said. “These are the ones -- like you put it to me one time -- they happened to watch late night TV, the heritage sites being advertised, and they forked over the dough and went for it.”

“I *am* thinking,” Chris said, “the one name, Makin in there, I might have heard it somewhere, our family.”

“Good.”

“Also . . . Laureplann, the guy in New Mexico . . . that might have been Gram’s side of the family, a couple steps removed, that name. Just goes to show, I should have been more up on this shit.”

Mark said, “Interesting that most of the folks on your list, they live in small towns.”

“I was thinking that too. The other thing, the Bryce Waller, up in Redding? That Jeez, the guy’s my exact age.”

“You’re wondering, should you look him up . . . introduce yourself to your long-lost 4th cousin.”

“Yeah . . . but . . . couldn’t that set that off a can of worms? Meaning the guy asks how I found him, and I say through the genealogy site, and he gets excited and goes back in there to see what *other* unknown relatives he might look up . . . except he notices he’s not *in there* anymore. So then he straightens it out. Does the DNA test again, *re-inserts* himself.”

“Yeah good point,” Mark said. “*Don’t* look him up.”

They shot the breeze a little more and Mark gave Chris a couple dog biscuits to feed to Mel, and Mark said, “You brought up something kinda obvious there, and honestly I didn’t *think* of that.”

“Don’t sweat it. You were wrapped up in a significantly bigger task.”

“But . . . the workaround is -- you run these names periodically, the *list* -- all’s you have to do is make a fake account and you can search the

database -- *anyone* can, it's public . . . Unlikely the scenario with your Redding cousin is going to *happen* -- where someone starts all over again with the \$99 late night TV DNA test -- but if you ever *see* it happen, let me know."

"Fine. Sounds good. Thanks again."

You could see Mark wasn't *quite* good with this though, and he was massaging it, and after a couple minutes he said, "You know what? Don't *you* worry about it. How we'll *handle* it, *I'll* go back in there and code an alert. To myself. So if that ever *did* happen -- any one of this group ever re-entering themselves -- I'll get an immediate notification."

"Wow. So . . . *visit* the guy in Redding, after all, you're saying?"

"Let's not go that far, if we don't have to. But yes, we'd have it covered."

Chris took a moment. "What I like about you," he said, "you take on your clients' problems like they're weighing on you just as bad. That's an admirable quality . . . And I'll sleep a lot better."

"Well we both will," Mark said, and they wrapped it up, and Chris wondered how far he could make it tonight, meaning the direction of New York again, and you'd see how that played out -- but it was sure nice to have some piece of mind for a change.

The business he'd been talking about recently, with someone or other -- oh yeah, it was Ned, speak of the devil -- but that they had to take a couple seconds every day and be thankful for the mostly-idyllic Manhattan Beach weather . . . that was playing out real true on this particular cross-country trek.

First of all the Sierras were rough, right off the bat, and they told him at his regular Starbucks in Colfax that 80 was screwed up, and there were chains required at the moment, from Baxter, which was 10 miles from here, to Boca, which was beyond Truckee . . . and Chris hated this process, and

man, this was April 13th already, shouldn't we be discussing wildflowers and hiking trails by now?

But apparently not this year, and one of the girls at the counter said her brother could help him, and she called the guy, and asked Chris what make and model his vehicle was, and she got back to the brother and the kid showed up promptly and had the right chains with him and took care of it -- and Chris threw the kid an extra 20 over what he charged him, well worth it to be sipping your Americano while the kid did the dirty work in the parking lot.

You thought of these things too late, but there *had* been a Subaru in the used lot on Sepulveda and Chris ignored it even though the salesman did mention the convenience-to-Tahoe business . . . but what could you do now, and you'd handled it, so forget it.

Except that it wasn't quite so easy. There were more spots, eastern Nevada, little bluffs basically is all they felt like, but quite unfortunately they required chains to get up and down those as well, and Chris ended up exactly where he *didn't* want to be, which was on his back, side of the road, trying to figure how to fit the damn things on, and then remove them. Not once but twice, the whole shebang, and what was up with this, something he wasn't aware of even in the high snow season, you needed chains or 4-wheel drive this part of highway 80 for Gosh sakes? And maybe the doomsdayers really were right about global warming messing with the cold stuff too.

Then three days of rain -- again not your spring showers variety, but hammering, thunderous stuff, the defrost on full blast and your eyes riveted to what little you could sometimes see of the road -- and Utah, Wyoming and Nebraska were pretty forgettable this time, and it wasn't until Des Moines that it dried out . . . and then you had the reverse, it got hot, and that first night after the rain ended, little pull-off town called Casey, Chris

took a walk for a little night air and the mosquitos, or black flies or whatever the heck, ate the shit out of him.

He was finally able to duck back into the motel room for a little relief, and there was air conditioning but it was making an inordinate amount of noise . . . and this was Tuesday night, and with the time change you wouldn't be disturbing anyone out west, and Chris shut off the AC, and opened the windows and called Finch.

While it was ringing he noticed one of the screens was screwed up, and he could picture a perfect storm of bugs figuring it out pretty quick, but how much more damage could they do really.

"I'm glad you called," Finch said, "we missed you."

There was the point here, Chris felt a little funky *too* having to miss the Friday night session. "How was the assorted student writing this time?" Chris said.

"It was . . . unusual, once again. Including your piece."

"So you're telling me," Chris said, trying to remember it, "you didn't like the guy having to save the tour guide from Canada? I thought that part worked okay. Resolved a couple of things at *least*, but left the door open for a sequel."

"I beg your pardon?" Finch said, and Chris realized that was his *first* idea, but he didn't care for it too much, never wrote it down, and what he turned in was something different.

"I'm mixed up maybe," Chris said. "Who read mine?"

"Holly. In fact she packaged the evening together for you. She made copies of everything. It would be a shame if you dropped out, Chris. I feel some momentum kicking in."

"Who said anything about dropping out?"

"Ned alluded to it. He said you had to visit your aunt in Boca Raton, that it could take a few weeks, and that you'd in fact mentioned that if it agrees with you there, you might just stay."

“Hmm,” Chris said. “All true I guess, but my guess is visiting aunts is over-rated . . . Listen, maybe I’ll give Holly a quick call.”

“Splendid. She can forward you the next assignment as well.”

“She . . . what’s the scoop there, anyhow, the phantom yacht broker guy?”

“You’re nosy.”

“I really am. I’m a fan of clarity.”

Finch said, “I’ve been curious myself. So I asked her.”

“Wow.”

“Not so much as a friendly inquiry, as calling her bluff.”

“Did it work?”

“Well, she did produce the gentleman, brought him to the session.”

“You’re *kidding*. And?”

“He’s a perfectly nice chap, but they’re a mismatch, if they actually *are* an item.”

“You’re worse than me, with the obnoxious opinions. How would *you* know?”

“First of all, he loved her piece. He defended it against even the mildest pushback, from Rosie and Ned and myself. Strictly between you and I, her piece was atrocious.”

“Ah. You’re saying though, he may not be floating her boat? Why don’t you step in then, make a move.”

“I’m considering it. A real one.”

Chris was kidding, but this was amusing, let the old guy go for it. They said goodnight and Chris called Holly.

“Hey there,” she said.

“Not your fault,” he said, “but of all the current expressions out of the millenials’ mouths, that one hits the biggest nerve.”

“Well *someone’s* on their high horse, apparently,” she said.

“Let’s start over. Anything going on with you and Finch?” Not the question he intended to ask, but it slid out.

“I *love* Terry, you know that. So yes, there hopefully always will be.”

Chris let it go, don’t stir up more trouble, and he said, “He did say you had a recap? From Friday night?”

“Yes. Where are you?”

What did that have to do with anything? But you’d better keep in line with Ned’s Florida explanation and the route you’d therefore be taking, so Chris said, “Russette, Louisiana. Why?” No idea of course if this was a real town, anywhere in the country, but hopefully it did the trick.

“Because your piece this week,” she said, “it needs more color. Chris, when you *visit* these places, you have to look *around* . . . That’s what shapes good *writing*.”

“Observation, then,” he said.

“Precisely. You have the two men speaking in the bar in Venice, and that’s fine. But how can you expect the reader to connect the ski lift accident in Colorado?”

“It didn’t work?” Chris said.

“Chris, it was laughable. I mean I’m sorry to inject the tough love on you. But everyone was in agreement.”

“Okay then. Maybe I’ll have to re-work it . . . Whose was the best?”

“I’ve made copies for you. You can judge.”

“That’s okay, for now just give me the bottom line.”

“Well, one by one . . . Rosie’s was interesting. She had Carrie, riding in a float down 6th Avenue, the Puerto Rico day parade, and there’s someone *in* the parade throwing candy to the children in the crowd, and Carrie notices a mini-pack of pop tarts on the ground unaccounted for, and she climbs down off the float and retrieves it, and when she tries to get back on, the float runs over her foot.”

“Hmmp . . . Working in the *symbolism* then.”

“What are you *talking* about?”

“Forget that. Who went next?”

“Ned did. His character is on a hippy bus. Don’t forget, it’s 1968. Everyone’s getting high, and the character suggests stopping by a lake . . . and they all skinny dip, *except* the character, who gets a call, and sits by a tree and takes it. There’s quite a bit more too, Ned applied himself vigorously this week.”

Chris said, “They had cellphones in 1968?”

“They did not, and Rosie mentioned it right away, but I told Ned he could simply be interlacing dimensions, that it’s all about the *story*, and time and place is largely irrelevant.”

“I see . . . Ned okay with that . . . explanation?”

“Not in the least. He seemed pretty pissed off. He said he was going to have to re-write the whole scene.”

“And *your* work?” Chris said.

“Well do you have a couple minutes? I feel like this workshop is paying off, that I’m beginning to find my rhythm.”

“You better give me the abridged version. For now, I mean.”

“O-kay . . . Elinor fends off the advances of Claire’s husband. She returns to the cabin. She takes a shower. Claire comes in, carrying an Entemann’s pound cake, and they crack it open.”

Chris waited in case there was more, but there wasn’t.

“Well, sounds decent,” he said. “And the main thing, you’re leaving the door open for the next one.”

“Chris, you keep *going* there, but what if there *isn’t* a next one? Our works need to stand on their own.”

“How’d everyone react? To yours.”

“They loved it. Chris this is what I’m saying, we’re *feeding* off each other. The energy is quite special.”

“There’s a next assignment, then?” he said.

“You bet. Write the scene that takes place immediately after your inciting incident.”

“Well . . . I’ll do my best. I have to look up *inciting incident* first.”

