

JUSTICE ON ICE

by REX BOLT



Chris Seely
Vigilante Justice Book 2

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ONE

The third day down there, Chris taking it slow, enjoying the bikini offerings along The Strand, some guy on a bicycle almost runs him over.

Chris didn't like this, but he'd forgotten about it by the time he reached the Manhattan Beach Pier--except there was the same guy sitting on a bench now, watching the late-afternoon surfers down below.

Chris took a seat next to the idiot and said, "I really look that old to you?"

The guy squinted at him. "Come again, bud?"

"What were you doing, about 25 back there? I almost had to adjust my power-walk to avoid you."

"That's pretty funny," the guy said, placing it.

Chris said, "It wasn't the 'get out of the way, old man', specifically, that hit a nerve."

"Let me guess. You didn't like the tone."

"But forget that for a second . . . I'm really an old man, is your impression?"

"You're asking for an honest answer?" the guy said, amused. "Well compared to the studly population we got around here . . . what do *you* think?"

Chris had to admit he could see his point. It was a little intimidating exercising here, a more intense vibe for sure than the Marina Green in San Francisco. Everyone looked great. Even the legitimate old guys looked fitter and moved better than he did.

Either way, there was the guy's bicycle leaning up against the railing. It looked like a fancy hybrid bike, with about 80 gears, and bells and whistles up the wazoo.

Then again, it could have been a knock-off version from the rack at Target.

Chris watched the surfers for a minute. Only medium-sized waves today, short rides, but a lot of skill down there.

He got off the bench and picked up the guy's bike and threw it over the side of the pier into the ocean.

The guy popped up and looked over the railing, and turned to Chris with a wide-open mouth, and started racing to the front end of the pier where the stairs took you down to the beach.

Chris realized there was one surfer in close who he hadn't seen when he flung the thing over. Luckily the guy wasn't aware of the bicycle plunging into the water nearby, and more importantly it didn't hit him.

It did seem like the right time to start moving and to probably blend into the throng, so he headed back to The Strand and turned south toward Hermosa, and by this time the bike guy had taken off his shoes and was wading into the water, his head swiveling around like a bird.

More interesting to Chris was the beach volleyball game taking shape right in front of him, four gals who knew what they were doing, the serving and the diving and the spiking all at a high level, and the outfits micro-swimsuits, at best.

"You're probably wondering," someone said, "how they don't burn their feet."

Chris was hoping the person wasn't talking to him, but he was, a pleasant-enough-looking guy with a backwards Dodgers cap and a newspaper under his arm.

"They still read papers in L.A. then," Chris said.

"Not sure," the guy said. "I pick up the leftovers at Peet's. Not much bite to them anymore though."

“You got that right, I was in the business once,” Chris said, thinking about running into Rich Tomlinson that time at the Booker Lounge, comparing notes on what they were doing these days, Chris discreetly asking how you might successfully commit a little murder if you needed to, what would be the best way.

“What interested me,” the guy said, “was you tossed it, and then you took your time. Nothing that urgent bothering you, where you had to hightail it out of there.”

Chris said, “Jeez . . . I was that obvious then?” A little alarmed that he hadn’t blended back in after all.

The guy said, “I’m watching a couple Mexican kids reeling in a pretty big fish. Something I always wanted to try, but never committed myself to.”

“I know . . . you have to be willing to get a little dirty, plus all that time.”

“And then you gotta filet it, I guess, or some other shit,” the guy said. “So I look to the left and there’s this strange scene playing out, the metal going up and over . . . I can’t help wondering, are they having some kind of logical beef, or is it just some guy off his rocker.”

“So you followed me to find out,” Chris said. “Answer your original question, I wasn’t wondering how they don’t burn their feet . . . but how do the outfits stay in place?”

“They don’t always.”

“Oh. Not a big deal. Just something to be curious about, I guess.”

“You sound like me,” the guy said. “Let’s get a drink.”

There was a three-block stretch on Manhattan Beach Boulevard, coming up the hill from the water, where you could zig-zag bar to bar and they all felt pretty much the same. Cozy establishments, partial views of the Pacific, just beat-up enough without overdoing it.

“If you go local,” the guy was saying, who’d introduced himself as Ned, “you need to be wearing flip-flops. Take a look around.”

Chris said, “When I was a kid, on vacation, we used to call them zorries. The strap though, it digs into my foot between the toes.”

They were in *The Crow’s Nest*, not quite 4 o’clock, a little table in back, sipping whiskey sours. Ned seemed to know everyone, and introduced him to Cindy, the waitress.

“Are you new?” she said, friendly.

“You mean, as opposed to passing through?” Chris said. “I think so, yeah.”

“Well it looks like you’re in good hands already with Neddy,” she said, and left them alone.

“The ee after your name,” Chris said. “Sounds like there’s some depth there.”

“Yeah, well,” Ned said. “Where you holing up at, anyway?”

“Ah, I got an apartment. Month-to-month. Kinda re-inventing myself.”

“Yeah? . . . What’s so important you gotta reinvent yourself *from?*”

The correct answer of course would be: *From killing guys . . . Or at least lining them up that direction.*

Obviously you couldn’t put it that way, so Chris said, “Up north. I had a medical scare . . . I think I’m out of the woods, but something like that, it makes you act different.”

“You’re out of the woods, how?” The guy not dancing around it, which Chris could appreciate.

“Well I go in, figuring they’re going to give me a couple Alka-Seltzers . . . I come out, I’m driving down to Colma pricing burial plots . . . A few days later, when you get yourself half-way stabilized, you start thinking funny thoughts.”

“I can imagine. What kind of thoughts? . . . You want another?”

Chris said he wouldn't mind.

“One of my goals coming down here,” Chris said, “cut back on the hard liquor. And the free radicals. Someone lectured me on those too. I'm off to a flying start.”

“Your lecture-person needs an update,” Ned said, signalling Cindy with two fingers. Chris remembered Allison with the unusual massage, along with examining his tongue and telling him what he needed to work on to improve himself. She was looking at a chart, and he asked her which organs she could tune up. She'd been pretty bossy, but still.

That was back near the beginning, which seemed like a long time ago. Chris counted it off on his fingers, and said, “Right around the end of football, the regular season, is when they death-sentenced me.”

“So we're talking, what, mid-January?” Ned said.

Chris said, “Dang, coming up on nine months now. That's good.” Though at the same time, thinking, *Is that actually very long?*

“So . . . you're saying, the chemo took hold then? You beat it?”

Chris said, “Your name really Ned?”

“No, Lou,” the guy said.

“Cause I'm hearing a touch of New York. And you look pretty Italian, if you pinned me down.”

“Well I'll stop short of calling you a genius for those observations . . . I lost most of the accent. Acting classes out here.”

“It surface sometimes though, where you revert back?”

“It's been known to.”

Chris had no idea where he was going with this Lou, but he supposed it wasn't the worst way to be closing out the day, especially when he didn't have a whole lot else going on. “The acting work?” he said.

“Nah, not great . . . I thought I could come out here and kinda take over the industry. It ain’t that simple.”

Chris said, “You’re reminding me of the guy in *Get Shorty* now . . . The book was a lot better than the movie.”

“Actually,” Lou said, “*The Sopranos* is what you might say triggered my interest in Hollywood. They kind of shift gears there, where the nephew writes a script, and they fly out to get that actor to entertain it.”

“I know who you’re talking about. The half-Indian guy who played Ghandi. He’s not interested, and they send him a message.”

Lou said, “I can’t remember what the final outcome was, did they ever get it into production . . . or was it one of those loose ends they never dealt with.”

Chris said, “That’s something I appreciated about the show . . . They didn’t need to tie everything up into a neat package.”

“You’re right. Like the loose Russian down in the Pine Barrens. You always wonder, is it gonna come back and bite ‘em in the ass.”

“When you brought up *The Sopranos* as your motivation,” Chris said, “I thought it was going to be where Tony has the dream that he’s the traveling salesman, and is at the convention at that hotel in L.A.”

“After he gets shot,” Lou said. “But I thought that was the midwest.”

“Ever shot anyone?” Chris said, the second whiskey sour starting to kick in good.

“Funny,” Lou said, “something I had in mind to ask *you*.”

The place was filling up. Cindy was joined now by another waitress, a platinum-blonde, petite, with her hair up, and some of the regulars were putting their hands on the two of them here and there, friendly and probably harmless in a casual beach town, though maybe not somewhere else.

Chris said, “So what kind of business are you in now? Since the movie-star career bombed, apparently.”

Lou said, “You know . . . a little of this, little of that . . . *business* business.”

“And you’re looking for assistance . . . in some way, shape or form.”

“You tell *me*,” Lou said. Deadpan now, eyes a little colder, and Chris could picture him leaning against the stoop outside a three-family house in East Yonkers, which if that wasn’t the exact neighborhood was close enough.

TWO

You had another balmy evening, definitely so far-so-good in that department, and Chris wondered if October was Indian Summer down here too, like they’re always bragging about in San Francisco as though it’s some incredible local secret.

You of course had the multi-million-dollar mansions in Manhattan Beach, but where Chris was residing, going on four days, was a cheesy apartment complex on McLellan Lane.

There was a worn-out sign sticking up that said *Cheater Five Apts*, and when he filled out the application he asked the owner, a Pakistani guy, what ‘cheater five’ meant and the guy shrugged his shoulders but someone said it was a surfing term from back when everyone rode long boards.

The only water you’d be seeing from here was the rectangular pool in the middle of the complex, all the apartment doors horseshoeing around it.

But you could smell the ocean and more important you could get there easy, and though a dinky one-bedroom seemed obscene at \$2150

a month, he'd sublet his apartment on Broderick for three, as the Bay Area had gone nuts.

His brother Floyd found out he was subletting the place and called him. Floyd was late, it was already a done deal, and they made a little small talk.

It was kind of tense. While Chris was managing--after a couple false starts--to finally shoot the health club guy Thad in the head in Idaho, Floyd in San Francisco was muscling in on Chris's new girlfriend Kim.

He'd gotten off the phone civil with Floyd and didn't ask questions and Floyd didn't volunteer anything, so that was that.

Except walking home now in Manhattan Beach, a nice flowery fragrance in the air, something else crossed his mind.

The guy he'd baseball-batted in the office down here--he couldn't remember his name--it was Chip, there you go--that was for Floyd. Supposedly.

Then when the news comes out, Floyd first telling him he's drinking a toast . . . but as time goes on deciding Chip wasn't that bad.

Jesus.

So Chris wasting that one, was the honest truth. Though he did bring Bethany and that part had been interesting, though ultimately frustrating.

But forget all that. Where he was going now was: *Did this guy from the bar tonight have anything to do with it?*

The guy'd given him his card, and Chris pulled it out and looked at it again.

Component Strategies

Ned Mancuso

Whatever the fuck *that* meant.

And a phone number.

Could this Ned/Lou have been following him around on the pier--nothing to do with him getting into it with the bicycle person, but everything to do with what happened to Chip--and then he conveniently uses the bike incident as a lead-in?

Chris decided that was unlikely, despite Chip probably being connected, having run scams in Vegas, including the one on Floyd, before hauling his sorry self out to sunny So-Cal. In fact the cops initially suspected a mob hit, though they backed off that later.

Chris couldn't think of a logical reason he'd be on anyone's radar re the Chip-bashing . . . so you move on.

This Ned/Lou though--that guy was going to show up again, you could bet on it.

Meanwhile, he got back to McLellan Lane and was looking forward to getting inside, flipping channels and unwinding . . . except there was some action at the pool.

A young couple he'd seen around was arguing. It wasn't real loud, but it sounded serious, and Chris hung on the railing outside his apartment and lit up a cigarette he'd bummed off Ned/Lou, who'd been smoking up a storm in *The Crow's Nest*.

This sounded like an issue with infidelity. Not a surprise. 20-year-old kids, 25 at the most, alcohol probably involved . . . Plus you *did* screw around on people at that age.

It was hard to tell who might be fooling around on who, since they both had histories going. She kept calling him 'You Pig', and her name was Stacey, since he kept saying, "I just need you to level with me Stace."

Chris thought about taking a dip, he'd sweated coming up those hills, but he figured they'd be going at it for a while down there.

He went inside and stretched it out on the recliner, exhaling a big 'aaaah' when he put his head back, thinking dreamy thoughts about the sun and sand and surf, and also the beach volleyball action from today.

The problem though, the recliner was *too* darn comfortable, and you'd fall asleep in it, which he did tonight watching the renovation show with the lovey-dovey couple down in Waco, Texas.

The commotion woke him up, punctuated by the sound of a two-way radio. He rubbed his eyes, saw it was 2:45, and opened the door a crack to see what you had.

There were four policeman and a couple squad cars and soon enough they paraded both Stacey and the 'You Pig' kid out of their apartment into separate vehicles and drove off. Stacey was holding an ice pack on her face.

Chris considered it a few minutes, thinking that's too bad but it could have been worse, and closed the door and got in the real bed this time and konked out for good.

Which concerned him when he finally woke up--was something physical starting to rear its head after all?--but his energy was good and he chalked it up to his new environment and headed back into town to begin his day at Starbucks.

As recently as a couple months ago he would have gone straight for a run, before coffee or human contact. It was the backbone of his day, and was part of the deal when he'd had to drown the Croatian--Jeez, he really was forgetting the names of these guys, that's not good.

Then he tweaked his knee, like an idiot trying to do too much, a trail run on Mount Tam, and he went to the doctor--not his normal doctor, Billy, who would have hammered him for ignoring treatment

for his supposed death-sentence--and the new doc gave his tweak a name and Chris decided why be a hero, and he hadn't run since.

You could sit outside at Starbucks on this little ledge, and you had assorted people coming out of the water, some carrying surfboards, which nowadays were the size of bath mats.

You also had open-water distance swimmers, who'd be *way* out there circling some buoy you could barely see, wearing these orange caps so they could find each *other*, and Chris figured that was a strange activity with the sharks and God knows what else lurking below.

There was one guy inside reading an old-fashioned physical book and Chris liked that, so when he went for a re-fill he sat down in the empty chair at the guy's table.

"Morning to you too," the guy said, Chris figuring he was getting any obligatory conversation out of the way quick.

"You wouldn't have stood out ten years ago," Chris said, "maybe even five, but you do now."

The guy smiled and turned the book over and looked at it. It was a hardback with a clear library cover, titled *How The Hell Did This Happen?*, and Chris was glad it wasn't about politics, it was some true-crime deal.

This guy looked in his early 50's. Chris said, "You retired then, working part-time, what? You don't strike me particularly concerned you're going to be late for an appointment."

The guy laughed. "My old firm, I hear from them sometimes, they want me to do some consulting. Litigation work. That's not going to happen."

"I get where you're coming from there," Chris said. "They've still got me on the list, to sub, up where I taught school. Every so often I

get a call, even though they're out of their mind if they think I'm coming back."

"Where's that?"

"Terra Linda . . . But addressing what you were saying . . . so you're a lawyer?"

"That in Sonoma County?"

"Below it. Marin."

"Well *was*, would be not the technical answer, but the right one . . . Too many circumstances you frankly don't care about, and it beats you down."

Chris figured what the hay, and lowered his voice a notch and said, "You ever run across a guy named Ned Mancuso?"

The guy looked at Chris more squarely. "I have, as a matter of fact. I take it you know him."

Chris said, "Not so much know him, as trying to figure him out." Waiting on the guy now.

The guy stuck in a bookmark. "I wouldn't be able to go there," he said.

"Attorney-client and all that, undoubtedly."

"You got it . . . Speaking of appointments, I do have to meet the wife. The excitement of the weekday half-price bargain matinee."

As he got up Chris said, "Criminal, or civil, your firm . . . Or what?"

"All of it," the guy said.

THREE

The lawyer guy had handed him a card leaving Starbucks--Jeez, they were big on business cards down here--and it had his name and the words **Tennis Partner**, not a bad idea, Chris having said

something about the guy's *Indian Wells Open* t-shirt which triggered him digging into his wallet.

The other thing was the library, the guy resourcefully checking out a book, which got Chris thinking.

Chris had been avoiding libraries. On the one hand he'd done his most significant research on their computers, which he was pretty dang sure couldn't be traced back, as long as he didn't do something dumb.

Unfortunately now something else popped into his head--was there some facial recognition shit you weren't aware of?

Chris told himself now he's getting paranoid.

And the real reason he'd been avoiding libraries was he was worn out.

Just not sure he wanted to update his list anymore. It was a lot more work than people realized.

Plus . . . Shep the bartender had been the first to point it out, that maybe he wasn't getting worse--and could someone in the medical chain have made a friggin' mistake . . .

That was six months ago, when he started to wonder.

The last time he'd seen his doctor, Billy, Billy'd given up on him because he wasn't cooperating, and told him to have a nice life.

Chris knew how this shit could work. The ebb and flow, the microscopic sons of bitches playing hide-and-seek, and you think you're out of the woods and then *boom* . . .

But the naked truth was so far he had no symptoms (that he was aware of).

Which at this point meant retiring the list.

Didn't it?

Because a) he was mentally fried, didn't know if he could rise to the challenge again, and b) the risk-reward ratio was different if he wasn't necessarily going to kick the bucket.

If he called it a career right now he'd probably be fine . . . and he supposed he should consider himself lucky.

The only real heat he drew was that guy Cousins, who dropped in on him twice and scared the hell out of him.

Ray had chimed in on the subject, that it was an act, the guy trying to disguise the fact that he was ice cold.

The final time he saw Cousins was in June, when Cousins told him he was taking early retirement, and which new detective to contact if he thought of anything. Cousins hadn't looked great then, he was unshaven and his face was ruddy like he'd been hitting the bottle, though it wasn't Chris's business to speculate.

Chris kept a closer eye on the North Bay papers since Donny, and there was one case that had him shaking his head, a robbery and shooting at a marijuana farm in West Marin.

The perps got away, but a license plate traced them to a housing project in Compton, except the local cops up north waited to get a warrant and then drove down south to apprehend the guys themselves.

By the time they got there they'd missed them by an hour, and the scumbags are still at large, or at least Chris never saw a follow-up where they got caught.

Why would you handle it that way, why wouldn't you just tell the cops down in Compton to keep a 24-hour eye on these guys until further notice?

What happened to common sense?

Chris was getting worked up replaying this. He hated incompetence from government officials, especially when their inactions compromised our safety.

In any case . . .

There'd been a few incarnations of the list.

The original had:

Ray

Donny

Chip

Thad Simmons

Ike's guy

Guy at video store

Football driver

Maierhoffer situation

Soccer guy

Eric Mossman's guy

He had to admit he'd done a decent job in organized fashion accounting for the first four guys.

Ray of course, a pleasant surprise. Who would have known he'd become a good friend? But Chris would have killed him for sure otherwise, he was the one he was most mad at.

There'd been an addition:

Rest Stop assholes

These were the two guys who beat up Kim and Leslie's parents bad on that road trip in Oregon.

They pled it down to nothing, getting away with near murder because Mr. and Mrs. Stemphill were too shook up to go back there and get involved.

Meanwhile it was another post-card day in Manhattan Beach, high 70's, the morning fog dissolved. Palm fronds swaying slightly in front of the shops and restaurants. Chris noticed they even steam-cleaned the sidewalks.

Here was some old guy coming strong up the hill now, maybe not out of the ocean but from *some* kind of work-out.

Chris stuck up a hand and said, "How's the library?"

"Nice," the guy said, polite. "Renovated." And he kept moving, pointing at a diagonal to the left.

So Chris followed the guy's finger and took a walk over there. It wasn't far, it wouldn't gobble up any valuable time. What could it hurt?

Everything was glass, impressive, but the best thing was the level above the main desk, where you could sit at these white oak tables and look at the ocean. Chris thought if he had some big project there were a lot worse places you could plant your rear end.

Then there were the library computers. About twenty of them face-to-face, each one with a plush roll-around chair and a private cubby.

Chris studied the horizon for a while . . . and then figured just for kicks, okay I'll check out this one guy to satisfy my own curiosity, and he took over one of the cubicles.

Except instead of googling Ned or Lou Mancuso . . . he found himself looking around old news clippings from Grants Pass, Oregon, that included the name Stemphill.

Then . . . Jerry Smith, Sebastopol, California. See how that motherfucker was doing these days.

He hadn't gotten yet to the dog in traffic incident he'd heard about, but he must have been reasonably fired up because someone said, "Is everything all right? Are you finding what you need?"

It was one of the librarians, an attractive enough woman, her name tag telling you she was Emma K.

Chris said, "I look that discombobulated?"

Emma said, "I didn't mean to imply that. The internet can have a mind of its own, naturally." She had a nice smile. Genuine.

"So you weren't trying to get in my business," he said, "so much as you were concerned about my mental state." Joking, but who knows.

Emma cleared her throat. "Well, if there's nothing else."

"There *is* something else," Chris said. "How come everyone talks so loud in the library these days? It used to be, you didn't talk at all, even the troublemakers knew enough to keep their mouth shut . . . And here *we* go, doing the same thing."

"Are you typically this observant?" Emma said.

"You're ducking my question."

"I believe it's a complicated answer. Reflective of a deeper societal shift."

"Oh boy . . . How about 'cause you *let* 'em? Does that work?"

She laughed. "That's part of it."

"So you can tell me the other part at dinner," Chris said.

Emma studied him a moment and continued circling through the aisles, stopping if someone needed help. When she returned she handed Chris a slip of paper with her phone number and a comment: 'You're not going to try anything, are you?'

She waited for his reaction and he looked up poker-faced and scissored his hands, the safe sign in baseball, and she went away again, and soon he'd had his fill of the computer, things were flooding

back now, and a little too real, so he went outside and smoked another one of the cigarettes he'd bummed off Ned last night and phoned Emma.

She said that was quick, and he said no point giving her time to re-think it, plus he wanted to see if she'd break a rule and answer her cell at work, and she didn't address that but they settled that he'd pick her up right here at 5:30.

He hated to start up the car and drive, now that he was working into the lifestyle, but he couldn't see a better way. He was embarrassed having her come to his apartment complex, and of course they could meet at the restaurant except they hadn't gotten that far.

He'd been thinking he should get a bike, nothing to do with the doofus almost running him down, but it seemed practical and that would cement the local stamp on you.

You couldn't ride a dinner date around on the end of one though, and Chris hoofed it back up the hills to the apartment, detouring to get a torta at the little stand on Sepulveda since you never knew how these dinner things were going to work out, and he showered and figured why not lie down for a minute and was out like a light.

FOUR

"I was reasonably convinced you stood me up," Emma said. "You did strike me as a bit of joker."

"Well I wouldn't mind being called a playboy, in the good sense, if that's where you're going," Chris said. "Sorry about that though."

It was 10 to 6. He'd screwed up by over-sleeping and then the traffic was a little confusing, there'd been a one-way situation on

Ardmore which you wouldn't have expected around here. Emma had waited patiently out front, her hands folded around her purse.

"Playboys are jerks, generally," she said.

"I know what you mean, but I'm thinking more James Bond . . . Never off-balance in a social situation, always delivers the right line, and treats women with respect."

"You think that? He treats women like dirt."

"Hmm," Chris said. "Well where to?"

Emma ran four or five restaurants by him and he hadn't heard of any of them, but he liked the sound of *Big Wok*, except he was a little suspicious of Chinese food down here, coming from San Francisco, but she said it's Mongolian and that's where they went.

It was a bustling place, one huge room, and you collected meat and vegetables and noodles and sauces and you handed it all to the grill guy and he went to town.

"Good choice," Chris said when they were settled. "Although I see what the regulars are doing. *Two* bowls, and go easy on the noodles. Much higher percentage of meat."

"You can go back," Emma said, "it's all-you-can eat."

"This'll do the job. I notice you're wearing a ring . . . That to send a message, then?"

She said, "I'm still married. However, we're separated. One would think."

Chris said, "There was a young gal used to work at a coffee place on Union Street. She had a ring, big rock right in your face, but she flirted. Finally one day I butt in and ask what her husband thought about it. She said she was single, but had to add the ring after her first day because she kept getting hit on."

"Well that's interesting, but your point is?"

"I don't know."

“So why’d you bother bringing it up?” You could see she enjoyed dishing it out.

Chris said, “Okay forget that . . . I guess the ‘one would think’ part, is what a rational human would find noteworthy.”

Emma dabbed her mouth with the napkin and took a solid sip of white wine. “He and I are quite different,” she said. “When the girls made it out of the house, we re-assessed our priorities . . . We still live together, and plan to take care of each other when we’re old.”

“I see . . . But meanwhile, you both screw around with other people . . . Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that, but you get my drift . . . and Jeez, the girls out of the house? How old are you?”

Emma didn’t answer right away, and Chris wondered if he’d been too up-front and she might walk out of here and call a cab.

That was one more thing about his diagnosis--the impulsiveness factor. You tended to blurt stuff out. Not always with a lot of decorum. It was the ‘life’s too short, don’t beat around the bush’ effect.

Similarly there’d been the stepped-up womanizing attempts. Now that he had some perspective, he’d overdone that for sure.

Emma said, “In response to your second concern, I’m forty-four.”

“Dang,” Chris said.

“Is there a problem with that now, as well?”

Her being only a couple years older than him, in the ballpark, seemed logical on one level, but man, grown daughters on the loose and grandkids around the corner then.

He said, “You look great, that’s not it.”

“I’m not sure how I should take that,” she said. “Especially when I see old pictures, where I’ve been included on someone’s Facebook.”

“I know. And the reverse too . . . Some guy stuck me on his timeline, a kids’ birthday party, sixth grade, we’re at an Oakland Seals

hockey game. I'm chubby with a bad haircut, and of course I'm stuffing my face."

Emma laughed. "So tell him to remove it, or you'll un-friend him."

"Nah, you roll with that stuff," Chris said. "But you know for a fact your husband-guy's not screwing around on you? . . . Or it's part of the equation, is how it works."

"I don't care, is the correct answer," she said. "It's complicated."

"These type things though, when you strip 'em down, usually aren't . . . but hey the good part, you're not paying double rent."

"Let's change directions, if we may," she said, and Chris happened to scan the room, absent-minded, and sitting off to the right about eight tables away, yukking it up with another guy, was the kid from the apartments who'd beat up his girlfriend.

"This is a popular place," Chris said, still looking that direction.

"Oh very much so," Emma said. "Perhaps the best value in MB, when you factor in quantity and quality together."

Chris said, "Good for young people too, I suppose, money being tight, and so forth." Thinking money couldn't be *that* tight, if the guy could come up with even half the rent on the apartment . . . But more importantly, how would you handle this?

"Naturally I can't afford it here, on a municipal salary," Emma was saying. "Nor can my husband, he's a teacher. So we settled on Torrance."

"Is that right . . . where's he teach?" Chris said, not caring about the answer, wondering would this kid have to get up and take a leak or something, or was his youthful bladder probably too strong.

He did notice the kid and his buddy drinking tea, which was included with the meal but Chris had waved off because he didn't want

to be up all night with his not-so-young one, as did Emma who was working on her white wine seconds now.

She said, “He’s at Orange Coast. A bit of a commute, but you work around it.”

“Unh,” Chris said. “That a JC?”

“A community college, yes, he teaches Chemistry,” she said, and son of a bitch, the other kid got up and went back toward the right corner of the place where Chris assumed the restrooms were. You couldn’t see for sure from here, but what else would he be doing?

Meanwhile the ‘You Pig’ kid of course puts down his fork and whips out his phone right away, and starts rifling around. Why’d they always have to do that, what was wrong with staring into space once in a while? Especially when you’re right in the middle of an excellent meal.

The other kid isn’t gone long, and they continue eating, the kid-of-interest eventually getting up once, but with his plate, going back for another helping.

The booze, or maybe some MSG in the food, or a nerve that got triggered somewhere has Emma rambling on now about God knows what, the departmental dysfunction that academics universally endure, which trickles down to the families and invariably screws them.

Whatever . . .

‘You Pig’ came back to the table loaded up, and then whoa, before he sits back down he heads to the bathroom.

Chris told Emma excuse me for a moment.

It was a decent situation in there, with a half wall that gave you privacy when a new person opened the outside door, so there was no need to lock it.

Though you could if you wanted, which Chris did, turning the little latch.

The kid was finishing up at the urinal and Chris waited for him to wash his hands before saying, “How’s Stace coming along?”

“Oh fine,” the kid said, sharp enough, placing who Chris was. “Thank you for asking.”

Chris would have said ‘you’re welcome’ but the kids today favored ‘not a problem’. Chris cringed when someone laid that on him, since he hadn’t brought *up* a potential problem.

That’s how Chris answered him now, “not a problem”, and when the guy finished washing up and was looking in the mirror Chris grabbed him by the jean jacket and spun him around and marched him head first into the stall.

Luckily the guy wasn’t abnormally strong, though Chris felt he had enough adrenaline where he could have handled someone tougher, though maybe not. His main concern, replaying some of the gangster movies in his head, was did you put the seat up for maximum effect or not worry about it?

He tried with his foot to lift it but that didn’t work so he decided forget it and rammed ‘You Pig’s’ face into the bowl.

He let him swim for a little, then lifted him out by the back of the hair, like they worked it.

Then boom, back down.

You had to hand it to the kid, he wasn’t crying out or saying anything, if he was able to, and Chris initiated the treatment a final time, prolonging it, not enough to drown the guy for God sake’s, but to complete the point.

The kid gulped and gasped and then looked for a towel, but you only had the blower, so he used a half roll of toilet paper to do what he

could, and he told Chris, “Not what you think,” and went back out in the restaurant.

Chris took his time, hoping the kid and his friend wouldn’t hang around, and when he emerged he was right, though Jesus, Emma was working on a third glass of wine without missing a beat.

“You’re kind of sweating,” she said. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, well,” he said, “I think it’s more humid down here, than what I’m used to.”