“I’ll email you a definition, with examples . . . You can tell I’m fired up. Finch is amazing.”

“He is . . . he also mentioned, you brought your friend.”

“*Ed*. Yes I did . . . That veered slightly south, actually.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. On the way home, he expressed an odd, and in my mind, a *destructive* view -- that the whole evening was total garbage and a waste of time.”

“Is Ed, like a frustrated writer himself? That he’s not admitting to?”

“Chris? I’m so glad to hear you *say* that. The thought occurred to me as well.”

“So you can dump him and move on. You’re not on the same wavelength, clearly.” Again, meant as nothing more than sticking in the needle for a little fun, but Holly said, “You know something . . . that’s an excellent point. That may have been the final straw, I’m not kidding.”

Another example, Chris was thinking, how things can turn on a dime.

Chapter 13

You had the dip past Iowa City where I-80 dropped down to Davenport, and later the exchange below Chicago, where you jumped on 90 for a while, until you were back on track at Bristol, Indiana.

Chris was eating more than he should, especially in the middle of day, these darn full course meals, but what are you going to do, you walk in and you see stuff right away, on people's tables, and the waitresses were so friendly and wholesome, one after another -- and you assumed all these people voted for Trump -- which Chris had too, but regretted, starting about a year ago.

But you got at least a feel for these folks' way of life. You weren't in the center of it, but you could sympathize to their concern about radical change from the other side.

These individuals in the middle of the country weren't complicated, didn't pretend to be, they were straight shooters, and Chris was convinced we need more of that -- and fine, maybe you *should* pay attention to Holly, try to interact with a purpose, observe and deduce things, use them to embellish your prose, but it seemed too confusing.

The text came from Mark Thursday evening in Ohio, around Grove City, a half hour past Youngstown. It said only: **Something else.**

That couldn't be life or death, could it, and Chris was on a good roll today -- try to take advantage of the light and push on at least another hour -- meaning New York would be in reasonable striking distance tomorrow.

That would put it at 7 and a half days coast to coast. Not the quickest he'd done it, not even close, but considering the chains business followed by

the ridiculous sky opening up torrentially back there -- and admittedly the extra-long, and increased meal stops -- it was good enough.

He hadn't landed at any Super 8's so far, you could typically depend on those in the no-surprises department, but tonight he tried a Hi-Ho Inn, not bad at all, it seemed to be a regional chain, and this one had a spic-n-span fitness room, so you could do your mile on the treadmill and then ease into a quite expansive and perfectly temperatur-ed hot tub -- meaning most of them needed about 6 more degrees but this one didn't.

He hated it when people yakked on phones in places like hot tubs, but there was no around and he got back to Mark.

"Okay now don't panic," Mark said, and of course words like that always *made* you panic.

Chris said, "You mean am I sitting down?"

"What happened," Mark said. "I ran the names again, just for the heck of it. You know, the one-week mark, before we close the door on it."

"Huh."

"And those were fine, your list. Nobody re-appeared. Fully confirming, that the hack *took*."

"But something else," Chris said.

"Yeah. While I was in there, I figured why not run your profile again -- I don't why, there was no justification for it, we did our job."

"Come on here. Jeeminy."

"Another relative showed up. A new one . . . Nothing we did wrong. Just some guy, evidently deciding the last couple days to join the fun, your big happy DNA family. Guy's name . . . I got it here . . . Marlon Studebakker, 56 years old, Detroit, Michigan."

"Doesn't ring a bell," Chris said, "but what else is new."

"Here's the situation," Mark said. "I tried to hack him out right away. But it didn't work."

"Oh . . . so he's like, entered in there different, somehow?"

“No, exactly the same. But my approach -- and I’m been going with a 32B3 -- didn’t take -- not because *we* did anything wrong, but I’m worrying now it’s only good *once*. Our method.”

Chris said, “Even worse then. Didn’t you *tell* me, you can re-hack any that *re-emerge*? So don’t *worry* about it? Such as my guy in Redding?”

“That I’m confident we can do,” Mark said. “employing the *standard* 32B3. It’s any *new* issuers, that it apparently doesn’t work for. You see -- not to get too technical -- but the system -- the algorithm -- essentially remembers our technique.”

“And blocks us for Round 2.”

“Not exactly. More involved than that. But the end result currently staring us in the face . . . yes, I’m afraid so, Chris.”

This was not good news, and talk about bursting your bubble. Chris told Mark not his fault, he’d done everything Chris asked him to, and who would anticipate an anomaly like this, and they hung up and Mark said to enjoy the rest of the trip and they’d figure something out, but it was hollow.

Fuck.

After all that -- if the cops ran his DNA tomorrow, it would put them straight to old Marlon in Michigan -- that barrel of laughs -- and now the cops are in the family tree, and it doesn’t matter that only one tree member at the moment has his DNA on *file* in there, it’s enough to figure out which relatives in California just might be committing crimes, and the inevitable paring it down from there.

Meaning, at the moment -- you’re right back where you started from. Before you did any *lab* work, before you consulted *Mark*.

On account of *one* guy.

The phone rang again. “What,” Chris said.

“That bad?” Ned said. “I thought you *liked* the open road.”

“Oh,” Chris said, “hey.”

“Listen,” Ned said, “can you call me on a pay phone? They got any of those out where you’re at?”

Chris said actually he had been seeing some of those, *ten* times more than you saw in California in fact. Thinking though, from right here, tonight, that *could* be a bit of a goose chase locating another one. Not to mention having to get out of the comfy hot tub period, and drag yourself somewhere.

Ned said, “Let’s make it 45 minutes, how about?” And he gave Chris a number to call back on.

So . . . you drive 6 and half days in peace, for the most part, and then back to back, when you’re just settled in real good, *two* guys disrupt you, independent of each other.

Chris got out of there, showered and dressed again and figured start simple, and he went to the office and asked if they might have a pay phone right on the premises.

“We did,” the night clerk said. “Got removed in ‘06. They were extending the pump house round the side, that booth was a casualty.”

“Progress then,” Chris said. “So, anywhere else, you could recommend finding one?”

“Well, old man Rogers, they got one still.”

This was rough, a headache was coming on, and you’d have to get directions from the guy, and you prayed old man Rogers didn’t live a couple towns away.

Two greasy-looking guys came into the office, and both needed shaves and shampoos, long hair touching both their collars, caps up top, one a John Deere the other a US Army something or other.

The car they got out of was still running outside. Chris could make out someone vaguely in the driver’s seat. Hard to pick up the plates, but they were yellow, not Ohio.

Which didn't mean much, this being a roadside stop off the interstate . . . but the vibe wasn't good.

"What can I do for you boys?" the clerk said, and meanwhile Chris stepped around the counter, joining the guy.

Instead of the normal reply -- *you'all get a vacancy for tonight*, and so forth -- one guy was swiveling his head around, back out toward the parking lot, and the other was keeping his eye on the doorway opening behind the desk.

Chris said, keeping it quiet and under control: "Get back in the car, fellas."

"What was that?" the night clerk said.

And it seemed the two greaseballs hadn't heard it either, because they didn't react.

At first.

Then the guy who'd been scanning the parking lot opened his jacket and pulled out a small automatic with a yellow grip and pointed it at neither one of them specifically, but right down the middle.

Chris very slowly reached under the counter, squatting just slightly. He said, "Fellas, I'm not going to be telling you again. It's not a *suggestion*. Get . . . back in the car." Locking eyes, not with the gunman but the other mutant.

Maybe 10 seconds went by. The non-gunman said, "Bo, let's bring it. It don't matter."

For a second Chris thought that meant bring the heat, and a jolt of terror hit him above the belly button and exited his lower jaw, but it apparently meant hightail it out of there, since that's what they did, and the car sped off.

"Golly," the night clerk said.

"I know," Chris said. He straightened up from the counter and his hands were shaking and he couldn't get them under control, and the clerk

noticed but didn't say anything, and the guy lit a cigaret and stuck it directly between Chris's lips.

"I don't smoke," Chris tried to joke finally, but it tasted good, no surprise that it was a no-filter Camel.

The clerk said, "Didn't know if we was set up for some fireworks tonight there."

Chris didn't either, what might have gone down, but they were junkies, pretty sure of that . . . no predictability to a junkie. You give them what they want, a trigger's just as liable as not, to get squeezed by someone.

He said to the guy, "We had to make our stand I felt . . . Of course it's all speculation."

The clerk was nodding his head like a robot. "You got that right. Meanwhile . . . God *Damn*, I'm letting time go by, notifying the authorities."

He picked up the desk phone and you could see him punching in 911, and Chris motioned that he was going outside to take a look, and he kept going and got in the Malibu, and there was traveller's area on the other side of the freeway with one of those 24-hour Pilot trucker deals, and he asked a guy if he knew where 'old man Rogers's place' was, and the guy said *what for* at this hour, and Chris said a pay telephone, and the guy said they had one here, and pointed.

"One thing I'm learning you are," Ned said, "is reliable. I got here early, and the phone still rings."

"Where's that?" Chris said.

"Redondo. The Jack-in-the Box still has one outside. The enclosed booth and *everything*. Yeah you have the usual bb gun damage, the glass, the way kids do, both overall it's respectable."

"You use it a lot?" Chris said.

"Sure, now and then. Citizens should have the right to keep their personal conversations private. Or at least the option . . . You never finished telling me, the road trip. How it's going."

“It’s been uneven,” Chris said. “You know what I’m flashing on now, out of left field? . . . Holly with her *first* book idea, *she’s* on a road trip and she *finds* herself, and there’s assorted other bullshit ups and downs.”

“Piece of work,” Ned said. “She would have been better off, sticking with *that* topic. Now she’s un-interpretable.”

“Anyhow,” Chris said, “always more adventures than you expect, out here in the heartland. Finding yourself.”

“That’s the way it works. My own experience, people bother you, but they mean well, and you get diverted.”

“Or some variation,” Chris said. “So . . . *you* bothered me tonight, *because?*”

“Wait a second. You told *me* to call *you* -- you gave me a time frame -- when you announced your were taking off without my blessing.”

“Skip the unnecessary dialogue and spit it out. Criminy.”

“Okay we’re making an adjustment . . . Where are you by the way? I didn’t even ask.”

“Not there yet. What’s the difference.”

“Fine. Do you know Bucks County?”

“Pennsylvania?”

“Correct . . . Now write this down, or commit it to memory. Don’t put it in your phone obviously . . . you know the drill.”

Chris was not in the mood tonight, that’s for sure, to have his intelligence insulted, but whatever . . . and he said he was ready.