“Absolutely. You’ll find that our coastal conditions, they’re deceptive. One rarely requires underwear to keep warm.”

Chris looking at her, in her modest librarian’s dress, thinking what the heck.

“I’ll qualify that,” Emma said, slurring her words slightly. “You, as a man, you won’t need that extended t-shirt too often.”

She had a point there, Chris had trouble keeping his shirts tucked in, and the t-shirt was usually hanging out the bottom somewhere.

“Dessert?” he said.

“There’s a Baskin-Robbins,” she said. “Though you do take your life in your hands crossing Sepulveda.”

“Maybe a little walk then? Appreciate all that evening humidity?”

“Do you live nearby?” she said.

FIVE

Emma suggested stopping first at Sampson’s, one of those high-end supermarkets that affluent communities have for when Safeway doesn’t cut it. Though in Manhattan Beach your high-end places were over the top.

Little 6-ounce jar of imported tuna from Italy for instance, which Chris noticed heading back to the liquor section, \$12.19.

“The after-dinner drink is a bit of a lost art,” Emma was saying. “Do you have a blender?”

Chris did not, he essentially had no kitchen items, so when they got out of there they had to make a second stop at Target, before finally pulling in at the *Cheater Five Apartments*.

Emma got to work right away, efficient, and Chris turned on the TV and took a look at Thursday Night Football, though it was only Houston and Cincinnati, so he tried House Hunters but it was the international version he didn't care for, so he opened the door for a little cross-breeze and said, “You didn't comment on my digs here.”

Emma was measuring, getting things just right, and soon the blender was fired up and she was coming around the counter with two Jungle Birds, naming the drink, a pretty darn nice presentation given what she had to work with.

They touched glasses and she said, “I like it. Except for the couch.”

Chris said, “I lived in Teaneck, New Jersey, for a year. No AC. From about May to September, no way you could wear a shirt in the apartment. I had a couch similar to this and your back was always sticking to it, coming away with little fibers.”

“How are they?” Emma said.

“Really good. I see why it took so long picking out just the right version of black-strap rum.”

“Don't forget the Campari,” she said, moving a little closer on the couch in question.

Chris said, “I was telling some guy the other night--Jeez, I guess it was just last night--that part of my objective coming down here was to turn over a new leaf.”

“I see,” Emma said. “Let me guess. No more late-night shenanigans.”

“Very funny,” he said. Coincidentally there was some laughter coming from the pool, people splashing around.

“Do they ever skinny-dip?” Emma said. “I noticed it’s reasonably dark out there.”

Ooh boy. Chris couldn’t deny the intrigue factor, the goody-two-shoes librarian with her hair down.

He said, “Not that I’m aware of, in my admittedly limited experience . . . That changes, you’ll be the first to know. Any particular preferences?” Might as well dig in a little deeper, what the hay.

“Yes. I like to look at men, who are . . . you know, in shape, and all that goes with it. Women as well.”

Holy Smokes. “Well, I give you credit for honesty,” Chris said.

“You know what?” she said, back at the counter, giving the blender button a quick poke and pouring herself a healthy refill.

She sat down again and left her hand on his leg this time.

Chris said, “You didn’t answer your own question.”

“Have you ever been married?”

“Me? No.” Which was technically a lie, though it had been a flash in the pan and she’d bounced back quick with the Nascar mechanic in Pensacola, Florida, or it might have been Gainesville.

“*My* husband,” she said, “sometimes I think, if I had a bazooka . . .”

“Take it easy,” Chris said. He had to admit the blend was going down nice, things were loose. He said, “I messed up some guy tonight. In fact on account of an incident right here, down in 21-B.”

Emma surprised him, by-passing the logical follow-up questions, and saying, “So you’re more of a mystery man than I would have expected.”

“Whatever,” he said, flipping channels again and leaving it on regular House Hunters, this one in Portland, Maine.

Emma said, “I did that too, once. I pushed someone off a high trail. When I was 12. At summer camp.”

Chris was ready to say, ‘And I kind of feel bad about it, flying off the handle, which is what I resolved *not* to be doing.’

“Come again?” he said.

Emma was nodding, looking right at him. Despite the booze, she’d kept it reasonably together, didn’t seem out of her mind, and she started to cry.

It was a strange way to handle it, but Chris put his arm around her and brought her in.

There was no more splashing at the pool, whoever’d been frolicking out there had enough. “Dang, is that crickets?” Chris said.

“It is,” Emma said. “Until we get our first chill.”

“All the cement around here, who would think . . . you want to go for a swim or something?”

“That sounds wonderful actually. By chance do you have an extra swimsuit?”

“That might be a negative . . . I guess you’re kind of all talk, no action.”

“That depends,” she said.

SIX

There were some details eating at him now on account of giving in and looking that stuff up yesterday. He knew this was going to happen.

On the Leslie parents’ beat-up deal, it’s possible one of the pieces of scum might be alive and well and living up in Chico. Guy named Mason McCall.

The incident was in '06. Leslie and Kim's poor mom and dad innocently driving up to Washington to visit the middle daughter Margie.

Chris could picture Mr. Stemphill. He was a good guy who smoked a pipe and wore corduroy jackets and listened to everything you said. Kim said he was stubborn when he was on the road, did it his way, which meant long hours and rest stops, sometimes at night.

Which Chris put his finger on, the particular one, after piecing together some old news stories.

The Brothers Oasis Rest Area on US-20 near Prineville, Oregon.

It was surprising the Stemphills didn't just take 5 straight up, but maybe that made sense, they'd want to be on some backroads.

Chris could see the place on the computer screen, a couple picnic tables, then flat open space stretching to the foothills. It looked harmless enough, but they were showing it to you during the day.

He didn't have much luck with the second guy but it looked like McCall back then lived in Bend, and if it *was* the same prick, hey, he'd moved up in the world, working maintenance now at Chico State University.

What do you know, a California State employee. The guy sure wasn't shy on Facebook either, not at all. Some of his friends called him May.

Replaying the conversation with Kim, the night he met her at the Bay Club and discovered she was Leslie's sister . . . no matter how you sugarcoated it, Mrs. Stemphill was never the same after the incident.

It was curious that Kim and Leslie had apparently moved past that. How could you?

One tidbit that crept in when they figured out their connection and started going through the *Hey then, did you know so-and-so?* . . . The 25th Lowell High School reunion.

Kim tried to persuade him to go, plus bring her along, even though she was a few classes behind and had nothing to do with it.

There *was* no reunion at that point, but now they'd finalized it and he'd been getting notices, including a fancy RSVP package that went right in the recycle bin.

The campaign intensified recently, enthusiastic emails telling you **Last Chance**, the thing actually happening next weekend.

It was brutal to consider but Chris couldn't help it:

Could you go up there, work it out with Jerry Smith, combine the timing with the reunion Saturday night, then grab a map or rental car or whatever the fuck it took and find Chico and this May-guy and convert on the whole shebang?

Whether you could or not was one thing, but Chris knew you should.

The reunion part would be the low point of the three activities. But you're up there anyway, you might as well make an appearance.

He intentionally missed them all after attending the first one, the 5-year. He'd walked in, said hi to some people he still liked, politely said hello to some others he didn't, listened as someone fired up the fight song over the PA system, and got out of there.

As he explained to Kim, if he had a list of priorities, that would be at the bottom. But looking at it now, would it actually kill him?

Plus . . . maybe you have an alibi, not for what might transpire in Sebastopol or Chico, but at least for *being* in the Bay Area.

Or . . . would that be worse, because it would place you up there period? Oh boy.

Again, you can't keep torturing yourself without ever stepping off a curb, and Chris went online and registered for the damn thing.

Though he felt a little sick when it got to the billing screen and they were calling for a cool 175 bucks.

Are you kidding me?

He re-read the blurb, and it included an outing the next day, a bus ride and picnic at Half Moon Bay. That sounded awful, but there was no option to limit your involvement, so he put the highway robbery part out of his mind, clicked away, and he was in.

There'd been a section of about 50 leading questions on family, career, life experience, fondest memories and much more, for the booklet they were going to hand out that night, and he tried to leave it all blank, but it wouldn't let you advance, doing that, so he typed **ok** into all of them.

Now what?

Gee, it was after 11 already. His morning got discombobulated. One thing he'd need to do for sure was follow up on Jerry Smith. He'd confirmed a few basics yesterday, the asshole still alive and well up there, same address on Mill Station Road, decent view of the place on *Street View*. But tough to refine your approach, since he had no handle on the guy's routine.

Chris wasn't ready to run into Emma again so soon, so the library wasn't the best fit. He had the Starbucks guy from yesterday's card on his fridge, the retired dude looking for tennis partners, so what the heck.

Naturally the guy answers on the first ring, nothing going on, and says sure he can play, any time, and they make it for 1.

Meaning he had a little while, and the pool looked pretty dang good so he took a dip. It felt great, making up for the other times he'd thought about it but hadn't.

While he was floating around, he wondered, could you swing over the railing outside his apartment and just jump in from there?

Or taking it a step further, if you persuaded someone into a hotel pool, how high up would you need to be before it switched from being an acrobatic high dive into something else?

It never quite worked out last night with Emma, the swimming part. He found a couple pairs of shorts with drawstrings, and she tried them on but didn't feel right.

Chris got a better look at her during this process, and she was an attractive woman for her age, and slender for the most part.

"Nice of you to say," she said, "but I'm embarrassed to wear a two-piece."

Chris didn't see a problem, but said, "Well, Jeez, childbirth. Isn't that part of it?"

"The second and final one of *those* was 19 years ago. Kaitlyn. It makes me crazy I can't get rid of it."

"Forget it, it's nothing," he said, although from a different angle he supposed he could see her point.

"I went to the doctor about it," she said. "He told me some extra mid-section is perfectly appropriate, that it bolsters my immunity . . . That's a bunch of nonsense."

Chris couldn't help squeezing his own flesh above the belt line.

"That's funny," she said. "Now you're checking yourself."

"Do I look okay to you? My color, and all that? Is there enough bounce in my step, in your view?"

"We'll find out," she said, and he never got around to asking about that summer camp situation, it wasn't that urgent.

SEVEN

The retired lawyer's name was Chandler Sweeney, and he was a good tennis player and sneaky with his tactics, and he kicked Chris's ass.

"Is that what I'm going to run into," Chris said, sitting there after getting hammered again in set number three, "all you guys better down here, or you're an exception?"

They were in the city park on the other side of Sepulveda, down toward Hawthorne where it got more modest, Chris figuring the space you needed for a couple of courts didn't exist closer in.

Chandler said, "You're not bad. A few things you do well, a few not so much . . . I got a pro I can give you, it'll help . . . Me, I played at UCLA, a *long* time ago. Back when you could do more than one sport."

"Oh yeah?" Chris said. "What was your other one?"

"Basketball. I had an okay outside shot, but I was too slow, couldn't defend my man effectively . . . They let me stay on 'cause I hustled, but I didn't see much playing time."

Chris was looking at this Chandler thinking, *Let's see, John Wooden, he was there about a hundred years, wasn't he? This guy actually played for Wooden?*

"Who was the coach?" he said.

"Gary Cunningham."

Chris knew the name, one of the revolving door of guys *after* Wooden, so Chandler wasn't quite that old . . .

But no way this guy played basketball at UCLA.

Which would be easy enough to confirm, but why waste the time.

Chris suspected the college tennis part was a stretch too.

But that didn't matter at the moment, Chandler giddy from his dominating performance and talking like a chatterbox, standing up to demonstrate a technique.

Chris figured, the guy feeling so good, might as well pick his brain, since he didn't think he was lying about being a *lawyer* too.

Chris said, "Let me jump around on you a second. If you were going to kill someone and live to tell about it, what would be the best way?"

The guy laughed, not unlike Rich and Booker had, when Chris posed the same question in the *Booker Lounge*.

"That's part of the human condition," Chandler said.

"Hmm," Chris said, starting to regret the question.

Chandler said, "Answer is, it's harder. We go for technicalities, mostly."

"Meaning . . . you're saying, they *have* these guys? Generally? The police?"

"Indeed. DNA is an absolute killer. Altered the whole playing field . . . Once upon a time, we could put a witness on the stand and dig around, try to re-establish the so-called facts . . . Now with someone in a white coat up there, yep, they've got you."

"What about O.J. Simpson?" Chris said. "His blood was all over the place, no?"

"It was. We did some consulting work for Johnnie Cochran before the trial . . . You might say that was the beginning of the era we're in now . . . Where you're reduced to two things. Procedural abnormalities and character defects."

"Who might have had reason to plant evidence, you mean."

"Yeah, put together enough *okay fine, the blood's all over the place but what if's* to screw up their case."

"Ah," Chris said. This was interesting, and the guy obviously knew his stuff, but no way you could let it come to that.

“Of course the home run,” Chandler said, getting worked up like he was with the tennis, “we were facing Clark and Darden. Both of them idiots . . . You don’t always get that.”

“Allowing the gloves to not fit . . .”

“Unh-huh, it goes on. What was your original question though?”

“I guess just . . . what would be the key *these* days, someone being successful?”

“You mean, making it look like someone else did it?”

Chris hadn’t thought of that, not really. Jeez . . .

“Or are you asking,” Chandler said, “how would someone commit the perfect crime? Where they wash their hands of it, and then put on a tuxedo and have dinner at a fine restaurant.” He laughed.

“More or less,” Chris said. “Yeah . . . how could they handle their business, still be walking around, and stay the *frick* out of your office.”

“Oh . . . Well I have one theory which sounds simple, but I don’t think I’m that far off . . . You want to play another? You have to be somewhere?”

Chris said no he didn’t want to play another, and he didn’t have to be anywhere either.

Chandler said, “I’ve thought more than once, these guys, if they simply run and hide long enough, keep a low profile, law enforcement tends to forget about them.”

“Interesting,” Chris said. “And don’t get drunk and brag to the guy on the stool next to you, I guess.”

“Of course, all that. But if you go out-of-state, you’ve upped your odds substantially.”

“Despite everything you hear about the master databases?”

“Right. Don’t forget, AG’s and DA’s and mayors are human. They want to get re-elected . . . Extradition can be a mess, not to mention the public perception--why are they bringing more garbage back *here*

when some guy's breaking into houses right in the neighborhood and you can't even catch *him*."

Chris told him the story about the pot farm shooting up north, the local cops getting caught up in the warrant business, and losing the guys.

Chandler shook his head. "There are plenty of bright folks on the good side, but every move has to be documented now. It handcuffs them . . . Why, do you have something in mind?"

It shouldn't have, but it caught Chris off guard, strictly hypotheticals flowing up to this point.

"Because I wouldn't hold it against you," Chandler said. "You'd have your reasons. We all do."

"What do you mean, we *all* do?"

"I'm saying we have skeletons in our closet. If we're honest with ourselves."

"Oh yeah? . . . That mean you have a hidden list somewhere?"

Might as well have a little fun with it, push the guy's buttons.

"I do. Not for official consumption, but I've got it filed away."

Pointing at his temple.

Chris couldn't believe he hadn't cut it off with this guy yet, but here you were.

He said, "And? If you had a terminal disease, for example--not much to lose--you might act on it?"

The guy took off his tennis hat and played around with his hair and looked at Chris. "I'm surmising *you* might have a terminal disease, and it could be something you're considering."

Not asking him, and not judging. Which Chris appreciated.

He said, "I *had* one, yeah . . . I think I'm good now. Meanwhile, there is a list, and in my case I've got it written down."

“So Ned Mancuso is on it?” Chandler said. “That’s why you brought his name up in Starbucks?”

Wow, where did that come from?

“Because you might have to get in line, there,” the guy said.

“Oh . . . Attorney-client privilege out the window temporarily.”

“Most definitely . . . So . . . if I’m understanding you, you had an issue, developed a unique mindset as a result, and now that the issue’s resolved itself, you’re having trouble letting go.”

Chris said, “How much do you charge? Or did you, by the hour.”

“When I retired it was at \$1500,” Chandler said.

“Well that’s good and bad. The refreshing part, you gave a figure right away.”

The guy didn’t say anything, waiting for Chris to get to the point.

“You’re good, is why I’m asking,” Chris said. “You actually got me figured out better than I have myself figured out.”

“So . . .” Chandler said. “You want to play tomorrow?”

“That it?” Chris said. “I give you enough where *I* almost have to run out-of-state, and you’re booking tennis courts.”

Chandler said, “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll see you here tomorrow at 1 . . . We can do some drills first, if you want.”

Heading back to the apartment, Chris was thinking that wasn’t exactly how he pictured it playing out today, hitting a few balls in the town park with a retired guy, though when he crossed the pool area and started up the stairs he noticed 21-B was open, and stuff was being moved out.

EIGHT

Chris went inside, showered and got comfortable and poured himself a Guinness before he took another look at what was going on down below.

You had Stacey carrying light stuff to a U-Haul parked around the corner, and there were two scruffy-looking guys doing the heavy lifting, double-digit tattoos between them.

No sign of the kid he dunked at Big Wok.

Chris figured might as well bring a little folding chair outside the door, see how this plays out.

After a few more trips Stacey looked up and noticed him and said, perfectly pleasant, “Hi, how are *you* today?”

Chris said, “More important than that, how’s your cheek?”

“Oh,” she said, looking embarrassed maybe, that more people knew about it than she thought. “Thank you. Everything’s fine.”

“Hmm . . . So where are you moving . . . and with whom, you don’t mind my asking.”

Stacey set her box down and came upstairs. “Excuse me, do I know you . . . beyond hello?”

Chris took his time. “You don’t have a sister, girlfriend, something? . . . Where you can go?”

“It isn’t like that,” she said. “And it’s really none of your business, besides.”

“But you’re standing here. Which tells me you’re mixed up, Sweetie . . . And observing the body language back and forth the last twenty minutes? I’m guessing you’re re-locating with one or both of these doofuses. While the ink’s not even dry on the *other* guy.”

“Ken didn’t hit me,” she said. “There’s a lot of shit.”

Chris didn’t like hearing this at all, if the You Pig guy was Ken. The kid had said ‘not what you think’ after Chris put him under the third time.

“Except of course they took him in,” Chris said.

She said, “They were wrong, and it won’t happen again . . . And I thank you for your concern.”

She started back down the stairs, but coming up them now at a pretty good clip was one of the scruffy guys.

“Hey Pops,” the kid said to Chris. “Whyn’t you mind your own business, how about.”

“Mike!” Stacey said.

Chris said to her, “Don’t worry about it. He has a point . . . Not so much minding my business, but the Pops part. I’m getting that lately.”

“What the hell’s *that* mean?” Mike said, standing a little too close.

Stacey said, “I’m very sorry. Please don’t pay attention to him . . . Mike!”

Chris said, “Everyone keeps telling me I need to wear flip flops. So I break down and pick up a pair. I’m trying ‘em out right now for the first time, feeling pretty awkward out here . . . That part of why you called me Pops?”

“You got your nose where it don’t belong, butt-hole,” Mike said, loud, rubbing his hands, whatever that was supposed to imply.

“What I should have done, but too late now,” Chris said, “was trust my instincts. Just not sure I got enough leverage going with these things.”

“The crap you *talking* about?” Mike said. “Look at me, fuckoff.” He had his hand on Chris’s arm now, and Stacey had scrambled back up the stairs and *her* two hands were on Mike’s other arm, pleading with him, trying to pull him away.

The other guy appeared now, down below, coming back from the truck. He was eating a slim jim. He looked up and pointed and laughed.

The reason it would probably work out--again--was Stacey's apparent taste in men. Specifically their body types. Mike wasn't much, just as Ken hadn't been, and unless he was a secret MMA guy and knew how to defend throws, Chris was pretty sure he could convert what he needed.

Might as well let it go a bit longer though, hope that cooler heads prevail, and he can get on with his day without incident . . . And what did he have going again? The evening action on The Strand at the very least, he supposed . . .

Then Mike pushed Stacey away, hard.

Chris thought of it a couple ways and settled on the belt, Mike needing one fortunately to hold up his trousers on his skinny frame, and Chris came out of the chair and locked onto the guy and flipped him up, balancing half of him on each side of the rail for just a second, like a teeter-totter at the playground, and then fired Mike end-for-end down toward the pool.

The reason he hesitated, he was making a quick unofficial calculation, was it deep enough in the middle where the head hitting the bottom wouldn't be a big issue?

He concluded that the head-first approach for Mike should be fine, *probably*, and resumed handling it that way.

Stacey ran down there and the other kid tried to help, though they weren't eager to get wet, so it took a minute but they got Mike out and onto a chaise-lounge. He did seem a little woozy.

"Ah man!" the other guy said suddenly, and he backed away, and Stacey did too. Apparently Mike had defecated along the way.

The owner's wife was out there now, in her traditional saree, and she didn't say anything but went back into the little office they had and got her husband.

The husband was pretty mad. He ordered ‘everyone out, get out of this *place!*’, and looked up at Chris indicating that included him.

Chris went into his apartment, which wasn’t what the guy meant, that he was trying to throw them all out of the complex period, which would be a heck of a nuisance to start over and find a new situation, though you couldn’t blame the guy.

Chris knew from the experience of mistakenly owning a couple rental properties that you couldn’t let the inmates run the asylum. Though he himself had handled things exactly the wrong way, even lending deadbeat tenants money a couple times.

Whatever. He took off the dumb flip-flops which, fair enough, had worked okay this one time, and sunk back into the recliner.

He opened an *Economist* magazine someone left at Starbucks. He’d been told it was one of the great magazines in the world, and he tried his best but couldn’t get enough out of it, not sure if it was the subject matter or the writing style--there were no bylines, they tried to put one voice on the whole shebang--and he fell asleep.

An hour later there was a rapping on the door, and it was the owner, who Chris remembered when he put down his deposit called himself Sharif, though the lease had a different name on it . . . Which like an awful lot of things these days, didn’t quite make sense, but so be it.

“I didn’t intend to scold you in public that way,” Sharif said. He had the Pakistani accent loud and clear, a touch of British English mixed in.

“I deserved it,” Chris said. “Honestly? I come down here, try for a fresh take, but it doesn’t work . . . I feel like the guy in the John Madden commercials.”

“Who is John Madden?” Sharif said.

“What am I saying, not the guy *in* ‘em--John Madden is the guy. Jeez . . . He’s an ex-football coach who tells you he’s learned to relax. Except in telling you, he comes flying through a wall because he can’t control himself.”

“Ah,” Sharif said.

“That kid okay?” Chris said.

“Yes. They’ve nearly completed their evacuation.”

“That’s what you call it?”

“I do. Why?”

“Did she give you notice or anything, or was it on account of the incident with the police? And what about the other guy?”

“Yes, the incident. I offered her a financial incentive if she was out by 5 pm today.”

“Not a bad idea, actually,” Chris said. “Except I’m part of the problem now too . . . Is that why you’re here?”

“I considered it for a few minutes. Then Mr. Sussman stopped by the office.”

“Not to interrupt you, but you guys live back there, behind it? I never looked around, or thought about it.”

“Oh no. We live on PCH. We own two motels over there.”

“Everyone keeps saying PCH, which I keep calling Sepulveda . . . which is also Highway One right? All the way to Bodega Bay and points north? Same exact piece of road?”

“Absolutely,” Sharif said. “And the route of choice locally as well.”

“You mean instead of the 405? Even when you’re going to Santa Monica?”

“Oh God yes,” Sharif said, getting excited. “Never enter on to an LA freeway--under any circumstance--if you have even a faint alternative.”

“Gee, didn’t realize it was *that* bad. I’ll try to keep it in mind.”

“When we first moved here, my children were young, I purchased a map, so excited to be showing them Hollywood, Beverly Hills, all the famous spots we’d been hearing about.”

“Let me guess.”

“Yes. When we finally made it home we concluded it wasn’t important to go anywhere again.”

“So you’ve stuck around ever since. In a one or two mile radius . . . Well, not the worst to place to be pinned.”

“Not at all . . . Once every two years we go back to Karachi for a visit. You might say our biggest hurdle is getting back and forth from LAX, if we time it wrong.”

Meanwhile Chris figured all the other towns you could have named on Highway One, he must have been thinking about Bodega Bay because of that fish and chips place up on the bluff, which he and Joyce used to drive out to.

He was getting hungry remembering it. Total dive, but the guy running the joint took his boat out in the ocean every day and caught the damn fish. How could you beat that?

“At any rate,” Sharif said, “Mr. Sussman, a very fine gentleman, has occupied 12-B for several years. He witnessed the situation as it escalated, and he provided his perspective, which I accept.”

“Oh . . . So I don’t need a U-Haul myself just yet?”

“No. I stopped by to thank you actually, and commend you. If more citizens stepped up--”

“There’d be less bad guys? The deterrent factor?”

“Undoubtedly . . . While I’m here, may I ask your opinion on something slightly related?”

Chris said be my guest, and pulled out a bottle of *Whistle Rye* whiskey, which he’d happened to pick up for future reference on the beverage run at Samson’s with Emma. He poured two shots without

asking and Sharif indicated cheers and downed his right away, so Chris poured two more.

“Not sure how I could be of help,” he said, “but fire away, I guess.”

Sharif said, “As I mentioned, we own and manage a couple of motels. We have a current guest, and a bit of a situation, that has grown quite unpleasant.”

“Let me stop you again,” Chris said. “I don’t know why, but I’m always interested in this stuff . . . So you live right in the motel? Your whole family and everything? And is it a regular duplex type set-up, or what?”

“We actually have two families living together. My sister and brother-in-law’s as well. Plus of course our parents.”

“Holy Mackerel.”

“It’s traditional in our culture. And yes, there’s a standard owner’s apartment but we’ve converted some rooms, knocked out walls and so forth. One self-contained unit now.”

“And the women . . . typically they cook up big batches of curry?”

“Absolutely. Each and every day.”

“I may have to stop by and force my way into that then,” Chris said.

“Oh please do. You’re welcome any time.” This was a nice guy, no pretention.

“So what do we got? That’s keeping you awake at night, it sounds like.”

“What it is, a gentleman has resided with us for approximately three weeks.”

“And I’ll take a wild guess he’s whining about something,” Chris said. “Otherwise, we could talk about the Rams, the development of Jared Goff at the quarterback position.”

“Right,” Sharif said. “We’ve had numerous complaints of heavy noise in the middle of the night, originating from his unit. One guest said it sounded like machinery crashing. So against my better judgement, I took it upon myself to investigate.”

“Meaning you broke in when he wasn’t home. Without a warrant.” Chris said it and realized he shouldn’t be joking around.

“And normally I’d be able to--in fact I have in the past, as have most lodging proprietors, I suspect.”

“You’re saying look around when the maid is doing her thing.”

“Precisely. But in this case the gentleman made it clear upon check-in that he wanted no housekeeping services.”

Chris said, “Okay whatever. Give me the bottom line first. What’d you find in there?”

“A set of weights. Barbells. Nothing illegal or such, but I could certainly detect an issue, especially with this guest residing on the upper level.”

“Were they the full power-lifting jobs, where he’d be clean-and-jerking and then dropping the whole works on the floor?”

“I’m afraid I’m not familiar enough to know. The gist of it was, he called the police.”

“Jesus. You were able to straighten it out? That part?”

“I’m not sure. I told them I was alerted to what might be an emergency condition, so I entered the premises.”

“That’s good thinking. That should take care of it . . . How’d this jerk know you were in there though?”

“I must have moved some papers around. Curiosity got the better of me.”

“What kind of papers?”

“Nothing interesting. Something looked official, but it was only a parking ticket.”

“Welcome to MB, right?” Chris said. “I saw a guy my first day down here, all he does is let his kid out with a boogie board, which required idling in a red zone for ten seconds tops, and they ticket him.”

“We never go to the beach,” Sharif said.

“So that it? You’re waiting for the police to close their little case against you? Or there’s more.”

“The guest has gone onto a rampage on *Yelp*, for one.”

“Stop calling him *the guest*, will you please? What else?”

“He put a stop to his credit card, so we have to deal with an investigation there as well.”

“So . . . do what you did with the Stacey gal.”

“I tried. I offered him a substantial credit, finally upping it to the entire three weeks at no charge.”

“God *damn*,” Chris said, starting to feel the guy’s pain. “So that didn’t work.”

“Not at all . . . As I hear myself, I feel badly, actually, burdening you with this. It’s my issue, I brought it upon myself.”

“It’s fine, I have a pretty clear slate,” Chris lied. “Keep going.”

“All right then, thank you so much. Now the gentleman has filed a lawsuit. We were served on Monday.”

“Served?” Chris said. “Already? Meaning somebody showed up and handed you papers?”

“They mailed something to us, yes.”

“Okay forget that . . . I mean, don’t *dismiss* it, but you weren’t served.” Unless there was some technicality Chris didn’t know about, which you could run by Chandler.

“Well that’s at least a measure of relief then,” Sharif said, “if it wasn’t official.”

Chris wasn't as relieved for Sharif though, since that's how these nightmares get started, technicality or no.

Some sleazebag lawyer sending you an old fashioned 55-cent letter, the idea being you forward it to your insurance company and who knows.

If not, then the piece of scum may or may not follow through. But this shit would weigh on you regardless.

"What number?" Chris said.

"Pardon?"

"What room is the person in . . . And which motel, for that matter."

"Oh," Sharif said. "So you're offering . . . to take a stab, at negotiating on my behalf? . . . That's exceedingly kind, but it's something I won't allow."

"Because it's wrong? Or you have some kind of policy about it."

"Neither. I simply won't have you crossing that line . . . I was seeking your counsel, not your intervention."

"Fine," Chris said, "give me the guy's name instead. That's harmless enough, right? I'll figure out the room."

NINE

Chris learned there was a technique to how much you opened the windows when you went to bed in Manhattan Beach, and he employed it last night and woke up the most refreshed yet.