Ned said, “We got Nick -- could be Nicholas too, or Nicky -- Protancio. Otherwise known as The Tank.”

“Why’s that?”

“Built like a fire hydrant. All-city nose tackle at JFK Yonkers High, way back in the day. That school’s not even there any more. But real big neck on the fucker. Cro-magnon type bone structure in the head. You see where I’m going?”

“Short legs, competing the package?” Chris said.

“Extremely. There used to be those rides at Coney Island . . . I’m getting off track here . . . What do you think?”

“About *what? Socializing* with the gentleman? Explaining Gee, sorry about what happened to Ralph, let’s smooth it over?”

“Wouldn’t be that, no,” Ned said quieter.

Chris said, “He *lives* in Bucks County? Or I’m, like, intercepting him there.”

“No he’s out there now. Lot of the old Bronx guys, they’d barely know shit about how to even start up a weed-whacker, but suddenly it’s fashionable, stake their claim out in the countryside, grab yourself a hundred acres . . . Dutchess County’s another place now. But The Tank opted for Bucks.”

“I can’t blame ‘em,” Chris said. “Close enough still, I’m guessing, where you can control the important stuff back home. Striking distance.”

“Listen,” Ned said. “Like I been saying all along, no *obligation*. You *hear* me? ‘Cause I think you *don’t* . . . Take a look, see if it’s your cup of tea . . . If not, no sweat, go down to Florida for a while, have some fun.”

“Which is where you told the other writers I *went*.”

“I like that, by the way . . . See how you said the ‘*other*’ writers? By *doing* that, you’re indirectly saying *I’m* one too.”

“Well you are.”

“We’ll see, but I’ll take it. Thank you my man.”

“Speaking of Florida,” Chris said, “wouldn’t you know, I found out I have a relative there I never met.”

“So the karma is lined up. Go for it.”

Chris said, “I’ll check on Nick first. Make an evaluation . . . he *is* connected to Ralph, I mean so to *speak*? Paulie *too*?”

Ned lowered his voice again. “Not sure, honestly, *which* specific motherfucker back there is calling the shots. *Whose* eyeballs, in a perfect world, I’d claw out and piss in the empty sockets of.”

“I hear you,” Chris said. “But take it easy.”

“Point being, we make a statement to The Tank, we’re in the ballpark.”

This made sense. You’re not trying to take down one of the mythical Five Families here, for Gosh sakes. You’re just trying to establish a little credibility.

Hopefully slow down the next Ralph from showing up in MB, was all.

That could be unlikely of course -- and unfortunately, but one thing for sure: you’re not going to slow down the next Ralph by doing *nothing*, either.

Ned gave him The Tank’s address, plus a building in town he owned, seemed to do a little work out of.

“And he’s on his 4th wife,” Ned said, “should that come into play.”

“You know her?” Chris said, no reason except something told him Ned might.

“We go back a bit,” he said. “Lorraine -- used to be Guggliano. Mind you now, she’s a good 25 years younger than Tank. He’d be in 60’s by now.”

Chris said, “If I do run into them both -- but take a pass and decide to head to Florida after all -- should I still say hi to her for you?”

“That’d be fine,” Ned said, and it was hard to throw the guy off-balance, he had a straight-up answer to most anything, didn’t he . . . and Chris thought, when this is over -- and I try to go straight -- I’ll have to absorb some of that.

Chapter 14

It was a little weird, you passed a town called Jersey Shore, and that was way in eastern Pennsylvania, and Chris remembered a week he spent once at the real Jersey Shore, and coming back from there that time, a guy driving and his girlfriend in front, Chris and some other guy in back, traffic stops on the turnpike and the guy asks the girlfriend how she'd feel about him breaking the law, and driving on the shoulder for a while -- which a few people are doing -- and she says that would be grossly unfair to everyone else, who's obeying the law and waiting out the stoppage -- and the boyfriend considers it for a couple minutes, what she said, and then swings onto the shoulder.

Chris made a mental note a couple times to find out whatever happened to that relationship, but he never did.

This morning it wasn't going to kill you, adjusting your angle from the Big Apple to Bucks County. In fact it was probably shorter. You continue on 80 as normal, except at Berwick you jump on 81 South, then after a while 476, and you're home free.

Door to door, leaving the Hi-Ho Inn, 5 hours and 22 minutes, it said.

Chris didn't know much *about* Bucks County except what he loosely remembered from history class, that there was quite a bit of British activity there a hundred years before the Revolutionary War blew everything open, and there were manors and stuff.

Glancing down at the map, a half hour away, he could see the appeal for a guy like Nick. You were north of Philly, but only an hour or two, you

were a couple hours east of New York, tops, and -- something you didn't think of but likely applied to Nick -- 2 hours from Atlantic City.

They seemed to divide it into Upper, Central and Lower Bucks County, and the respective towns were Quakertown, Doylestown and Bristol -- but his town . . . checking the note again, Ned's info, would be Beddingham, also in lower Bucks, if he was reading the map right.

And of course you thought you were a half hour away, quite a while back, but you had to zig zag around once you were technically *in* Bucks, and this involved some secondary roads, his particular one including quite a bit of up and down, not mountains but short, steep and curvy hills, and finally you did see Beddingham up ahead, and Chris found a diner and stopped for a coke.

One impression today, the countryside was rich with spring, stuff blooming up the wazoo, little creeks and waterways running fast and disappearing into stands of what Chris guessed were flowering cherries, and maybe dogwoods and magnolias mixed in too, all of it feeling pretty dang fresh and vibrant.

The effects of a *real* winter, in other words, not a *California* one, meaning nature had been seriously held back for four months and now was making up for it.

The menu in the diner had some local tourist info on the back, and it informed you that William Penn himself founded Bucks County, and Jeez, that was probably the guy they named the darn stated after.

The main thing, Chris was thinking now, adding a little perspective to the situation, based on the last episode . . . not Roland so much, but the other one he had to travel to . . . was come at it a little different this time.

That had been pretty torturous, no other way to frame it, the absurd business of going Reno to Montana and like a slingshot gone haywire, all the way to back to Beacon, the Central Valley -- and then the mess there,

the endless following the bozo around -- not to mention having to find him in the *first* place -- and then once you were *on* him, all the *waiting*.

As he told Dr. Moore, he'd at least met the high school guy Gillette, so that killed an hour at one stage, and he did envy and admire that kid, even after the kid disclosed he was dealing with a major issue. Dr. Moore hadn't pressed him on it, really, but she should have, this being a common-enough theme, wasn't it, Chris always looking to go back somewhere and start fresh and re-do his own stuff.

But here -- today -- don't screw around. Kind of like the example of those achievement tests again -- you over-work it, you probably don't come out any better, and you may end up getting it wrong.

Chris checked the time. It was 1:20. Hmm . . . in fact, if you handle things during business hours, or thereabouts, you might not even have to check in to a motel. Not the worst thought, since judging from this tourist info attached to the menu, you didn't have your typical all-American motels in Beddingham, but instead your country inns and B & B's . . . and Chris supposed that's how it had been around here for a long time, and you weren't likely to get many new town council people welcoming in the modern age enough to approve a Holiday Inn Express for example.

Chris didn't care for country inns or B & B's -- first of all you felt like you were in someone's house, and had to tiptoe around, no matter how they disguised it . . . and second, you weren't crazy about parking right in front of one of them, where your vehicle - and you -- seriously might end up standing out if something were to happen.

You trusted Ned by now of course -- mostly -- but to wholeheartedly embrace and address his issue, Chris figured you better make sure the guy was worthy of being addressed.

Meaning . . . that he wasn't just some guy, that Ned had an issue with once in a pickup basketball game.

And that the guy had been his sworn enemy ever since.

If Nick was really in his 60's, that would admittedly put him 20 years older than Ned -- so the basketball example was less likely -- but either way, you still were responsible for your own due diligence.

Chris had been getting more lax about having to use a public and theoretically untraceable (back to *him*) computer for these initial researches . . . and sitting in the diner, pretty comfy, having added the 'Brown and Tan' special to that original coke, a local dish that featured bacon battered in beer and was pretty dang amazing -- he decided it was safe enough to use his phone.

That realistically . . . if it came to the point where they're checking you on that *secondary* stuff, you were likely in much bigger trouble on the *primary* stuff -- and Chris thought of Mark again, the amazing work but the ultimate failure, and Jeez, you needed to block that all out right now.

So Chris googled: **Nicholas Nick Protancio Arrest Record**, and before he clicked Enter he inserted **The Tank** too, since you'd assume Ned wasn't the first one to ever call him that.

But the point, obviously, you want to make sure this guy actually did something. Beyond perhaps loosely directing Ralph to make an inquiry in Manhattan Beach and finding out he ended up in a marsh a quarter mile south of one of the Panda Expresses in Torrance.

It was confusing. His name showed up, or partially did, various places, not necessarily criminal ones, and it was looking like a bear to put it together logically and get that concrete conclusion you wanted.

So Chris tried it again, substituting **Arrest Record** with **Going to Jail** -- a lot less formal, but let's see what happens.

Again, a mishmash, a lot of it different this time . . . but there was a link to one article from the NY Daily News that had potential, and Chris went there.

Yonkers Man Sentenced to 8 Years Following Manslaughter Conviction

by Jack Krinkle

***October 16th, 1987 - White Plains, NY* - A Yonkers man was sentenced today in Westchester County Superior Court, following a manslaughter conviction last month in the death of 38-year-old Patrick Solowski, of Red Hook.**

Nicholas Protancio, 33, of 884 Reggina Drive, was found guilty of slaying Solowski on the night of December 12th, 1986, after Solowski allegedly rang Protancio's doorbell and attempted to serve him with a legal document.

Witnesses described a discussion between the two men on the doorstep of the Reggina Drive residence, and a subsequent escalation after Protancio spit on Solowski's paperwork and according to witnesses, told Solowski to 'go back where you came from, I'm not interested'.

According to court testimony, Solowski attempted one more time to hand the papers to Protancio, at which point Protancio produced a 32 caliber Belgian Bulldog revolver and shot Solowski dead.

Prosecutors had pushed for a sentence of 30 years to life, but Judge Helene Stewart, citing Protancio's community charity work and otherwise clean criminal record, imposed the 8 year term.

In doing so, Stewart told Protancio that she hopes he spends much of his term considering his actions, and can return to society a responsible member.

Protancio will be eligible for parole in April of 1994.

Welp. There you had it, Chris supposed.