It was essentially open all of the them. He learned it from one of those fit old guys on The Strand when he went down there last night after Sharif left.

He asked the guy didn't that ever give you a scratchy throat in the middle of the night, and the guy looked at him funny and continued

his blistering pace toward El Segundo, which Chris kept up with for a couple minutes and then let go.

Of course the nightcap might have helped too. He'd called Emma, but it went to voicemail, so he went in the kitchen and did his best with the new blender.

And he tried not to think about Sharif's situation, now that he'd opened his big mouth and made a dumb offer to help.

Down here you woke up, listened to traffic, sirens and honking like any other big city--except one of the great beaches in the world was part of the deal.

So you got out of bed and hit the shower and fired up that pre-Starbucks cup of java, and then checked a newspaper, and before you went out you checked your email just real quick.

Which today, like normal, there wasn't much of, just the way Chris liked it.

There was a junk email from a screw-and-fastener company.

There was a concert announcement from a small venue in Lincoln, Nebraska, that Chris had been to once. He figured he should unsubscribe, he wouldn't be back there, but he left it alone.

The final email that morning had the subject line:

CL *Painting*

Chris drew a blank for a second and then remembered, oh yeah, the Scott Bird piece.

Bird was a British guy, a graffiti artist. He was a disciple of a more famous man who called himself Banksy.

For a while Bird lived in San Francisco, and he created signs to boost gallery openings.

Chris had an art restorer friend he helped out once, a guy named Bill Doyle, and Doyle scooped up one of Bird's signs and gave part of it, a letter **P**, to Chris as a gift.

Chris hung it in the living room on Broderick Street, but when he moved to Manhattan Beach it ended up in a storage unit on Aviation Boulevard.

A few days ago he'd put it on CraigsList to see what the market might bear, and had forgotten about it until now.

The first line of the email read:

Hey There Bro,

followed by

Yo I don't even like Bird's work but I can tell a fake ass picture when I see 1 a 100 miles away.

Got a lot a nerve, don't you?

2500 fuck your mother.

Needless to say, there was no closing salutation.

No 'Sincerely,' or 'Yours Respectfully,' in this particular message.

The guy's supposed name in his email address was Marcus Reinhardt, followed by a bunch of numbers.

Wow.

Chris let it resonate and read it one more time.

The part he rolled around, ignoring the guy's attitude for a minute, was the \$2500, the price he was asking.

His friend Bill the restorer told him that was fair market value, if he ever wanted to sell it.

And that was five, six years ago, and Bird's profile seemed to rise since then, though admittedly you didn't hear as much about him lately.

Regardless, \$2500 seemed like a fair starting point here and now in 2019.

So a) the inquiring customer, if you could call him that, was wrong about the authenticity and b) the price was in the ballpark.

Chris shut the laptop and left the apartment, making the left turn toward the friendly confines of downtown MB. He had it down to 18 minutes, door-to-door to Starbucks, or Peet's up the block, which worked fine too.

This was why intelligent people limited the internet.

At one point Joyce fashioned herself an artist. On weekends she'd set up her easel and come back with a farm field and cows or a weathered old barn.

Chris thought her color sense was pretty bad, but he helped her put a few on Craigslist, and there'd be a legit inquiry but plenty of fake ones too.

But son of a gun, *those* scammers were at least polite.

Sheez.

At Starbucks he got a gooey pastry to go with his coffee, meaning he was continuing to screw up that new leaf he intended to turn over, but what could you do, and he checked the *LA Times*.

They were all over this fire situation going on north of San Francisco, neighborhoods igniting like kindling. His old stomping grounds Terra Linda looked okay. He did notice Allison and Monica, on Facebook, marked themselves **safe**, even though Berkeley was 50 miles from the action.

He wondered if Jerry Smith was okay in Sebastopol, which *was* in range.

Which led to another thought. Should you drive up there or fly? The Camry had seen better days, but if you had to bring specific stuff the plane would be a problem unfortunately. He remembered going through the same consideration before Chip.

He got talked into hitting with Chandler this afternoon, which threw a monkey wrench into your day, but there was enough time to look in on Emma at the library, and it took a little wandering around but he tracked her down in the back stacks.

“You have that big desk, with the two-tone nameplate,” he said. “What percentage are you *at* it, would you say?”

Emma was in business mode. Her hair was pinned up and she had a pencil behind her ear and she was straining to read something off an upper shelf. She said, “What else don’t you like about me, Chris?”

“Whoa, hold on . . . That’s my fault then. Sorry.”

She shook her head and he figured Jeez, maybe this was it, but then she put her hands around his neck and gave him a kiss, a real one.

“Dang, one extreme to the other,” he said. “Everything okay?”

“Status quo,” she said. “How are you? I never officially thanked you for dinner the other night. That was good for me, even though I acted out.”

Chris wondered what *that* meant, but it wasn’t a good idea to ask. He said, “What about coming to a reunion with me? Up in the Bay Area . . . How’s that sound?”

“When?” she said. Getting right to it, not conducting a Freudian analysis, which was good.

“Next weekend. Class of ‘94.”

“I don’t know . . . The silver anniversary then. I missed mine.”

“Missed it, or bypassed it?”

“Sort of both. I loved high school. I was a cheerleader.”

“And you dated the quarterback. Or at least the second-string running back.”

“I dated the braniac. The number one person on the debate team.”

“And what happened to him? He went off to MIT?”

“Close. Cal Tech.”

“Cal Tech . . . I was just reading something, that’s the hardest college to get into. Over all of ‘em . . . Why’d you miss yours?”

“It’s complicated,” she said, and Chris agreed, these things shouldn’t be, but they were.

She said, “You wouldn’t prefer to go it alone? In case a certain girl you had a crush on in Band class is divorced and available?”

“How’d you know I was in Band?”

“Just a wild guess. You seem musical.”

“Okay you can make fun of it, but we had a pretty dang good drum corps. I was on snare.”

“Well whoopee,” she said. “But all right then.”

Just like that. It caught Chris off guard but he said that sounded great and pecked her on the cheek and left, and he wondered why you had to keep gumming up the works with another layer, and she was probably right about the divorcees.

Chandler wasn’t kidding when he said he had some drills. He had Chris start by running laps and then stuck him halfway between the baseline and the net and fired balls at him, explaining that mid-court play was one of Chris’s weak points.

It didn't make sense to Chris, that you don't want to be *in* mid-court, but he went along with it.

"You're turning it over," Chandler called out. "That's old-school. It's all in the pronation of the forearm now."

Chris had no idea what he was talking about but he didn't want to risk a major clarification so he kept his mouth shut and tried his best.

"You might not think so, in the short run," Chandler said, "but I saw some progress out there . . . Shall we play a couple sets, put it to use?"

Chris said, "Listen, I appreciate what you're doing."

Chandler said, "Meaning as opposed to yesterday, where I was kind of a wise-ass?"

"Yeah, okay," Chris said. "You have a good side. Pretty sure I came across like a jerk too, in fact I probably still do."

"Well . . . not the worst way to be. Our old man used to tell us that, speak your mind, they may not like you but they might respect you."

"I guess you can apply that to everyday situations," Chris said. "I had one this morning, a variation on the theme. It's a good thing I'm learning to relax . . . pick my spots."

"What kind of variation?" Chandler said.

Chris told him about the email from the *Craigslist* viewer.

Chandler digested it a moment, his face scrunched up. "You have it on you? The exact thing?"

Chris dug out his phone and pulled up the message. He said, "I didn't answer the guy. Do you think I should have?"

Chandler read it a couple times and handed the phone back and said, "I can't speak for you, but if this were me it would be hitting a nerve. Big-time."

“It sort of did, but I moved past it. Only reason I mentioned maybe responding to the guy, I’m thinking--you ignore the assholic negotiating style, he could still be a potential buyer.”

“What category did you list it in?”

“Collectibles . . . That’s what I mean, he’s probably some doofus who collects art, and wants to be convinced it’s not a fake. Which admittedly, on *Craigslist*, there is a lot of.”

“Could be,” Chandler said. “But at this point I’d kill that guy before I sold it to him.”

The words hung there and Chris took a good look at this guy, and wow, it seemed like he was dead serious.

“Take it from me,” Chris said, “that type of level, no way is it worth it.”

“That’s your opinion,” Chandler said. “I had a *Craigslist* experience that I tried not to think about too. But finally it got the better of me.”

“Uh-oh. What happened?”

“This is four years ago now . . . I put a motorcycle on there.”

“Not to interrupt you, but you don’t seem like a bike guy. Not at all.”

Chandler cleared his throat. “As I was saying, I listed it, an ‘89 Honda GB500. Book said \$3400 to 45, so I split the difference and made it 43.”

Chris said, “That’s not quite splitting the difference, but I get the idea. You’re not going to tell me some guy accused you of faking a bike?”

“If we could cut the comedy,” Chandler said. “That night someone calls. He asks a couple questions and then states that the maximum budget he has is \$3000. I say fine, thank you for inquiring, and then fires off another question about the condition of the

motorcycle. I say, and perfectly politely I thought, that there's no point, since it's outside your price range . . . The guy slams down the phone, but that wasn't the end of it."

"So he went and filed a complaint with *Craigslist*, and they suspended you?"

"Much worse. This guy downloads the photo of my bike and then posts it as his own listing, for \$500. With my phone number."

"Ah."

"So the phone starts ringing off the hook, and then people are accusing me of baiting and switching them, and I figure it out but I can't get the ad down because it's his listing, and it's a Friday afternoon and we're into the weekend, and finally on Monday I reach someone at *Craigslist* and they take it down. But I'm the bad guy now. Meanwhile the phone's still ringing every ten minutes."

"So that was it? . . . Or you did something beyond that?" Chris remembering Chandler in the beginning, that *the experience got the better of him*.

"I did. And I know you're a stand-up individual . . . and this is not for public consumption."

Chris was thinking, could this guy actually be dangerous? This mild-mannered retiree from Starbucks whose schedule that first day revolved around timing the bargain matinee?

"Down below Torrance," Chandler was saying, "there's a deserted open area, used to be a military installation. I told the guy meet me there, that it's a good place to test-drive the bike, since it wasn't currently street-legal."

"Wait a second, you jumped way ahead. You called him back?"

"Darn right I did. I didn't let on that I'd been receiving the dozens of calls on *his* ad. I merely told him I might reconsider the three thousand dollars, but that it would have to be cash."

“You’re not going to tell me . . .” Chris said, lowering his voice. “You did the guy *in*? . . . I mean I’m joking, but still.”

“I should have. Which is something that pulls at me when I replay it in detail . . . No, what I did was I brought a couple of fellows with me. One of whom we’d done some work for, got him out of a tight spot. There were no blows exchanged, or anything like that. But the three thousand did change hands.”

“So in the end . . . you sold the bike. The revenge was, you forced the guy into buying it? Whether he wanted to or not?”

“Yes. And I kept the bike.”

“You’re shitting me . . . You *robbed* a guy?”

“That would be a question of semantics,” Chandler said.

“Naturally my interpretation is different . . . Okay, that’s off my chest. C’mon, let’s play, serve ‘em up!”

Chris got off the bench even though he didn’t feel like it and they played two sets, and Chandler beat him worse than yesterday.

“I think I’m regressing,” Chris said after the last ball--a down-the-line winner from Chandler that beat Chris by ten yards-- had been struck. “Let’s forget any future drills.”

“You were fine,” Chandler said. “The difference was I was on fire. You notice? I couldn’t miss . . . Maybe it had to do with my relating that little episode.”

“You weren’t worried though . . . the guy reporting you?”

“I was prepared for the consequences, which would have been a ‘he said, she said’ situation. We did ask him to surrender his phone, on the outside chance he intended to document the encounter.”

“I don’t know why I had this crazy thought,” Chris said, “you were going to tell me you brought Ned Mancuso with you.”

“Oh Gosh no, that would have been entirely impractical. These two fellows, they got their point across, both for that day and going forward. Plus I gave them the three grand to split, on top of their fee.”

Chris almost asked what kind of a fee would be standard for something like that, but that may be going a little too far.

He said, “Well that’s a good story. And, fine, you did get your point across . . . But you ever wonder, did he really learn his lesson? I mean you think he changed?” Pushing the guy’s button, why not.

Chandler thought about that one. “Doubtful,” he said. “But you can’t sit around and let people blatantly disrespect you. You have to do *something*.”

He was giving Chris a hard look now.

“I really wish,” Chris said, “we didn’t have this conversation.”

“You know I’m right. You knew that before I opened my mouth.”

“Either way,” Chris said, “going forward, I’d appreciate you not volunteering information unless I ask for it.”

“You asked me.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did.”

TEN

There was a pizza place in Hermosa, a block in from the pier, red and white vinyl-covered tables.

There were framed glossy photos, signed, either Italian actors or celebrities. Chris wondered if this was Ned’s kind of joint. Maybe not, maybe it reminded him of what he got away from in East Yonkers.

Chris had gotten friendly with Albie the owner, and it might be fun to ask about Ned. For that matter, Albie probably knew Chip, and might have a theory on what happened there.

Chandler was right of course, on the CraigsList deal, you couldn't just ignore it.

Chris finished his slice and brought out his phone and typed:

Dear Marcus,

Thank you for your interest in the Scott Bird piece.

The piece is part of a sign that Bird painted for an opening at the Blue Belle Gallery on Post Street in San Francisco in 2013.

I'd be happy to show it to you at your convenience and confirm authenticity, as well as provide paperwork that indicates value.

Sincerely,

Chris Seely

So there you had it. For now, and maybe forever. It felt good to say something back, even though he took the high road.

So moving forward . . . Today was Saturday.

Which it didn't feel like, every day down here identical, as close as you could come to a perpetual vacation.

The reunion was a week from tonight, suddenly looming real. He better get off his ass.

Yes, you had to drive to the thing, not fly. He'd held onto the cheap firearm, the strange CzechPoint brand revolver Ray had gotten him. He hated using it, hoped there was a different solution with Smith and the Mason guy both, but you needed to bring it.

Then Emma. Would she ride with him, fly up and meet him, what?

Where would he, or they, stay?

More important: Do you visit Jerry first, which means going early.

Chris was starting to get a headache, nothing bad . . . but on top of it what about Sharif's issue? It seemed rude to leave the guy hanging for another week, and it could turn into more if the Chico trip came to fruition.

He ordered an espresso and Albie mentioned the weather, and when he could see Chris was in no hurry he started telling stories. Typically interesting ones, though Chris couldn't focus great and Albie wrapped it up.

Chris dialed the number of Sharif's motel, which was called *The Breakers*. Sharif had cooperated by telling him which motel plus the guy's name, Chris convincing him to take it easy, that he wasn't violating any confidentiality stuff since he didn't include the room number.

Chris asked for Damon Sharp's room, and the receptionist, likely a family member because of the Indian accent, told him to hold on please and it started ringing.

Someone answered, a friendly enough Hello.

Chris said, "I need to speak to you. What room are you in? You're Damon, right?"