There could always be more to it, and things get watered or pled down by the time the court takes over -- and sure, maybe poor Patrick Solowski hassled this a-hole a bit more on that doorstep than was portrayed. Process servers have been known to carry weapons, and conceivably he flashed something or mentioned it, igniting The Tank to take it to the next level.

Sure . . . all that can happen.

Chris was convinced it didn't. That you side with law enforcement and witnesses and juries and the courts -- until proven otherwise.

This guy didn't like getting served, and in his mind, his *world*, he made it go *away*.

Then you had a sympathetic judge, having the nerve to go on the record lecturing the guy, while imposing the minimum sentence.

That -- or she was intimidated -- and you can't you rule that part out, and Chris supposed a judge would be only human, if that happened.

Chris put the phone away. You couldn't help wonder what was in the lawsuit, or subpoena, that contributed to getting the poor guy killed. The article didn't say. It was something you might ask Ned about some time, what was the thrust . . . but yeah, some other time.

Chris had spent an hour in the diner, at least. He continued into town, gave the main couple blocks the once over. There was a square right there too, with decorative old black iron fencing, sharp points on top, and a monument in the middle, some guy on a horse and the horse rearing up.

119 Briggs was the in-town address that Ned gave him. It was an historic building -- the whole downtown was -- with its own little brass plate on the front, and the building was originally The Ice House it said, which you assumed was where they produced and stored the ice blocks people used in their refrigerator, before real fridges were around.

It was quite an impressive brick structure, subdivided into shops and offices, maybe 8 total, and there was an interior courtyard with some tall

indoor potted trees, and quite a few chairs had been set up and someone was dusting off the little stage up front.

Chris heard someone say it was their Friday night art walk, the 3rd Friday of the month.

It didn't look like the art walks Chris was familiar with, but he was thinking what probably happened, people pop in and out of the galleries on the main three or four blocks, and then there's some finishing event here where they sit down, an artist maybe demonstrating something more intimate, or someone lecturing or otherwise unleashing verbiage onto the unsuspecting crowd.

Chris tended to be cynical of course, with these events, since he'd sat through enough of them, but they obviously filled a need . . . so that's what was going on.

Hmm. Where would The Tank be currently? Ned had forked over only the address of the building, no specific office or department. Had Ned suggested The Tank owned the place? He might have.

There was a directory off the courtyard near the stairs, and you had one listing by itself, for *Building Services, B-1*.

Might as well take a look . . .

B-1 it turned out was in the basement, which you figured out by elimination -- since the first floor units had G before their number, assumedly for Ground, and the upper floor units had M before theirs, for Main, it seemed.

It wasn't apparent that this place *had* one of those -- a basement -- since the stairs next to the directory only went up a flight, not down.

This was going to take some detective work, and Chris casually searched the four corners of the interior building, looking for a secondary egress, and you had nothing.

So you go outside, give it the once over. There was a guy patching something tar-like on the side of the parking lot adjacent to the building

and Chris was tempted to ask him but didn't, and went back inside, and a few people were filtering in for the lecture, and Chris thought maybe don't be a hero tonight after all, how about just take a seat and see what's on tap like everyone else, and tomorrow's another day, and worry about The Tank then.

Which is what he did for a minute, it felt good to rest your rear end, even though that's what you were doing *driving* for a week, but even so . . . and then he noticed the far office to the right, set up a little different, there was an outer hall you went into first, and a door off that . . . and who knows.

So Chris took a look, and no-one seemed to notice him pushing the outside door, or disappearing into the secondary one and down the stairs.

It felt original down there, that's for sure, very low ceiling, the brick walls needed an extensive repointing job, barely any mortar left between them, one light bulb in the hall with a pull string hanging.

You had a couple of maintenance closets, left and right, an oversized low sink with a mop in it . . . and at the end of the hall, B-1.

Chris thought about knocking, didn't, and tried the handle and the door was open, and he went in.

He realized he should have tried to pull up a photo of the guy when he was googling him, that there hadn't been one attached to the 1987 newspaper story -- but all that said, this guy sitting at the desk in the one-room office staring you in the face sure looked like he'd acquired *The Tank* along the way.

Like Ned presented it, everything wide and massive up top, and then short little legs, which you couldn't *see*, specifically, but the guy *was* sitting pretty dang low in the chair, wasn't he.

It was tempting to lay it out straight, say, "Excuse me, are you Nick the Tank?"

The issue there might be though, once Tank began with his friendly enough, "I've been *known* to be. Who wants to know?"

. . . or some similar wisecrack, warming up to the main event, which could easily be pulling a gun out of the drawer -- who knows, maybe even the same one still as with the process server . . . and things could spiral out of control badly from there.

So Chris said, "Excuse me, *sir*? Mr. *Protancio*?"

"What," the Tank said.

Chris continued. "They sent me to report a power surge? Something with the microphone, it's cutting in and out. The lights too, they are flickering."

The Tank stood up. "Goddamn Art Walk. Every month, some peripheral *bullshit*."

There was an old-fashioned phone on the wall, no numbers or anything, just a small light lit up below it and a speaker mounted off to the side, the type you spoke into without using the earpiece. You could picture the Tank being the type who wouldn't upgrade stuff if it worked fine, which this obviously did. It was also interesting to think that whatever scammy boiler-room operation he was running out of here, it was likely to be a lucrative one -- and why not go upstairs, take one of the *real* offices, you own the damn *building*.

But this too, probably fit the profile of the Tank. Meaning the dingy basement room works fine, why sacrifice the rent you're receiving instead, from the fancy upstairs office.

Chris was on that page himself, situations like that, you didn't need luxury and you didn't need to show off.

Meanwhile, the Tank picked up that house phone and waited a moment, and then Arturo apparently picked up the other end because that's what Tank kept calling him, and there was some confusion between the two how to handle it, the electrical business, and the call ended . . . and the Tank seemed sufficiently distracted for a few more seconds, plus he was turned halfway sideways to handle the phone the easiest way . . . and Chris

moved in a step and got the wire around his neck -- first not quite perfectly, a little off center with the leverage -- and then he squared it up and was solid.

You had the weird breathing sound you expected, and the guy reaching back toward you, and yeah, no exaggeration from Ned, big meaty paws, thick wrists, muscular forearms, though obvious fat in the mix as well.

Chris held firm, the angle was locked down, all the physics in place, and soon there wasn't as much fight from Nick and he dropped to a knee -- and Chris adjusted himself accordingly.

These were never pleasant, but as he waited out the Tank it ran through his mind with surprising clarity -- that when you separated out the less important parts, pared it down to its essence -- this guy, either on his own or collectively -- sent Ralph out to LA, with the express purpose of sooner or later extinguishing his -- Chris's -- ass. (Ned's too, if you wanted to get technical.)

So here, right now, you didn't have to relish this or enjoy it or take pride in it or even chalk it up to revenge -- you just had to do it.

Something sounded like water running and a door creaked and Chris hoped to God he was hearing things, and it wasn't from outside in the hall, it was from right *here* -- and only then Chris noticed what was probably a rest room in the corner.

A woman came out, finishing tucking her blouse into her slacks. Then her mouth extended to the wide open position and Chris hoped it would stay that way, frozen open, no sound attached to it . . . but then the *Oh My God, Help's* started, but hopefully they wouldn't be a deal-breaker, since they were the only ones in the basement and even better, there was heavy machinery humming in the hall.

Which Chris assumed was a generator for the whole building, or the furnace or central air -- or whatever the fuck else was going at it out there, but it was effective.

The screams diminished and unfortunately the gal had found a pair of scissors on the Tank's desk, and she didn't waste any time -- though it occurred to Chris if someone's choking out your man, you stab the choker guy in the *eye* or something, that should do it . . . but instead she went after Chris's hands, and it wasn't pleasant, not in the least, but Chris maintained his grip.

He was starting to think Nick had seen better days anyway, he felt awful limp and heavy down there now . . . but you better make sure.

Meanwhile Chris thought of something -- remembering the name Ned gave him, the 4th wife, *Lorraine* -- and you might as well go for it and see, and Chris said, "Lorraine. *Listen* to me here. *Look* at me . . . This was *scheduled*." And he let that hang, hoping there'd be some effect, and at least she stopped the screaming, though she kept up the cutting his hands and knuckles a little longer, and then stopped that too.

Chris let go of the Tank, and it was a done deal.

It was pretty clear her name *was* Lorraine, and that she was confused.

Chris help up his hand, like give me a second before you do anything stupid . . . and he started for the bathroom but figured you lock the main door first, in case Arturo came wandering in explaining that he couldn't detect the electrical problem upstairs.

Lorraine stood still and Chris washed his hands as best he could, and whatever kind of soap they had in there stung bad, but that was probably for the best.

"So," Chris said to Lorraine, "we move on . . . Things happen for a reason. You know that by now . . . I don't like it *any* more than you . . . It's nothing personal Babe. You know *that* too."

Chris gave her a long look, and she was crying, which you didn't like to see, but the lesser of several evils obviously, which included placing a call to the sheriff, or constable, or state troopers, or whoever handled the stuff in this town.

Chris also knew that as soon as he left she *would* make a call, but that would be to someone in Tank's orbit . . . and Chris said to please pass over her cellphone, and to wait here for exactly *seven* minutes until it's *safe* -- that those were the explicit instructions that *he* received -- and that the phone would be waiting for her upstairs where the set of mailboxes was.

Lorraine opened up her purse and for half a second you had that terrible repeat alarm, that she'd pull out something snub-nosed herself, but thank God she was complacent enough to simply hand over the phone and sit down.

The lecture upstairs was in full swing, the audience section almost full, and Chris heard the expression 'power of persuasive endeavor' resonating out of the speaker's mouth and over the PA system as he hesitated for just an instant, took a look, and got the hell out of there.

Chapter 15

Which *way* you were going had nothing to do with it of course, and the first meaningful road he noticed was state route 413, and that worked you slightly east toward south Jersey, and you ran into the 295-276 interchange near Trenton -- all good at this point -- though Chris didn't stop physically sweating until an hour later when he pulled off for a bite to eat in a place called Plymouth Meeting.

Whew.

One thing that had been in his favor, was the Tank's henchmen likely had to come to Bucks County from somewhere else after Lorraine made that call, as opposed to being down the *block* -- though Chris didn't leave her phone like he said he would, but that wouldn't matter.

The somewhere *else*, again, could be Philadelphia, NYC or Atlantic City -- whereas if you had similarly dealt with the Tank in one of *those* places the exit strategy might not have been as smooth.

You never know . . . and Chris reminding himself for the umpteenth time that you can't script this shit -- that line was getting old.

When he came out of the restaurant it was dark and windy, and it was already dusk when he went in, but now it was *pitch* black, no moon tonight, or stars you could see either.

Not the optimum evening, in other words, to be heading across Pennsylvania on one of these highways that didn't help you out much with the artificial lighting, and you'd have to pay attention. But Chris was revved up, nothing gained tonight by checking *in* somewhere and not being able to sleep, so he kept on driving, and by 3am he required a cup of coffee . . . and that wasn't going to be easy . . . so he opened the windows and blasted the

radio -- what few stations he *could* tune in -- and it occurred to him this was a throwback to a couple of road trips 25 years ago -- and it sustained him until 5:30, when it started getting light, and you could smell the wet grasses being warmed up, and he found a convenience store and stood outside for a while looking over some fairly idyllic valley that had come into focus the last 20 minutes.

He'd picked up a couple interstate maps in the convenience store. They still sold them here, which seemed to be a dying industry for sure, the physical maps, and he opened one on the picnic table they had outside near the gas pumps.

Jeez, he'd screwed up pretty good overnight -- not that it mattered much -- but at some point he veered onto 79 and had driven several hours largely due south into the heart of West Virginia and was headed for Tennessee at the moment.

Again, which was fine. It did point out how you got confused at night, and you had to give credit to the over-the-road truckers, those guys likely never working on enough sleep yet rarely making a wrong turn like this, even on a pitch black night.

You could see on the map the Monongahela National Forest to the right, which you'd definitely negotiated, and yes sir, pretty darn curvy through there, and obviously beautiful country too, which would explain this lush green untamed expanse he was soaking in in the distance this morning from the convenience store.

Detroit, as Chris was calculating it, using the un-exact finger method on the map -- from here, you were talking . . . 350, 400 miles . . . and if you were going 65 all the way you could do it in half a day, couldn't you . . . except from here you were on the small stuff until at least Columbus, and even there not really, you needed to hit Farley before you finally found an interstate that ran you toward Detroit.

So, no, don't be a hero again, go halfway and hope you catch your friendly 56-year old unknown relative Marlon Studebakker up there tomorrow . . . and Chris got back in the Malibu and it was a good day of driving, clear and bright and crisp out there, and he settled on Dakota, Ohio, for the night, a bit north of *Delaware*, Ohio, for Gosh sakes -- and he noticed this other places too, why name *towns* after *states*, though they had their reasons.

Not until Chris found a motel did he realize the extent of how shot he was, not just the staying up all night but the reverberation from the encounter with Nick . . . and the unexpected surprise of the 4th wife Lorraine making her appearance. Thinking about it, it was a one-man operation down there in the basement office, so Lorraine probably just dropped in, end of the day, a Friday evening.

It could have been messier if the Tank had an actual secretary emerging from that rest room, who might *not* have understood the nature of Tank's businesses and those of his associates . . . and issues that sometimes arose. Lorraine clearly did, you had to give her that, she was going keep it in-house, and if the police happened to get involved later, so be it.

Chris had taken a page out of Ned's book of course -- the *mechanics* of it, as related to Ralph -- meaning the *wire* seemed decent -- and Chris found a Home Depot on the way out here one night in Wyoming, and had gone in there with a mental list of supplies: roll of wire, wire cutters, thick gloves . . . He wasn't sure he'd need any of it, but you tried to plan ahead, and he'd thrown the Home Depot bag in the trunk and hadn't thought about it again until he was closing in on Bucks County.

Anyhow, when Chris got in the room in Dakota, Ohio, and saw that bed, he collapsed right on top of it, no turning back any covers, and he barely got one shoe off and slept for 6 hours.

It was after 9 when got up, re-energized, starved, all that good stuff, and he figured why not see what, if anything, is cooking in town.

There was a lot actually. A couple groups on foot heading for the main drag bar scene, yukking it up pretty good and carrying baseball equipment, which likely meant an adult softball league breaking up. There were couples strolling around as well, some old folks sitting on benches, even little kids riding scooters and bikes around . . . and this is how it *should* work, Chris was thinking, you're brutalized all winter by the weather, when it's over get your asses *out* there.

He compared the scene to Petaluma for example, where he lived once, bigger than this place but also a family community so not totally different, and there you could do stuff outside all year, so consequently there was no thrill in it, no incentive, and you didn't run across anything like this.

The big thing tonight in Dakota though was the high school prom. It always seemed early didn't it? April still? Chris remembered his own being in June, about a week before they got the heck out of there for good, but times were different apparently.

Again, like with the kid Pike in Beacon, Chris found himself envying the whole shebang -- the event and the kids both, so much ahead of them, life (hopefully) not having dealt any big blows so far, your stress level centered on having the right friends and getting invited to the right parties.

At the moment there were clusters of the prom kids milling around Main Street, some getting in and out of limos, but you assumed the *official* prom wasn't underway yet, but then again it seemed about that time.

Chris asked an older couple sitting on a bench. "They go to a hall, right? Or the school gym or something? Before the night's over?"

The husband shook his head. "Used to," he said. "That dried up. Going back, I'll say 6 years."

"Sorry," Chris said, "what dried up?"

“Way it worked, they had an *in*-surance up-tick. The school said forget it, we can’t afford it.”

“He *means*,” the wife chipped in, “they had to cancel using the gymnasium because the liability folks made it impossible.”

“Right,” the husband said, “so they scrambled and . . . you know where the Grange Lodge is?”

“No sorry,” Chris said, “I’m a visitor.”

The guy said, “Welcome to town then. It don’t matter anyhow, about the Grange, other than they held it *there* instead, and it didn’t work out.”

“Ah,” Chris said.

“Eldon’s referring to the underage drinking,” the wife said. “The lack of appropriate supervision. It got out of hand, the police came, there was an altercation. Sergeant Wayne got his skull fractured.”

“Maybe,” Eldon said. “They played it up big. The fact was, the man spent a night in the hospital, under *observation*. Take it however you like.”

“But you’re saying,” Chris said, “it never recovered? The traditional prom?”

Eldon nodded. “Everyone whining, that point forward, both sides. The school worked out the *in*-surance finally, but now they let the kids take a vote, and like I say, last 4 or 5 years, they been voting it down. They’d rather mess around on their own, as you can see.”

“And save 75 dollars of course,” the wife said.

“Screw *that*,” Eldon said. “You only come around once . . . But it’s all different today. The kids, they got no ties to tradition. They don’t give a crap.” Eldon spit, which was a bit unexpected, but you could see his point and appreciate his passion.

Chris said, “What happened to the officer who got assaulted? Is he still on the job?”

“That’s the other part,” the wife said, “Sergeant Wayne committed suicide, three Christmases ago. It’s left a sour taste all around.”

“You’re kidding,” Chris said.

“Martha,” Eldon said, “will you stop with that please, for once? There was mental health issues the man was *dealing* with, you know as well as I. Way more deep rooted than some kid hitting him side of the head with a beer bottle one night.”

Martha looked at Chris and upturned her palms slightly. “It’s something we agree to disagree on,” she said.

They watched the continuing action for a while and Chris said, “Let me pose something to you out of left field, if I might. If it throws you off, please feel free to leave it alone.”

“Son,” Eldon said, “nothing throws me off.”

“Well,” Chris said, “if you got robbed one day. Not your house, like a break-in, but *you* directly, face-to-face . . . and I don’t mean you, specifically -- but if this happened to *someone*.”

“You ain’t given me much to work with so far,” Eldon said, “though you haven’t quite lost me either.”

Chris smiled, you had to like him. He said, “What I’m getting to, should this guy just let it go?”

“So I’m clear,” Martha said, “someone was robbed of their *belongings*, but not injured?”

“He’s *telling* you that,” Eldon said, “if someone got strong-armed on the *street* . . . Like we got going on in Toledo, when the floodgates opened and *that* place went down the tubes.”

“Pretty much that’s it, yeah,” Chris said. “Let’s say the guy gets a weapon stuck in his face?”

“Firearm?” Eldon said. “And he got away with it, you’re saying?”

“Yes, I think so. *Both* those.”

“I’d string him up,” Eldon said, “long as someone didn’t get to him first. Mind you those *types*, plenty of enemies already in the loop.”

“Eldon,” Martha said, “please don’t lash out irrationally.”

Chris said, “You’d take it into your hands, you’re saying though? You wouldn’t . . . let the system do its job?”

“What system?” Eldon said. “What are *they* going to do about it? Some poor guy looking up a hollow barrel seeing his life flash before him? Your system gonna make it up to him?”

“I don’t think so,” Chris said, “not necessarily.”

“Except,” Eldon said, “you’re not *sure*. Son I can see right through you. Pardon me, but you and I’s crapping on opposite shitholes.”

“All right honey,” Martha said. “The man is simply posing a . . . what’s the word I’m looking for? A *chance encounter*?”

“A hypothetical, maybe?” Chris said.

“Thank you,” she said, “that’s exactly it. Certainly nothing to get worked up about, in real life.”

“If you say so,” Eldon said, smiling for the first time, and pinching Martha’s cheek, and Chris wondered, the way it was in the old days, the high school prom business, if *they* were an item back then too . . . but you left it alone for tonight.

The old guy Eldon had freaked him out a little bit about these unknown big cities. Not that a place like *Toledo* was a real big city, or particularly scary. But that was the point. Detroit was both those things.

Why would Marlon select *there*, when you had the whole country to work with, to settle down?

Of course Chris’s lasting images of Detroit were the photos of the burned-out sections, and it had been a while now, and he supposed if they were successfully gentrifying places like Flatbush in Brooklyn, where you once assumed there was no hope . . . then why not Detroit. Perhaps.

Back in the motel last night he’d spent a little time on Gedmatch, the genealogy site that was the center of all this current law enforcement commotion and which Mark had likely been tearing his hair out over --

until he figured out Chris's deal, which unfortunately was still a work in progress.

One thing Mark had reminded Chris -- he, or anyone, could log on with a fake account and roam around, search. Not for DNA, not *that* deep a search, but simple non-DNA family tree stuff.

So you had Marlon Studebakker, 56, Detroit, Michigan . . . and in Gedmatch there were a bunch of other connected Studebakkers, most of them in the upper midwest as well . . . and Chris committed three or four to memory so he'd hopefully be able to talk his way into Marlon's door.

He rolled into Mo-town Saturday before noon, the first couple sections not great, but frankly a step up from even the Tenderloin in San Francisco . . . and Marlon's neighborhood, son of a gun, was actually pretty okay.