The guy, if it *was* Damon, had a surprisingly high voice for an apparent tough guy. "Is this Mr. Wiggins?" Damon said.

Jesus, where was this going now, but fine.

“It is,” Chris said. “I need to stop by. Give me your damn room number, I’ll be honest, I’m starting to get ticked off now.”

“Sure,” the Damon person said. “83. I apologize, believe me, that’s not my intention.”

“I’ll be by,” Chris said, and hung up.

He’d at least established the idiot’s location. He was prepared to say he was from *the gym*, a good bet that would register with Damon, but the Mr. Wiggins part was fine.

Now what though? Drive over there, when he opens the door smash him in the face? It worked with Kyle that time, the chunk of red rock, but this was a tougher customer, plus how would you justify it? Chris (and Sharif) would get arrested pretty quick.

Chris went down to the *Cheater Five* pool and sat there.

You could do nothing.

Forget the silly reunion . . . Jerry Smith and the other prick didn’t *really* require your services, did they? Even Sharif’s guy, that would eventually come to an amicable resolution.

And Emma was right here, you needed to drag her up to San Francisco? For what?

Chris felt like calling someone up north, touching base. The only person he really missed though was Ray, and now wouldn’t be a good time in case Ray was boozed up.

Chris absent-mindedly checked his email.

There it was, the reply back from the art guy, pretty dang fast.

There was no opening for any blue belle gallery in 2013 because that place didn’t exist then.

Don’t go insulting my intelligence

which makes you more of a piss-poor excuse for a fake loser human than you already are.

Admittedly, Chris had been loose with the facts this time. He wasn't sure the sign had been painted at the Blue Belle Gallery, and he had no idea if it was 2013 or if the place *had* been around then. He also lied about having official paperwork, though the guy hadn't said anything about that.

He supposed he could have confirmed the gallery stuff before he responded to the guy, since the letter had come from a legitimate opening *somewhere* up there, but it didn't seem worth it, the guy would have found something else wrong.

Either way, this was getting interesting, and you might as well answer back, it being comfortable enough out here by the pool, and not a whole lot else going on at the moment.

He started and deleted a couple replies to the person, not sure which approach might work best, when he noticed a guy that looked like Sharif but wasn't, walking back to Stacey's old apartment, being followed by the 'You Pig' kid, Ken.

The guy let Ken in, waited a minute, and Ken came back out shaking his head and thanked the guy and that was it.

The shortest way to the parking lot was across the pool, and the kid started that way and saw Chris and did a double-take, and went back out the gate to take the longer way.

Chris called over to him. "I'm not going to bite you. Sit down a second."

The kid reversed himself again and tentatively came back over. Chris said, "What, you left something?"

"I think so. But it's gone now."

“What was it?”

“Just a ring. A Raiders one. Probably not worth a lot, but I wore it around.”

“You mean the *Oakland* Raiders? Like a Superbowl ring?”

“LA Raiders. A replica. One of those memorabilia things.”

“They’re moving to Vegas,” Chris said. “The heck with the fans, right?”

“I guess,” the kid said.

“So you just kept it in there, in the medicine cabinet, or up with dishes, or what?”

“Something like that.”

Chris looked at the current half-written reply to the Craigslist guy and shut it off.

“You okay?” he asked the kid.

“I’ll live,” he said. “I appreciate you asking.”

“I got a few bucks,” Chris said, pulling out what he had in his wallet and sticking it out to the guy. “What I’m hoping though, is Stacey was telling it straight, that you didn’t smash her in the face.”

“I can’t take your money, but yeah she was.”

“So . . . she miraculously ends up falling down on her own at 2 in the morning? Or one of the two guys that moved her out and stole your ring had something to do with it.”

The kid didn’t say anything. It was probably Chris’s imagination but he looked skinnier than the other night and he thought about offering him something to eat.

“So where you staying these days?”

“Me? In my car, for right now. It’s no big deal.”

“Something I always wondered,” Chris said, which he did. “You park and sit tight, what’s the difference between that and you sleeping there illegally, in their interpretation.”

“I’m not sure . . . I guess if you’re upright, you’re okay, but stretch out you may not be . . . I’m in the parking lot at Best Buy. So far so good lying back.”

“Down on Rosekrans?” Chris said, and the kid nodded, Chris thinking that’s not the greatest, a ways down there toward Inglewood, sooner or later the middle of the night in that neighborhood catching up with you.

“That where you’re going back to now,” Chris said, “after you stop by Stace’s and ask her and the two dudes to level with you about the ring?”

The kid smiled for the first time. “You have a pretty good ear,” he said.

It was one of those decisions you could wrestle with.

Chris said, “In that case, you can stay on my couch. Till you get a handle on it.”

The kid looked stunned. Chris figured he thinks I’m a worse nut-job now.

“Gee,” the kid said.

“I was gonna ask you before, but didn’t want to over-step it, but you don’t look too great so I’ll ask now . . . you hungry? It’s Chris by the way.”

They shook hands and the kid said he was Kendall and yeah, he wouldn’t mind a bite to eat.

There was a 24-hour place on Manhattan Beach Boulevard and Highland called *The Kettle*, an old-school diner with a menu 20 pages long, all of it available any time, such as German pancakes at 11:30 at night, which is what Ken ordered, plus a few other items.

Chris said, “Well, good thing you didn’t accept the money, because I’m using it up here.”

Ken kept eating and gave a thumbs up.

Chris said, "Although a healthy appetite, it's not the worst thing to witness . . . I was that way myself, at one time."

"Then what happened?" Ken said between bites.

"You'll find out. You ever go to college?"

Ken said a year and a half at a JC in Albuquerque.

"Okay, so you probably got the idea, though you really notice it in your college dorms."

"The freshman forty, you mean?" Ken said.

"Something like that. Hits the girls first. The guys, not normally until later . . . Bottom line, it's not easy getting old. Things you took for granted, they stop working as well."

"You look fine," Ken said, thanking the waitress as she re-filled his ice tea.

"Well," Chris said, "without getting all detailed, that's good to hear."

"Except you seem kinda stressed," Ken said, "so please stop me if I'm butting in, but what do you *do*?"

"Do? You mean job-wise, or all day?"

"Both."

Chris said, "That bad, huh? . . . What I did, I came down here to re-invent myself--for the reasons you're alluding to--except that whole concept has gone south pretty fast."

"Really? If it's my thing you're talking about, from the other night . . . don't worry about it."

"You ever see those John Madden commercials?"

"No," Ken said.

"Jeez. Second guy now who hasn't. And you're a Raider fan."

"Sorry, then."

"I'm gonna bring the TV in the bedroom," Chris said. "You okay with that? I got a cable hook-up both places, but only one device."

“Of course, are you kidding?”

“And the couch, junk sticks to you off it.”

“Believe me,” Ken said, “I’m more than fine . . . and if your girlfriend comes over, I’ll get right out of there.”

“You don’t have to,” Chris said, “she only came over once, and if she does again, just go down by the pool for a while . . . How’d you know I had a girlfriend?”

“She was with you, when you dunked me.”

They were getting up, the kid finally full. “See this is the thing,” Chris said. “Why wouldn’t I have remembered that?” Though in fairness, they didn’t exactly hold introductions . . . In fact he’d assumed the kid hadn’t even noticed him, pre-dunking.

Ken said, “I don’t know . . . you’re at the point where you don’t sweat the small stuff?”

“And you’re full of crap,” Chris said, “though I guess I appreciate the thought.”

ELEVEN

The kid was a good houseguest, as unobtrusive as you could be in a cheesy one-bedroom apartment. He had a sleeping bag in the car and said he didn’t need a pillow, and when Chris got up in the morning he was gone, everything neatened up in the living room, no sign that anyone had been there.

Last night when he got in bed Chris re-addressed the *Craigslist* issue, settling on the following reply, jamming it all together, no reason to show the guy the respect of using the Enter key:

You know something? Your wise-guy act is starting to wear thin. I know what I have, and I know it's the real McCoy. You want to see it in person, I'm giving you one chance. And feel free to bring your art appraiser too. Day after tomorrow. Monday. October 23. 21020 Aviation Boulevard, Unit 147. 6pm My lowball price is \$1666. But you'll need cash. If I see you fine. If not, you can contact me until the cows come home but that was it. Chris

Re-reading it this morning, this was positively absurd, both getting involved with the guy further, and composing something so stupid. And so lengthy too, not his normal style.

Still, he checked his messages before heading out the door, and nothing from the guy overnight. Hard to know what to make of it, but Emma had a little time and he was meeting her in Venice and he had to hustle.

Which was a heck of a scene all by itself. There was a hole-in-the-wall coffee place right on the beach, across from some intense basketball games, plus you had bodybuilding and outdoor handball and people working high gymnastics rings suspended over the sand.

Chris said, "The vibe, it's a little different than Manhattan, isn't it?"

"I prefer it here," Emma said. "It's more real."

Which was exactly what he liked about MB--the *non-real* part.

"Kinda raunchy around the edges though," he said. "Mixed in, of course, with the off-beat stuff." He was thinking specifically of the multitude of semi-nude bodies flying past--running, walking, biking, skating, jumping, whatever--and this early on a Sunday morning.

"I see you're staring," she said, "so it can't be that painful."

"How's your husband?" he said. "I mean generally speaking."

“He had someone over last night.”

“You’re kidding . . . you mean really over?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. So, where’d you go? Or did you?”

“I went to my girlfriend’s. I thought of asking you . . . but I wasn’t in the mood.”

“So that worked out better? She lives in Venice?”

“Culver City. Though she had someone over too, it turns out.”

Chris looked at Emma closely. “I see. And did you participate in anything . . . at either location?”

“Not particularly,” she said.

“Anyone tell you,” Chris said, another impressive thong bikini skating by, Emma staring at it too, “you’re a strange bird? And I don’t mean that negatively . . . Necessarily.”

“You’re irritated now, I can tell,” she said.

“Not at all,” he said, not disguising it too well, his voice going up a notch on the *all*. “You’re still coming with me, right?”

She said she was planning to, yes, that she took off Saturday afternoon and would fly up.

Chris nodded and said, “Up there, I was thinking Sunday we head over to Mount Tam, take a hike. Kind of my old stomping ground.”

“I’d be up for that, though you’ll have to bear with me, I’m not the greatest outdoorsman these days.”

“We can take plenty of breaks. One of them, I’m going to ask you what happened at summer camp . . . Or should I bring it up right now?”

“Let’s don’t.”

“At all? Or not now?”

“We’ll see,” she said.

Once again Chris let himself get railroaded into playing tennis with Chandler, the third day in a row, and he was thinking if this guy keeps pressuring me like this I may have to go up north and kill a couple guys just to get *out* of it.

He was in the apartment getting his stuff together, already beat from the morning, since after Emma left he sprung for a rental bike and rode up past Santa Monica to Will Rogers State Park and then Malibu, further than he should have gone on the hourly rate he selected, and he had to push hard coming back to Venice to avoid a time penalty.

There was a tap on the door and it was Ken.

“Sorry to bother you,” Ken said. “I just wanted to make sure . . . is it okay to stay one more night?”

Chris said, “It is. In fact didn’t I already say, until you get a handle on your stuff?”

“Oh. Okay then. That’s very kind of you . . . Cause I do have a handle on it, technically.”

“What, you’re out of your car?”

“Not that, no, but everything else is fine.”

“Shut up and come inside,” Chris said. “I see the problem, I’m going to make you a key.”

Ken sat down on the recliner. “Man, this thing is sweet,” he said. “That might be problematic though, seeing as how the landlord tossed me out of here once already.”

“Don’t worry about him,” Chris said. “He’ll understand.”

“Not sure about that one, though if you say so . . . You getting ready to play tennis, it looks like?”

“You might say that. I got some guy, s’pissing me off. You want to come? You ever play?”

“Not in a while. I played in high school. But where’s it at?”

“What are those, skater shoes or something?” Chris said.

“I guess,” Ken said.

“So they’ll work. Let’s go.”

Chandler was already warming up, not with a racquet and ball, but laying there in one of the service boxes doing these weird, contorted stretches, and already sweating pretty good.

“It’s all about the core now,” he said, getting up to say hi. “I see you brought some new blood, a fresh victim.” Winking at Ken.

Chandler’s attitude was grating on Chris, the ‘all about the core’ BS taking him back to Maierhoffer, those times at Julius Kahn playground, Maierhoffer getting the better of him and managing to stick in the needle about his supreme fitness.

The last he heard, from Birgitte, and that must have been six months ago, the a-hole had re-settled in Israel, Chris never quite sure if the Damirko incident had anything to do with it--and son of gun, there it was finally, the name of the little guy--but it wasn’t something high on Chris’s radar, though he hoped Maierhoffer wouldn’t change his mind and come back.

Speaking of Birgitte, his brother Floyd making the rounds with *her* too. What a circus . . . god dang.

Chandler was asking Ken if played much, and where, and Ken was low-keying his answers, the way a guy might, Chris was thinking, when he was pretty good at something.

“You know what?” Chris said. “You guys start off, but don’t worry, I’m here if you need me.”

From the first couple balls it was obvious Ken was a player, and *he* was starting to tick Chris off now as well, with that nonsense, the implication he hadn’t played since high school.

Chandler hadn’t expected this, and after the first set he ran out of water, which was never the case against Chris, and it was amusing

seeing Chandler have to go a ways to fill his fancy container, since the water fountain outside the court hadn't worked since probably the 1950's.

They played another, Ken toying with the guy, who suddenly looked pretty dang old, and Ken a few times cutting loose and really crushing a ball, and Chandler standing there and clapping on his racquet like they do on TV.

"Where'd you come up with *this* guy?" Chandler said, back at the bench, looking pretty white and changing his shirt which wasn't the greatest sight.

Ken was wrapped up in his phone, which of course they always were when they had a spare second, barely a drop of sweat on him.

"He's a good kid," Chris said. "Kind of like with you, I wasn't sure of it at first. He played high school ball, apparently."

"No, no--*Kid*," Chandler said, interrupting Ken. "Pardon my French, but high school ain't gonna produce the kind of display you just laid on me there."

"What does that mean?" Chris said.

"That high school tennis is a glorified PE class. Most of the elite kids don't bother with it."

"I played some USTA juniors as well," Ken was saying now.

"Thank you so much for this though. It was very inspiring."

"See what I mean?" Chris said. And to Ken, "Chandler played high-calibre tennis himself. At UCLA."

"Really!" Ken said.

"Nah," Chandler said, "he's making a big deal about that. It wasn't much, not at all."

"Still . . . UCLA," Ken said. "That's huge."

“At any rate,” Chandler said, happy to change the subject, “this guy happen to tell you about his encounter with the guy interested in the picture?”

“He hasn’t,” Ken said. “That sounds interesting though.” Polite, and undoubtedly hoping not to have to hear about it.

“Oh yeah,” Chandler said, smiling a little, looking at Chris. “He has some unfinished business there, that’s for sure.”

“Okay, let’s knock it off,” Chris said.