And luckily pinpointing his address had been a piece of cake, a simple white pages search and there he was front and center and the age matching to cinch it . . . and no surprise, that someone who offers their DNA to the world as public fodder, wouldn't check a box that kept their name and address *out* of the old-fashioned phone book.

The guy lived near Greektown, a lively stretch not far from old downtown, and in a high-rise building that was probably considered luxurious in its day, say the 1970's, and now was rougher around the edges, metal windows that could use the upgrade to double panes, shabby terraces, a fountain down below not working currently and with big rust stains in the pond. But you had a doorman, and underground parking it looked like -- and what more did you need?

Chris announced himself as Rich Studebakker, and the doorman did the intercom thing and buzzed Chris no problem through the main door. The apartment was 6 stories up, most of the units overlooking a central atrium, and that thing had seen better days as well.

A guy opened up and Chris sure hoped it was Marlon and it was -- and a weird thing happens . . . when they shake hands, instead of letting go, Marlon pulls him in and embraces him.

“I apologize for that,” he said, “but it’s not every day I meet a new Studebakker. Damn! . . . How on earth did you find me, Rich?”

Chris’s first thought was wow, maybe there really *is* a Rich Studebakker out there that this guy’s been *waiting* on -- and that he should have reviewed that Gedmatch family tree a bit more carefully and chosen a better first name. But oh well.

Marlon sits him down and right away is bringing out the schnapps and the little glasses, oh boy, shots now . . . and Chris could see he’d have to go along with it . . . and would there be a chance to distract this guy?

They talked about politics and lifestyle issues and fortunately Marlon never asked where he was from, since if Chris answered Duluth for example that might not go over as well if Marlon was assuming he was the Rich Studebakker from Champaign, Illinois. Or maybe it would have made no difference, and Marlon never *knew* of a specific Rich, but just enjoyed *all* family dynamics, as the more the merrier.

They talked a little business and finance, and dang . . . this guy was retired already from the auto industry. 31 years at GM, the last 12 with a corner office and a personal secretary, and Marlon matter of factly told you he started there right out of high school, in the mail room.

This was all interesting enough, and Marlon was admittedly someone you could admire, but that wasn’t why we were here. We were *here* . . . Chris reminded himself . . . to see about me avoiding possible arrest and prosecution and implementation of the electric chair.

“Changing it up for just a second,” Chris said, “you wouldn’t have a computer handy would you? By chance? . . . I mean it doesn’t have to be right now, no emergency. I’m going to Scottsdale next week is all, and I

want to confirm a couple things, which I hate doing on my phone -- being on the road and all.”

Marlon said of *course* he did, and to come here, and please make yourself comfortable . . . and Chris followed him into the bedroom . . . and the son of gun, being acutely polite it was turning out, closes the door to give him privacy and says shout if you need something.

You weren't surprised Marlon might be old school, and yep you had to turn on the computer and wait for it to warm up and load, which wasn't breaking any records, and finally Chris got on and went to Gedmatch . . . and now, the moment of truth, the only reason he diverted himself the 400 hundred odd miles to get here . . . could you log on.

Meaning as *Marlon*. So there was the sign in screen, and you stuck the cursor into the username box, and hovered, and then clicked the blank white . . . and you're waiting for autofill to do its thing . . . and it's not looking good.

Chris reloaded the page and tried it again -- and zip. All blank. Nothing showing up, now even a tease.

He thought of one more thing, that had bailed him out once, when he was trying to buy a spec tennis paddle off ebay once, and couldn't hook up his PayPal account -- that in Google Chrome, which Marlon did have going -- if you were lucky, there was a way to find this stuff, your saved passwords.

Chris google how to accomplish that . . . and you had the usual 8 steps at least . . . settings, and advanced, and security, yada yada -- and that still got him nowhere, but in the search results someone pointed to an *updated* method, and he messed around with that enough to where it actually worked.

And Marlon's password for Gedmatch was showing as:

BiggestHam1964

Wow. So Chris hustled back onto the Gedmatch screen, forgetting just one important component, that you of course need the goddamn *username* as well.

Let's see . . . maybe just try **Marlon**, or **marlonstudebakker** all one word, but that was going to be silly . . . and Chris thought of Google itself, that people are often signed into that, if they've been working their gmail or whatnot . . . and Chris angled the cursor to the M in the purple circle in the upper right corner of *that* screen . . . and he held his breath and hovered, and there was Marlon's email address.

So for God sakes plug that in -- and he did and added the discovered password and he clicked *Enter* . . . and there was that ultra-satisfying moment where the web server was doing something -- positive, on your behalf -- and Chris was in.

It wasn't user friendly in there, it felt more like a high school class project in the infancy of the information superhighway, lots of raw data floating around and crude links that were straight out of the earliest HTML days . . . but Chris had done a dry run back in the motel last night under his fake account . . . and he knew his way around -- sort of.

The main thing, he remembered you find your user profile first, you click around in there until get to your DNA profile (all the *you* and *yours* meaning *Marlon's* now obviously) -- and then you do 6 things.

- 1 You locate your DNA kit in your profile.
- 2 You highlight said DNA kit
- 3 You check a box next to your DNA kit, indicating you are the authorized representative of said DNA kit and you want it deleted.
- 4 You answer yes when it asks are you sure?
- 5 You hit Enter . . . and delete the motherfucker.
- 6 You log off and sign back in, and make sure it worked.

Marlon called in from the other room when Chris was taking care of Step 4, would he like club soda and some Ritz crackers and cheese, and Chris called back that he'd love some in a minute and was almost done reviewing the Scottsdale itinerary.

Step 6 was a success, and if Marlon had offered champagne at this point as well, that would have been more than fine . . . and he shut the computer back down and went back in the other room and spent another hour and a half with the guy.

He wasn't even sure he had it straight what Marlon *was* -- in relation to the real *him*, Chris Seely -- forget the Rich person -- but he thought it was third cousins or worse, he (Chris) and Marlon.

And now that he could relax and concentrate better he tried to size up this guy -- were there any Seely (or Weeding, his mom's side) family traits evident in him -- and Chris honestly couldn't see anything there, but again, he was a nice man and someone you might look up again, who knows.

Chris did feel bad double-crossing him with the computer and Gedmatch stuff, and he asked Marlon if he could donate to his favorite charity.

Marlon said what for, and Chris didn't want to get into a thing, and he was getting itchy to get back on the road, and he put a couple hundred bucks on the coffee table and told Marlon whichever charity, or whatever, *period*, don't worry about it, it's all good.

Chapter 16

It looked like 2300 miles and change, Detroit to Seattle, so, not how you would do it normally if you were headed back to the Bay Area, but Chris figured you know what, 10-12 hours a day for three days isn't going to kill you, and he'd never been that way, so why not.

It was pretty easy driving, you combined 94 and 90, and you stopped in -- or zoomed past, depending -- some interesting spots. Such as St. Cloud, Minnesota; Fargo, North Dakota; Missoula, Montana; Yakima, Washington. And he found a good old Super 8 off the interstate in Tacoma, and in the morning you'd be on Highway 5, where you'd barely have to think through Washington State, or Oregon, or even California until you got to the junction near Sacramento where you wanted you make sure you went right instead of that left -- which *would* leave you screwed up.

At a rest stop near Gold Hill, Oregon -- Jackson County -- Chris gave Chandler a call. This was Thursday afternoon, April 26th, two weeks since he'd picked up the DNA memory stick at the lab in Gardena and left L.A.

He'd balked on bothering Chandler on that earlier thing, but he *could* use his help here and tried not to feel guilty about it.

"Uh-oh," Chandler answered with.

"That bad, uh?" Chris said.

"It's all relative," Chandler said. "If you were in *town* -- which I take it you are *not*, in fact I hear traffic rushing by and wind as well, I believe -- that would be better."

"More predictable, you're saying. Likely as innocent a call, as 'do you want to hit a few balls'."

“Exactly. And you *know* something, we should. I won’t have you do those drills any more, we’ll just play.”

What Chris interpreted here, was Chandler must have lost a couple tennis partners recently. No way Chris was on his immediate radar before. That last guy for example, when Chris dropped by the courts and Chandler was putting a beating on this guy and sort of celebrating it too -- *that* guy for sure wasn’t coming back.

“More to the point,” Chris said, “and I know you’re getting tired of this . . . and I don’t blame you . . . but can you possibly procure a bit more information for me? One more guy? Maybe two actually, together?”

A big demonstrative exhale from Chandler into the mouthpiece, but he asked what did you need, and Chris said there were these two guys up in Marin County, young black dudes -- and he wanted to at least inform himself, were they wreaking havoc all over the place.

“Or,” Chandler said, “was it just an isolated experience?”

This guy had a way of making you feel pretty small, seeing through your decorative BS in about half a second.

Though Chandler wouldn’t *necessarily* assume that anything pertained to Chris here -- right? Just that Chris probably heard about something that *did* happen -- or *might* have happened -- and wanted to explore it a bit further.

Either way, Chris wouldn’t even have run it by Chandler this time, since it’s not his normal territory, except that Chandler back toward the beginning -- and what was that deal even *about* now? But bottom line, Chandler surprisingly had a solid contact in Sonoma County -- not Marin per se but right above it, likely good enough.

Oh yeah, that was where Chris wanted to make sure he wasn’t under the radar up there, which he assured Chandler would have been real goofy and misplaced and completely off target -- and Chandler to his credit didn’t

pass judgement (for the most part) and discretely found out that he currently wasn't.

So yes, Chandler might be able to get a word back to him on the pricks who robbed him at gunpoint on Mount Tamalpais, when he was killing time while Kay her Nancy friend engaged in their shopping spree at the Corte Madera mall.

Chris said, "One guy did more of the talking -- from what I understand. Shorter of the two . . . also what I heard, there was a brown car involved. Not a Honda or Toyota most likely. More like a Hyundai or Kia. Like I said, lightish brown."

What happened that night was when he was forking over the money and explaining why he wasn't going to give up his wallet as well, he noticed the shadowy outline of one car in the parking lot, the trees mostly in the way. No idea what it was, except that it belonged to these a-holes.

Then though, a minute later, he did see the car better, after they'd exited the pull-out out of view and had swung around and were headed back down the hill, and you wouldn't have been sure it was the same car, except there were two black faces in front.

The other issue being, at that moment, Chris was in the middle of seeing stars from just having been pistol whipped in the head -- but he did process the vehicle.

"Unh-huh," Chandler said. "That it?"

"There's a little more I think, about the car, from what I heard. If it helps. It sat a bit low, like they can these days, and it had those hub caps that spin around funny."

"You mean the opposite direction of the wheels?"

"I think so. I'm guessing they keep spinning when a guy stops at a light, I think I've seen that."

"*That* it?"

“I’m afraid so. I wasn’t given much else . . . What do you think? Any ideas?”

“My experience up there?” Chandler said “The bulk of your crime -- the black population you’re referring to -- that’s going to be based in the city, or the Oakland/Richmond corridor.”

“Kind of my impression too,” Chris said, the implication being Marin County was one of the whitest -- and richest -- counties on the planet. And it *could* happen of course -- but you didn’t typically run across inner city black guys driving across the bridge to go for an evening hike on Mount Tam -- or even rob someone there who *was* doing that.

“Let’s see what my guy says,” Chandler said. “Meanwhile don’t do anything stupid.” Chandler hung up.

And this wasn’t a normal finishing comment from Chandler, who kept it clinical and relatively objective . . . and Chris was startled for a moment, that *Holy Mackerel*, did he *know* something?

Chris convinced himself no . . . because nothing *happened* here . . . on *his* end . . . and he reminded himself that he’d been a simple victim in this one for Gosh sakes.

Chandler’s manner and admonition did confirm though -- didn’t it -- that who are we kidding, Chandler probably understands the *big* picture . . . and Chris trying to be coy and cagey and otherwise BS him on the petty details of these things -- so what, the guy *gets* it.

Friday Chris was almost home, at least the Bay Area, and he decided to call Mark and tell him the good news, what happened out in Detroit. It had been another post card day and he’d cut over at Clear Lake and out to the coast, and now was back in Bodega Bay, one of his favorite spots, and he dropped down off Highway 1 past the crab boats and the marine lab, and drove up the bluff to Bodega Head.

It was more crowded than usual for a week day out here, but someone told him the whales were visible, meaning the annual migration of the gray

whales from the feeding grounds of Alaska to the warm lagoons of Baja, which Chris could never quite wrap his head around. He'd seen whales a couple times from this spot, rolling around in the kelp beds surprisingly close to shore, not appearing in any hurry.

Maybe he'd take a good look after he reached Mark.

"Oh hey," Mark said. "Still to trying to figure it out, work the kinks. I can tell you're concerned."

"Yeah well, I appreciate it," Chris said. "But one good thing -- long story short -- I took care of that late addition, the Studebakker guy out in Michigan."

"Jeepers," Mark said. "I mean . . . what *do* you mean?"

"It wasn't fancy. Leave it at that for now. I'll give you more detail another time, though it's not real inspiring . . . The good thing though, at least I could relax driving home."

You could hear Mark clicking around. "No," he said, "I'm still seeing the guy."

"You have *got* to be kidding," Chris said . . . and he made sure Mark was on Gedmatch and had the correct name.

"Hey sorry man," Mark said, "but no . . . You *what* . . . I'm taking a *guess*. You convinced the guy that another genealogy site would be more advantageous? And he deleted himself from this one?"

"Something like that. Yeah," Chris said, starting to feel more than a little sick.

Mark said, "Problem we're seeing with Gedmatch -- and it's very clean overall, mind you, the massive engines they're having to run, and essentially via open source volunteers -- but one bug is its *cache*."

"Uh," Chris said.

"Meaning -- the database tends to retain information unnecessarily."

Chris had no come-back to that one. What could you say? He did everything right, it sure seemed like . . . and it didn't matter.

“However,” Mark said, “and this is the exciting part. I’ve come up with a new point of entry, different foundation entirely. I should be able to a) contain the re-peats like we were discussing before, and b) handle the new entries this time -- such as your friend in question in Michigan -- not to mention we get notified when a new one of these folks joins up.”

Chris said okay then, and please don’t torture yourself . . . though both statements were incorrect . . . it *wasn’t* okay that Chris was still currently hanging out to dry, probably, if Law Enforcement took a good hard look . . . and in terms of Mark torturing himself, please *do* that, if that’s what it takes.

There’d been an article in Sports Illustrated this week on the ‘69 Mets coming out of nowhere and winning the World Series, and not that it pertained exactly but it reminded Chris of *another* Met, from ten years later, a relief pitcher named Tug McGraw, and he had a mantra which caught on, “You gotta believe.”

Right now -- with Mark, the computer quirks, the DNA profiles, the unlikely relatives -- Chris figured you could do worse than keep your fingers crossed and buy into what Tug McGraw was selling . . . and he got back in the car and headed to San Francisco.

Chapter 17

Sunday morning Gloria had announced that she was trying a new take on Eggs Benedict, with an Asian-fusion twist, and it was a recipe one of the cutting-edge chefs in Hayes Valley gave away for a little extra PR . . . and for Chris not to be too hard on her if it didn't work out.

And of course each of Gloria's culinary presentations tended to outdo that last, and this was no exception. "I might have told you this before," Chris said, "but even if it *wasn't* incredible I'd tell you it *was* . . . but no need for that here."

Gloria said, "You're saying you lie then, on a semi-regular basis."

"Not with you, no. You missed my whole point."

"I understand," she said, and she wagged a finger at him, smiling, like I know you're a naughty boy sometimes . . . but you could tell she believed him that he was loving this particular meal.

Chris's phone rang and for better or worse it was Chandler . . . and you couldn't disrespect Gloria's work right in the middle of the action and excuse yourself for a moment, so Chris told him he'd call back in 20 minutes.

The *for better or worse* reaction was because Chris had forgotten by now (mostly) about getting in touch with Chandler from the rest stop off I-5 in Gold Hill, Oregon, on Thursday.

In fact he was mentally set to return to Manhattan Beach, either later today or first thing in the morning. His current measure of guilt for calling on Gloria once again was front and center -- but meanwhile, dang, this Eggs Benedict concoction was something else . . . and why not another cup of

fresh-dripped organic Bali blue mountain dark bean coffee, which Gloria was coming over with at the moment, before worrying about that guy.

Finally Chris did excuse himself and went outside on Jackson and took a slow walk toward Arguello, where you turn into the Presidio.

Chandler answered pretty quick and said, "Here's the scoop, take it however you want. Limiting the details here -- there is a recent record, two guys, petty thefts, one taller one shorter, lower Marin County, some vandalism. Mostly it's car break-ins, to be honest. They did link them to employing a similar vehicle to the one you described."

"Ah."

"The two fellas in question reside in Marin City."

"Yeah, Jeez," Chris said, "not a huge surprise I guess." Marin City being an anomaly, a cluster of housing projects built in the 1950's in lower Mill Valley that you saw from the freeway as you started up Waldo Grade toward the Golden Gate Bridge.

Chandler's point earlier made sense, that black guys committing crimes in upscale Marin County likely would have come from one of the Bay Area urban centers -- since there sure weren't many thug black guys living in Marin -- with the exception maybe of Marin City.

Chandler continued. "One of them, a James DuPree, 22 years old, has been apprehended and detained since April 3rd. The other half of the pair is underaged. No name on him. Spent 72 hours in Juvenile Hall in San Rafael, also from April 3rd . . . Anything else?"

"No, wow, thanks. Once again. What can I say? . . . Do they know which one was the taller one, and which one was the short guy?"

"Give me a break," Chandler said. "That all?"

Chris said he wouldn't bother him again, this should do it . . . and he added that Chandler didn't sound that great today and hopefully not on account of this . . . and Chandler said nah, his shoulder's giving him trouble, the damn bursitis again, and he hasn't been able to pick up a racquet for a

couple days . . . and Chris said you'll be fine, and Chandler said how would *you* know, and they wrapped things up.

Gloria's friend Tina was having a get-together at her house in Lafayette, celebrating the renovation being finished, and even Gloria, who could spend money with the best of 'em, seemed to be rolling her eyes, pointing out that the house was already perfect, didn't need a darn thing. Anyhow she invited Chris, said Tina's parties are always fun, and there might even be some people Chris would know from back in high school, that there are a few connections.

Chris said that's okay, he's got it covered today, going to keep it low key . . . and she made him promise he'd check in later, and Chris got in the car and drove to Marin City.

The housing projects were hanging off the side of the hill in the eucalyptus trees, spaced out, and there was one road up there and one back down, but you had these flatlands at the bottom, and that's what Chris always thought of *as* Marin City, because there was a popular flea market there on the weekends.

And it was one of those now, a perfectly fine Sunday afternoon, and it was dead here, and had been ever since they decided 15 years ago that the flea market didn't contribute enough to the local economy, considering the valuable space it wasted -- and in all-American fashion the dodo birds on whatever commission approved a commercial development that would rival the worst that a Gary, Indiana, for example, might have to offer.

In any case, they did have a fast food joint and Chris had zero appetite but you could sit down in there and at least mull it over -- were you barking up the wrong tree here and should you lick your wounds once and for all and forget it?

The girl behind the counter was black, so you didn't have to be a rocket scientist to assume she was local, that she probably just walked

down the hill to work -- and as she was putting the lid on his iced tea he asked if she was still in high school, and where would that be, that kids living around here would go.

She said yes she was, and she was talkative -- that they hired you here at 15, younger than the In-n-Outs and Burger Kings, and it was a good opportunity, and her goal was to work up to district manager.

Chris said don't you need to manage *this* place first, aren't you skipping a step, and she laughed and said that was true but she liked to think ahead. Chris said yeah, when it comes down to it, *good* to skip steps . . . and he repeated the question about the high school, and she answered that she and two of her friends go to Tam, and one goes to Redwood, and one goes to San Rafael High.

This pointed out of course that there wasn't a whole lot of population in Marin City, period. You had like 4 or 5 buildings up on the hill, HUD apartments, and that was it. Yes, maybe they were adding a few more down below, but the bottom line was you'd only have a handful of minority kids in any given grade, at *any* of these schools.

Leaving San Rafael out of it, which was the furthest away and less likely . . . between Tam and Redwood, Chris knew them both a little bit, and he'd had the stint teaching in Terra Linda himself, 8 miles up the road.

There wasn't a lot else to do about it today, unless you considered driving up to the projects *themselves* and banging on a couple doors like a fool and standing out for sure -- and what would you *ask*, exactly?

So he drove over to Redwood, got the feel for it again, it hadn't changed or expanded much, it was still parking-lot heavy with the main school and gym set back and a bunch of temporary classrooms lined up near where the canal came through below the old railroad tracks, which were long gone in favor of a bike trail.

Then he swung over to Tam, older main structure, some character to it, up a lot of steps to get to the main entrance. This was on Miller Avenue where it opened up and started curving around toward Almonte Boulevard.

Chris figured there were probably mini-school bus runs from Marin City to both of them, Redwood and Tam, but if he had to guess, he'd side with the girl in the fast food place, and play the percentages and put the hold-up kid going to Tam.