“You may not always realize it,” Chandler said to Ken, “but just like they’re two sides to a story? The same goes for people.” Winking again at Ken, which was starting to really piss Chris off. Was this guy referring to himself, for instance?

“What I’m putting together here,” Chris said, “is you’re a bad loser. Which must be triggering you running your mouth unnecessarily.”

“Just having a little fun,” Chandler said, smiling bigger and more irritatingly. “Okay, coming back to it, have you decided to follow through?”

Chris said to Ken: “What he’s referring to, just a small-potatoes nuisance. One of those you can’t do anything about, so you move on.”

“Even though it kills you though, right?” Chandler said. “Kenny, mark my words, something’s going to blow. Mr. Seely has a temper, just like I do. For better or worse.” *Kenny* now.

“Oh,” Ken said to Chris. “I apologize for not asking your last name . . . And having a temper--I mean when you think it’s justified--isn’t that human nature?”

Was the kid *ever* going to blame him for dunking him in that bowl?

Obviously Chris was helping him out at the moment, the kid probably thinking it’s in his best interest not to, but even when it

happened the kid didn't whine or complain. And when he asked what really happened to Stacey, the kid was a good soldier, kept his mouth shut.

"Either of you watch *Friday Night Lights*?" Chris said.

"Sorry, no," Ken said.

"I don't think so. It was a movie, right?" Chandler said.

Jeez, nobody'd seen or heard of anything down here.

"Not the movie," Chris said. "The TV series. Went downhill over time, but pretty compelling those first couple seasons . . . The reason I mention it, one of the characters reminds me of Ken, here."

Chandler said, "You've set the stage, and you have us pinned, so get to the point."

"There's these couple of scenes," Chris said, "One of the players, his name's Riggins, he ends up at a party where the coach's daughter is too. She's getting ready to make a bad decision and Riggins, he gets her out of there and takes her home. The coach walks in at the wrong moment and thinks Riggins is putting the moves on his daughter."

"Jeeminy," Chandler said. "All that . . . and you're trying to relate it to Kenny?"

"Yeah, right," Ken said.

Chris said, "So Coach is out-of-his mind angry, throws him out of the house--he's been staying there temporarily I remember now, there's another storyline--and Riggins takes it and never says a word."

"Meaning," Chandler said, "he doesn't speak ill of the daughter, even though it's she that caused it . . . I see what you mean, I admire that."

Ken said, "Does it end like that, or is there a follow up?"

"There is," Chris said. "Great scene. Couple weeks later, the daughter tells her dad what happened. Coach goes to Riggins's house and looks him in the eye and tells him he has character, and he

respects him . . . and then you see Coach walking back to his car, and there's Riggins reacting, Coach on some level a father-figure . . . TV doesn't get better than that."

"You keep going, you're going to have me tearing up," Chandler said.

"I didn't think you had it in you," Chris said.

"Not normally, but I'm a sucker for certain things . . . Okay regardless, you're tying in Ken?"

"Ah I pulled something I shouldn't have," Chris said. "He handled it like a man, let's just leave it at that."

Chandler waited to see if there was more, which there wasn't. He said, "See you tomorrow then? Same time, same channel? . . . If I can get out of bed," winking at Ken.

Chris said, "Actually, let me take a rain check. I have an event up in the Bay Area next weekend, I should start preparing."

"How 'bout you Kenny?" Chandler said. "You work, or are you independently wealthy like the rest of us around here?"

"I wish," Ken said. "But sure, that'd be fine."

Chandler said, "What kind of event?"

Chris told him and Chandler asked did he need the whole week to get ready for that?

"I wasn't intending to," Chris said, "but I've got one more nuisance on my plate." Leaving out the supposed meeting tomorrow with the art guy at the storage place, entirely a dumb idea at this point. "But there's a guy, won't get out of a motel room. And won't pay up."

"That could almost be me," Ken said. "We got out, but we still owe the landlords for last month."

"Different deal," Chris said. "This guy lifts weights in the middle of the night. The owner made the mistake of entering without permission."

“Wait a minute,” Chandler said. “This is you, the owner? Some kind of rental property you have, you’re calling a motel?”

“No, a friend of mine. A real motel. Against my better judgment I’m trying to help him.”

“Well . . . I know what I would do,” Chandler said.

“What?” Ken said.

“In a perfect world,” Chandler said. “Problem these days, your hands are tied. Tenants have all the rights, landlords are the scum on the bottom of the pond.”

Chris said, “So far, all I could come up with was call the guy, tell him I’d be stopping by. Or at least a Mr. Wiggins would.”

“That shake him up at all?” Chandler said.

“No, he knew Mr. Wiggins, seemed to be expecting him.”

“So . . . what are you doing wasting time with that approach?”

“I’m afraid I agree,” Ken said.

“Anyhow . . .” Chris said. “I’ve got that, and then maybe this gal coming with me up north, and I may have to get there a little early . . . Bottom line, my week looks shot, on the tennis front.”

“Why would you have to get there early?” Ken said.

“Jeez, you’re sounding like *this* guy now,” Chris said. “Just something in the itinerary. Not sure if I need to address it before or after the main event.”

“Plus,” Chandler said, “you just moved here, right? The air-conditioning hasn’t recovered from driving over The Grapevine, and you’re piling on activities back up north?”

Chris couldn’t disagree with him. “My air-conditioning hasn’t worked since about Missouri, on my way to Boston,” he said. “But break a leg while I’m gone.”

TWELVE

Ken said, "That was fun today. Thanks for including me."

They were back by the pool, this time a take-out spread from a place called *California Kitchen*, which set Chris back a few bucks but wasn't bad. Ken said he had money and he'd grab himself something at Taco Bell, but Chris wasn't going to let him, and the truth was he enjoyed the company.

"You think Chandler really played at UCLA?" Chris said. "Even back then, the dark ages, when almost no one else played tennis?"

"What do you mean?" Ken said.

No point getting all cynical and corrupting the kid. "We finish here, remind me we need to find a hardware store that's still open, make that other key."

"Maybe let's don't go that far," Ken said. "Again, Mr. Zaman, it didn't end well there."

"Okay listen to me. You keep bringing that up. That's who I'm helping out. With the motel business."

"Oh . . . Wow . . . The surprises keep piling up, then."

"Not as much a stretch as you think. I got on his bad side for a bit myself, but it morphed into me making a few suggestions. He's a decent guy, doesn't know what to do . . . Nothing worse than a tenant from hell, they can ruin you."

Ken said, "Break a leg. Is that an actors' expression?"

"Not sure, I was telling Chandler go ahead and break one because he's too full of himself. Don't you think?"

"Hmm."

"Nah, you're right of course. It's bad luck to wish a performer good luck. So they use the ironic version. You'd think Hollywood could get more creative than that."

“And where’s this motel person live?”

Chris picked up a napkin and wiped his hands. “Excuse me?”

“I was just curious.”

“What . . . you’re throwing up a smokescreen on me here? No way we’re going there . . . **A**, it’s none of your business, **B**, even if it were, it’s not child’s play.”

“Okay sorry,” Ken said.

Chris said, “I didn’t mean it like that. Okay? . . . All I’m saying is, you got a nice clean slate ahead of you . . . The other night notwithstanding . . . You get charged with anything, or no?”

“Luckily I didn’t.”

“So there you go. Don’t butcher it up, sticking your nose where it’s not required.”

“All I was thinking, I could talk to the person. Maybe help them come up with an alternative.”

“I tried that. No way.”

“Fine then . . . You tell good stories, by the way. I enjoy listening.”

Dang. “You don’t think I’m a blabbermouth? I catch myself, a lot of times, pretty sure I’m over-doing it.”

“Not as far as I’m concerned.”

“No?”

“No.”

Around 10, Emma called.

Chris was in the bedroom, trying to watch a week-in-review show but dozing off, and Ken was out cold in the living room, everything dark, Chris thinking the tennis maybe did have an effect and the kid’s human after all.

Chris said no, tonight wouldn’t work great.

“Even if I pled my case?” Emma said. “That I’m missing you in that special way?”

Something that crept in, pretty sure nothing to do with his diagnosis, but if he really wasn’t in the mood and couldn’t force the issue, was that okay?

It would have been okay with Joyce for example, who didn’t hold stuff against him. Emma, who knows. She was a live wire, plenty of mystery already there and being added to, and her libido level possibly out of his league.

Chris said, “You have to get out of there again? Your husband doing his thing? . . . What’s his name anyway, I never asked.”

“Jesse,” she said. “He’s out playing poker, that’s not it.”

“I don’t know,” Chris said. “You caught me a couple hours earlier, would have been better. Why’d you wait so long?”

“I didn’t wait at all, I just now felt like calling you.”

Jesus, what are you going to do?

He said, “Okay then, you don’t mind making the effort . . . I have to warn you, someone’s here. A guy, a kid, I’m letting him crash . . . I keep calling him a kid, he’s like 25.”

“That’s fine,” Emma said, not missing a beat, and she clicked off.

Yeah, you had to wonder about this woman’s past. Maybe not the last twenty years, a supposed mom--though probably even then--but especially before that.

If Chris took a wild guess she could have been an exotic dancer, playboy bunny, cocktail waitress, stripper, Mob-guy girlfriend--Jeez, even an escort.

Though he could have it all equally wrong, she might have been as wholesome as Wonder Bread.

Since he kept bringing up Joyce. . . she *was* a nymphomaniac, admittedly, but a predictable one. With Emma, you had the feeling she

could wear you out in a hurry and discard you by the side of the road, or maybe in the middle of it.

Twenty minutes later, boom, there she was. Wearing blue stretch pants and a big loose sweater, and some kind of colorful tie in her hair, a nice tropical scent trailing her.

Chris said, not wanting to wake up Ken but figuring it was inevitable now, "You're all set for a yoga class."

"You're funny," she said. "I like your sense of humor."

"You don't always," he said. "But say hello to my friend here . . . Kendall, this is Emma." Ken was laying on his back in the bag, rubbing his eyes, and only when Emma said she was pleased to meet him did he snap to attention and realize people were standing there.

"Whoops," he said. "Sorry about that . . . It's a pleasure to meet you as well . . . Chris I'm stepping out for a while."

Chris said are you sure, and Emma said there's no need, and she apologized for the inconvenience.

When he was gone Chris said, "You sounded like a flight attendant there, when the thing's stuck on the tarmac for two hours."

"Or a New York City subway conductor," she said, "when the train's stopped between stations."

He said, "That's a good one, I can picture it. One time the guy by accident said 'we *thank* you for the inconvenience'. Which was a little comic relief, though not enough, after a long wait."

Emma smiled at that, but there you were, a little window into her past.

"What were you doing in New York?" he said.

"Sightseeing with Jesse," she said.

Or maybe not.

"He's cute," she said. Oh no . . .

"Jesse? . . . or Ken?"

“Ken. Where’d you find him? It’s kind of bothering me, he looks familiar.”

Chris figured no need to mention *Big Wok*. “He lived downstairs with his girlfriend. Things deteriorated. He was in his car, so I offered him the couch for a couple days.”

“My God, poor thing,” she said.

“Well it’s not the end of the world. Not worth obsessing over.”

“Only a couple of days? Then what? You throw him back on the street?”

“Yep. The clock’s ticking down.”

“You’re a bit of a bastard, you know that?”

“C’mere.”

An hour later she was doing her thing in the kitchen, barefoot, this time wearing one of those pairs of his shorts. “I’ll never lose my weight at this rate,” she said. “They say the most foolproof method is don’t consume anything after 5 pm.”

“Unless you’re someone like the kid,” Chris said, “Kenny. All I can say, those were the days.”

She said, “I was watching the news. Did you notice how fit the French president’s wife was? That’s what I want to be, when I’m her age.”

“And she’s what, a generation older than the guy?”

“I believe the difference is a full 25 years.”

Chris said, “You brought her up because of Kenny? Forget it, don’t answer that.” He lowered his voice. “You did blurt out something, back there.” Meaning the bedroom. “Not sure if I should press you.”

Emma disconnected the blender and poured two tall glasses, this concoction a little pinker than last time.

“Unless you want to comment,” Chris said.

“I remember it,” she said.

“I mean we all . . . in the heat of the moment . . . are prone to emotion, and definitely exaggeration too.”

Chris couldn't help flashing on his own experience that time, the guy walking in and reporting his alleged comment to the police.

They were on the couch, which felt a little awkward, Ken's bed, but there wasn't a lot of choice.

“But you're saying you remember it?” Chris said. “Anything you want to add, in terms of clarification? . . . Or even that you were joking around?”

“How's tonight's version?” she said. “I added some grenadine. Kind of a makeshift fizz.”

“That red stuff? Didn't know I even had it.”

“We picked it up last time, to give us options,” she said. “Where does your friend go though, do you think?”

That was a good question, and it was cooling off out there tonight and Ken only had a t-shirt when he left. Chris pulled back a curtain and took a look, and there was the kid sitting by the pool staring into space in the direction of the Hollywood Hills.

Chris opened the door and said, “Hey. Get up here.”

Ken shrugged his shoulders and came back, and Emma said she was seeing goosebumps on him and she served him the half-glass that was left over and apologized again for disrupting the evening.

“That was good for me actually,” Ken said. “I took a walk.”

“See what I mean?” Chris said. “You can drive a big-rig over this guy and he'll put a positive spin on it.”

“You'd be good for my daughter,” Emma said.

“Hmm,” Ken said.

“Why, she's negative, you're saying?” Chris said.

“We butt heads,” Emma said. “I'm going to leave you boys.”

“Ah,” Chris said. “That it then? You’re okay getting home this late?”

“I feel bad,” Ken said.

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “Everything already worked out nicely.”

“Jesus Christ, come on,” Chris said.

“So . . . Too-da-loo,” she said, and she grabbed her stuff and that was it.

Ken gave it a polite minute or two and said, “Gin in here? I don’t know my hard stuff, but this is pretty good.”

“Dang,” Chris said.

“Is everything okay?”

“I suppose, yeah.”

“Pretty foxy lady, for a mom, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“Funny, she sorta said the same thing about you. In reverse.”

“Oh. But sorry about that,” Ken said, “I’m way overstepping.”

“That’s fine. We’re all human here . . . You’d be into her then, if the circumstances were different?”

“I guess . . . hypothetically, yeah . . . I mean what do you want me to say?”

“Don’t worry about it, we’re good . . . The thing she laid on me though, she insisted she wants to kill her husband.”

You could see Ken trying to process this one. First, the fact that there *was* a husband, second, people slung around that expression all the time, didn’t they?

“Obviously I’m wondering the same thing,” Chris said.

“Something like that, sometimes you dish it out playful. Full spectrum of possibilities.”

“Or, yeah, you can be angry,” Ken said, “but within reason.”

“Which is how I took it when she said it the first time-- actually in that same restaurant, which I hate to keep alluding to.”

Ken said, ‘Yes, that’d be people blowing off steam, 99 percent of the time.’”