You'd give it a shot anyhow, you were in it to this extent -- not sure who you owed it to, but someone.

Monday, Tamalpais High School let out at 2:26, just like it told you on the website, and the old clock tower read more like 2:40 but the chimes at least rang on time, and the spring 2018 crop of students started pouring down those front steps to Miller Avenue.

One thing that hadn't changed Chris noticed, and probably universal to every generation, was the kids tended to gravitate to the ones that looked like them.

You could pick out the wanabee hippies, the cleaner cut pre-yuppies, the jocks with the sunglasses and Nike shorts, the brainy group with the regular glasses and more disheveled appearance, and so on . . . and you had a small Hispanic cluster . . . and a group of black kids, getting onto a yellow school bus out front now, and another group hustling to catch up before the thing left without them . . . which was unlikely, but Chris remembered those days himself, you didn't screw around with your transportation.

In the second group Chris thought he spotted the tall kid who held him up, the shorter one apparently being the 22-year-old who they were holding and charging with something.

But you weren't sure, and Chris got behind the yellow bus and followed it the 2 and a half miles south to Marin City.

The bus let everyone out on sidewalk section of the service road, down below in the flats where the fast food place was, and Chris supposed it *would* be a little tricky for the busses, going all the way up top, and having to negotiate something up there in order to get down.

It worked fine, the lower drop-off, the kids were filing out, no one complaining, and most of them started off up the hill, and few were heading to get something to eat probably . . . and meanwhile two kids were walking the *other* way now, *south*, and Jeez, toward the freeway, 101, and the tall kid Chris had his eye on was one of them.

Hmm. Chris left the Malibu in the fast food parking lot and followed along.

It was clear soon enough that the two guys heading in the direction of 101, which was zooming past two blocks away, meant they were likely going *under* the thing, toward Sausalito. There weren't really any other options.

On the Sausalito side you had the northern finger of San Francisco Bay, and there was a waterfront -- not the touristy one in the main part of Sausalito but a more blue collar one here, with boatbuilders and welders and fiberglassers sprinkled in with a couple of fishermen's marinas.

The two kids didn't go that far though, they turned right, went a short block, turned right again into a neighborhood, and half a block left . . . and there was a city park with slides and swings and benches and some ducks running around . . . but also a full length basketball court.

Gee . . . they're going to play some ball it looks like. That simple?

Chris watched it unfold, and yeah it was. The two guys called *next*, waited until the current game finished, picked the best three guys off the losing team to be on their team -- exactly how Chris and his friends had always done it -- and the winner would take on the next set of challengers.

The kid wasn't bad, he could definitely leap but his ball skills could use work, and the kid with him was the more complete player, though the (probable) robber-kid had more upside to his game, Chris concluded.

Meanwhile . . . this was going to go on for a while, a couple hours probably, and Chris went back and got the car, so he'd be ready.

Around 5:30 a fresh group of guys showed up, older, probably getting off work around now, and this was their routine.

The earlier players had enough, most of them, and it seemed that included the two kids -- but the new team needed an extra player and asked them, and you could see the other kid motion that he was going, and Chris's kid thought about it a second and shrugged and played the one more game.

This innocent little tweak opened the door for Chris, and when the new game ended and the tall kid had rounded the first corner and was heading to back to Bridgeway, the main drag that put you back under 101 and over to the Marin City projects, Chris pulled alongside and opened the passenger window and said to get in please, he just wanted to talk to him a minute, clear the air about what happened.

The kid looked at him like *who you kidding honky* and he had on the tough guy scowl, but Chris could tell the kid knew, *remembered*.

Chris said, "Either *you're* going to have to get in my friend, or *I'll* have to figure out a way to run you over. And then I'll report you after that. And then we *won't* be good . . . Which we *can* be in about 2 seconds if you get in." Chris now giving him back his own medicine, laying the death stare on him -- which Chris wasn't bad at by now, having practiced a fair amount in the mirror.

And, there was a chance Chris really *would* have been true to his word and run the kid over, who knows.

And there was apparently enough there, projected out, that the kid picked up on and wasn't sure about *either* -- that this white boy motherfucker just might be crazy enough to *do* it.

So the kid reluctantly pulled the handle and got in, and said, "Just so you know mister, I didn't got nothing to do with it."

“I *know* you didn’t,” Chris said, and he stepped on it and made the yellow light, and instead of the left to Marin City he got on 101 North.

And it’d been a blur up there that evening, frankly, Chris didn’t have straight anymore which one pulled the gun on him and who said what, though yeah, he did think it was the older guy, the shorter one, who pistol whipped him in the side of the head.

The specifics didn’t really matter, and the kid said, “Where you going?”

“What’s your name?” Chris said.

The kid answered Tyson, not real loud, and Chris took the Blythedale exit, then the service road that bypassed some of the bullshit clog where the drivers kept trying to turn left, and then the short cut he knew, Hansen Avenue, and you came out at the 2AM Club, the start of the road up to Mount Tam.

“I just want to show you something, and then we got it covered,” Chris said. “You have a nice vertical jump by the way. You play high school ball? Currently? Or just pick up games?”

Tyson didn’t say anything.

Chris said, “Which is fine too. Sports are too organized now. First and foremost, you want to be having fun.”

Nothing from the kid.

Chris said, “All this is, I just want to get my 60 bucks back and like I say, we move on. How much you got on you?”

Tyson didn’t even check. He said, “Sheeeeeiiit dude? I already tol you. It warn’t me that motherfucking janked you!”

“Can you call the other guy, get the money from *him*? Where is he? Let’s go see him then.”

They were halfway up there now, the road getting steep, and the Bootjack Trail and its spin-offs were a couple miles further -- and that’s of course where Chris started *off* that night before making a careless turn a

mile in, and almost getting lost before surfacing in the parking lot of the other, substantially *lesser* used trail -- and proceeding to run into Tyson and his bud.

Which they coming to presently, and Chris put on his blinker, even though there was no traffic at all up here currently, and he turned into the lot and stuck it back near the restrooms where they pulled the gun on him.

Tyson was shaking his head. You couldn't tell for *sure* if he was scared yet, but Chris figured he was.

If *I* was *him* at this point, Chris was thinking, I'd consider making a break for it. Probably not back down the road, giving this insane white boy a *real* shot of running me over -- but into the *woods*, find me one of them *trails*.

Chris said, "If you open the door and run into the woods, you might make it, but if I find you in there, I'll shoot you and kill you. I *will*." Tyson's eyes glanced over and Chris was nodding his head -- not the fast nod, not the slow one, but the no-doubt-about-it one.

Chris said, "You have a mom and dad, together, you live with, or what?"

Nothing from Tyson.

"Because whether you do or *not* -- I saw something out there on the court. It gave me some optimism . . . You know what that is?"

No reaction.

"You can make it," Chris said. "You got a spirit. There's a joy in you, if you can find it. That's the hard part, but it's there. Can't say the same for everyone."

Nothing from Tyson, except he was licking his lips slightly now.

"You know what tough guys do? Real ones?" No answer. "They respect themselves," Chris said.

"And that's not easy," he continued. "But it's worth it. And you're gonna get there."

Nothing.

“Right?” Chris said. “Just *agree* with me -- you don’t even have to *mean* it -- and we’re done.”

Tyson turned. “You fucking crazy,” he said.

“Or how about this,” Chris said. “Smile. Just smile. You have it *in* you, I saw it on the court. Let me see it.”

Chris waited long enough, and Tyson contorted a smile.

“That wasn’t one,” Chris said. “It was fake. Do it again . . . Come on, we gotta get out of here.”

Tyson smiled again. It wasn’t perfect, but it would do.

Chris said, “Do you ever need help?” Tyson didn’t say anything.

“Here’s my number.” He wrote it on a scrap of paper and handed it to the kid.

“If you do,” Chris said, “you call me. Never worry about it. When or where or what. You *call* me . . . Are we good?”

It was barely there, but Tyson gave a microscopic nod.

Chris took a moment. “Okay,” he said, “out of the car.”

The kid was confused for a second but did as he was told, and as he was shutting the door Chris told him to take it easy on the way down, and watch the traffic.

Chapter 18

Holly said, “Of all the pieces of feedback that have been delivered here, that had to be the stupidest. Not to mention, the most insulting.”

“I would agree,” Ned said.

“That makes three of us,” Rosie said.

Finch cleared his throat. “I believe what Chris was touching on -- and yes, he could have framed his thought in a decidedly more diplomatic manner -- is the continuity aspect. Does the reader -- *can* the reader -- follow along adequately.” Finch glanced at Holly, all of this having to do with her latest installment, which she just got through delivering to the group.

“Well I like Micah being *conflicted*,” Rosie said. “That keeps me guessing, what might happen with the high-diver dude and that road construction thinggy.”

“Same here,” Ned said, “it flows for me fine . . . Also the dentist in Palm Springs with the bad finger . . . I mean we’re talking *sub*-characters, but that was a nice touch.”

“*Thanks*, you guys,” Holly said, making eye contact with both of them, and leaving Chris out of it.

Finch said, “Excellent then . . . Now, for next week, we’ll slow the action temporarily . . . and ask each of your main characters to reflect on what they’re thankful for, in the plot line to date.”

“Oh Jesus,” Ned said.

“No kidding,” Chris said.

“I’ll admit,” Rosie said, “I was waiting for a bit more of a qualifier.”

“I hate to agree with Chris tonight,” Holly said, “but Terry, that sounds awful. You’re going to grind us to a halt, with an assignment like that.”

“Gosh,” Finch said, “that’s quite a reaction, and one I frankly didn’t expect . . . All right then, how about . . . they reflect on what they’re *not* thankful for?”

“I like it,” Holly said.

“Fits much better,” Rosie said.

Ned agreed and he said to Finch, “You scared us there for a second, with that first one.”

“You really did,” Chris said.

THE END

**If you’d like to be notified of new releases in this series:
Please join The Rex Bolt Newsletter.**

The Chris Seely Vigilante Justice Series:

Who Needs Justice? (Book 1)

Justice On Ice (Book 2)

Dirty Justice (Book 3)

Justice Squared (Book 4)

Justice Wrap (Book 5)

Justice Blank (Book 6)

Justice Redux (Book 7)

Justice Spiked (Book 8)

Justice Dig (Book 9)

Justice Edge (Book 10)

Contact: RexBoltAuthor@gmail.com

Copyright © 2019 Rex Bolt

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, organizations, events or locales, or to any other works of fiction, is entirely coincidental.