“Actually I’m wrong, it was back in the apartment she dropped that on me, three glasses of wine and half the blended shit in the books.”

“So same thing tonight,” Ken said.

“Hopefully . . . but you know how there can be . . . one or two key moments? She kept repeating it, a rhythm to it, almost a chant. I won’t lie to you, it was a little disconcerting.”

“Wow,” Ken said.

“Something to keep an eye on, I guess.”

“She’s cheating on him then? If you don’t mind my asking?”

“She says she’s not.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t even know if there is a husband,” Chris said.

“Well keep me posted,” Ken said.

“You’re loosening up,” Chris said. “Not the worst thing.”

“It’s been an interesting day,” Ken said, “thank you.” And he got back in the sleeping bag and zipped the thing up, and Chris didn’t feel like heading into the bedroom again just yet, so went down to the pool and like an idiot fell asleep in one of the chaise-lounges and didn’t snap out of it until 4 in the morning.

THIRTEEN

Accu Lock-n-Store occupied a square block on the three-lane section of Aviation Boulevard as you drove from Hawthorne to Redondo Beach.

Chris had gone with an outside unit, which was cheaper and didn't involve a security check during the day. Except now, a little after 5, there was a guy stepping out of a hut asking for his information.

Which was fine, except would the *doofus* have a problem getting in?

Chris asked the guard and the guy said yeah, it was one vehicle per unit-visit, sorry no exceptions, and Chris thanked him and drove on in.

On the off-chance the guy did show up . . . having to meet him outside and the guy riding in his passenger seat, even a block or two . . . that just wasn't going to happen.

Chris wondered, was there a walk-in option, but again you'd have to pass the security guy, except back past his unit there were a couple those **Emergency Exit Only** gates, with the bar in the middle that you weren't supposed to push . . . so what the heck, he tried one and the gate opened and no monster alarm sounded.

So he left the gate ajar and messaged the bozo, even though he hated to.

Marcus. Chris (Scott Bird). I'm at the Unit (147). You show, park on street and walk in southmost gate. You'll see my door open.

He'd done his job, extended the guy every courtesy, beyond the call of duty, and much more importantly now, what he did he need again for up north?

There was so much crap in here you couldn't think straight. Nothing was organized. He peeked in a few boxes. The firearm of course he had in the trunk. There was an extra box of bullets in here

someplace, but how many of those would you *need*, it didn't seem worth hunting down a needle in a haystack.

He found a pair of leather driving gloves someone gave him as a gift, so okay fine, not for driving but maybe to wear. There was a long box with some sporting equipment, a cut-down hockey stick, a couple old squash racquets and one baseball bat, a black one.

Might as well. It sure seemed primitive. If you weren't a fan of shooting off the gun there had to be something better, but it was hard to argue that the bat worked those couple times.

A sweatshirt maybe, a baseball cap. He threw it all in the back seat of the car. *Ah Jeez* though, the reunion. He'd forgotten about that part.

There was a suit in here someplace, at least a sportcoat. He dressed up so rarely he was drawing a blank where to even start looking when someone said, "Excuse me, are you Chris?"

Chris took his time answering the guy, twisting back around and high-stepping his way out of this ridiculous mess and dusting himself off and checking the time.

He said, "Being 100 percent honest? You showing up at all, much less almost on the dot, I'd give less chance than seeing the comet."

The guy pretended to laugh and said, "Is this *it*, I take it?"

There was only one painting, four feet high by two feet wide, right in the front of everything, mounted in a deep light-wood frame.

"What do *you* think?" Chris said.

"Do you mind?" the guy said, pulling out a mini flashlight and a magnifying glass.

Chris didn't say anything, and the guy didn't wait for an answer, getting busy with his inspection. The guy wasn't what Chris pictured, which was a disheveled character with tape on his glasses and bad teeth.

This Marcus apparently fashioned himself a hipster dude. The beard, neatly trimmed, the man-bun in back, the flannel-plaid shirt folded back just right to the elbows, revealing an elaborate Asian tattoo.

Chris said, “I’m seeing a lot of that. White guys going Asian . . . what’s that stuff mean?”

“The three characters spell Aikido,” Marcus said, not looking up from his inspection.

Chris wasn’t crazy about that, a martial art, since you wanted to feel you had the upper hand when you talked down to him. “That involve striking, submissions, all that? Or is that the mostly *de-fense* one?”

“That’s correct. It’s a highly spiritual art. We have some throws and joint-locks, but the emphasis is on re-directing the attack . . . This is fake, by the way.”

The guy’d snapped off his flashlight and was done with the inspection. He said, “I used poor judgement coming here. Art fraud is an epidemic. You should be ashamed of yourself, honestly.”

Chris remembered listing one of Joyce’s paintings on *eBay*, a figure in a dress Joyce told him was a Marimekko design, so he put that word in the title. The next day he hears from a lady telling him he has no right to call it that, that she’s from a Marimekko watchdog group and he needs to straighten it out. He took care of it, didn’t want to get into an argument, but *man*.

“Is that right,” Chris said.

“Excuse me?”

“What I’m wondering now,” Chris said, “did you even bring the money. Or is that your mission, get in the way of law abiding citizens going about their business?”

“Okay now you’re out of line,” Marcus said.

“Taking it a step further,” Chris said, “I’m pretty sure you’re a failed artist . . . You tried, right? Probably went to art school. Then the reality sunk in . . . Then you developed your e-mail game.”

Marcus said, more slowly, “You’d best watch your step, friend . . . I’m not going to tell you again . . . So if there’s nothing more, and we’re *capiche*, I’ll be leaving now.”

Chris tossed it back and forth.

“Well there *is* something else,” he said. “I wasn’t planning on putting it for sale, but since you made the trip, it’d be at least worth a look.”

“What is it?” the guy said.

“It’s a Picasso.” Chris held up his hands. “And in full-disclosure mode, I’ll tell you right now it’s a print . . . but an old one. My parents picked it up in Europe, after the war.”

“Whatever,” Marcus said.

“There’s a large box in back, over this way, it says U-Haul on it. You got blankets top and bottom, and then sandwiched in the middle is the piece. Glass involved, obviously . . . Here, let me hold your examining stuff, I tried to get in there earlier but the muscles don’t always do what you tell ‘em, which you’ll find out some day.”

The guy didn’t want to hand anything over. “I need to be able to take a good look,” he said, “that is, if I find any *there*, there.”

Jeez, what an awful expression.

“Forget that,” Chris said, “give me your shit so you have your hands free. You find it, bring it out in the light, we’ll *both* take a look.”

The guy reluctantly complied. Chris said, “Lemme see your phone for a sec also. I want to find that site I was on, all about Picasso prints.”

Marcus gave him the phone too but warned, “Whatever prices they may be showing you, those are a joke. The market for Cubism hasn’t been this depressed in decades.”

“Fine, cross that bridge when we come to it,” Chris said.

He waited while the guy worked his way back through the jumble, which admittedly did take some younger legs to negotiate. Meanwhile he fiddled around with the guy’s phone.

“It’s pretty heavily taped,” Marcus called back. “We’ll need something.”

Chris said he had a screwdriver which should work, if he could find it, and there was a built in shelf on the left wall and he started looking around, where you had the chain hanging down that operated the roll up door.

He stuck the phone in his pocket so he’d have both hands free, same way he instructed Marcus, and he took a half-step back and grabbed the chain, hand-over-hand, getting the job done quick, and when it was all the way down he took the padlock, which he’d left in the open position, suspended over the receiving end of the latch, and completed the process.

That worked out okay.

But dang he was hungry, socializing sure gave you an appetite.

FOURTEEN

Chris felt back to normal after stopping off again at the pizza joint in Hermosa.

The owner, Albie, was even more animated tonight, and brought him a pepperoni calzone to try, on the house. Chris never cared for calzones back east--one of those items that looked better than it was--but this one was real tasty.

Back home, the pool looked inviting tonight and Chris made his second appearance in it since he'd been a *Cheater Five* resident, and he was floating around when Ken came by.

"Where you been?" Chris said.

"Where've *you* been?" Ken said. "I was hoping to buy you dinner tonight, to try and reciprocate some of the hospitality."

"I appreciate the thought. Hang onto your money, you need it more than I do."

"I got a small job it turns out, the rest of the week, so there'll be a little breathing room."

"What *kind* of job?"

"Your friend Emma, actually . . . They're re-arranging the basement, moving all kind of books and shelves around, some of it from upstairs too. She said they need extra labor."

Chris said, "The library? . . . Sheesh . . . I mean how'd she even get ahold of you?"

"She stopped by this morning, she told me she'd check on it and to call her later. Which I did."

"This *morning*? Where was I, then?"

"I don't know, sleeping I guess."

"Okay, though wow," Chris said. "I guess it's all on the up and up."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"No you're right . . . good for you. She . . . make any other suggestions, or plans, whatnot?"

"Not that she told me. She did say she's looking forward to being up in the Bay Area with you."

"Oh . . . well . . . You did eat though, you're good?"

"I'm fine. You don't mind, I'm going to stretch it out a bit, if that's okay."

Chris realized that meant he needed to get inside, since he kept forgetting to make the kid that extra key, so he got out of the pool and let him in and headed straight to Home Depot, which didn't have a key set-up but said try a particular Rite Aid, and surprisingly they did have one, except the correct person wasn't there and it was a big waste of time.

He was back home on the recliner, googling where you might stay in San Francisco.

Which was pathetic, since he'd lived most of his life there until 10 days ago. The fact was he didn't have any go-to situation.

He was thinking maybe an airbnb, when there was a knock on the door along with a "Good evening, Mr. *Seely*?" and Chris recognized Sharif's voice, as did Kenny too, who went to full sleeping bag over-the-head mode quick.

Chris opened the door and Sharif started to come in, as though he was automatically invited, except Chris hadn't moved out of the way, so Sharif backed off, but Chris then felt bad and let him in and once again filled a couple shot glasses, though tonight Sharif was already boozed up.

Sharif was smiling non-stop, and his face had some red splotchiness, which Chris didn't realize would happen to a Pakistani guy when he drank but there you were.

Sharif nearly sat down on Ken, unaware of the situation, and he caught himself just in time, realizing there was an actual person there but so excited he didn't give it a thought, and Chris unfolded a chair for him.

"I'm not sure how to thank you," Sharif said.

"Hmmm," Chris said, no idea what was going on here, and either way figuring the guy was mixed up.

“What impressed me most, I suppose, the sheer suddenness of it all, the finality!” Sharif said.

“Unh, huh . . .” Chris said cautiously, “and as pertains to what, exactly?”

Sharif laughed, which was like an insane-type giggle at this point. “To Mr. *Sharp* of course . . . and it’s wholly unsurprising that your reaction now is to simply downplay it . . . My friend--in Urdu, we’d shower the expression *Nawaazish* upon you, and that wouldn’t be nearly enough.”

Chris was still off-balance, trying to put some of it together. “So you’re saying . . . he’s moving out then, dropping the lawsuit part . . . what?”

“*All* of it, is what he claims! The evacuation shall be complete tomorrow, he announced rather emphatically.”

“Announced it *how*? You mean popped into the motel office, and just said forget about everything?”

“Exactly. We were stunned. And an hour later, he came back a *second* time, to reassure us . . . This is simply a marvelous development, on all fronts.”

“Uh-huh . . . He expand at all,” Chris said, “on what may have precipitated . . . the sudden change of heart?”

Sharif shook his head and continued smiling. “There you go again, entirely modest . . . He merely pointed out that the gentleman who spoke to him on our behalf made a compelling case.” Sharif let out another *tee-hee*.

Chris didn’t feel like the guy hanging around any longer, so he didn’t offer seconds, though Sharif was hoisting his empty shot glass anyway now, pointing it at him and throwing it back again for any drops he missed.

Chris said, “Well interesting then, good to hear . . . I mean something none of us expected when we got up this morning, that’s for sure.” Looking at his watch, hoping the guy’d get the hint, which Sharif did, standing promptly and looking like he wanted to embrace Chris before completing his exit, but Chris wasn’t going to let that happen and stayed far enough away until Sharif disappeared all the way out the door.

Chris went in back and washed up and brushed his teeth and when he checked on Ken the guy was still underwater so to speak but had shifted his position.

“You happen to hear any of that?” Chris said.

Ken stuck his head out. “Bits and pieces. I didn’t think it was the greatest to be showing myself front and center, for obvious reasons . . . Like I said, not only the incident with the police, but I owe him money. Which I’m not forgetting about, but still.”

“You need to get over that. You’re starting to get on my nerves with it, you want to know the truth.”

“All right, sure thing . . . Welp, I’m gonna hit the hay. I’ve got the library in the morning, they said be there at 8:30.”

“Which is going to be such a hardship for a young whippersnapper like you,” Chris said.

“You’re being sarcastic, right?” Ken said.

Chris was working it around.

“What I can’t get straight,” he said, “given the hostile nature of it . . . why would that guy be clearing out of there, la-di-da? . . . Seeing as how I never got around to paying him the aforementioned visit?”

“The motel guest, you mean?” Ken said. “The one Mr. Zaman was having trouble with?”

“The one and only,” Chris said, waiting.

“Well it’s always interesting how things play out,” Ken said. “When I was in high school? I helped out with a Little League team one summer. You had this one parent who was coming up to the coach, before games, after them. The coach said the parent called him on the phone. Pretty much telling him he doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“So?”

“So at the end of the season, the parent writes a letter to the head Little League people, telling them what a superstar job the coach had done.”

“So? Probably the guy’s kid got more playing time, or had a couple good games there at the end.”

“Nah, that part didn’t change.”

“Yeah? Big deal. What are you rambling on about? That has nothing to do with what I was saying, the Sharif thing.”

“It’s *exactly* the same. What you least expect, sometimes happens.”

“There’s no connection at all . . . unless of course . . . you have inside information.”

Waiting again.

“Good night then,” Ken said.

“Before you drift off, what else you do today? Besides your appointments with Emma.”

Ken waited a minute and reluctantly sat up on one elbow. He said, “Okay, for Gosh sake’s. You’re rat-a-tatting me, and it’s not going to stop, is it? Like one of those machines that digs wells.”

“I know the ones you mean,” Chris said. “They’re like a giant crane attached to a truck. After a while the truck leaves and the thing keeps pounding, sometimes for weeks, depending how rocky the undersoil is.”

“Fine. I spoke to your person briefly. I know you were against it, but I didn’t see what it honestly could hurt.”

“God *Dang* it . . . See this is exactly what I *didn’t* want to have happen. You getting involved in my business.”

“I’m *not*. It was just something . . . I could see it was bothering you. On top of your trip and all.”

Chris *was* mad at the kid, not like before, not about to dunk him again, but this was ridiculous.

But before you chewed him out any more . . . here he was waiting, and if you used your imagination you saw a puppy dog, who all he wants is a little approval.

Chris said, “Well what did you *say* to the guy?” And before Ken could answer Chris thought of something else. “Back it up a second . . . How’d you even *find* him?”

“That was no big deal. I know they run those couple motels on PCH. I just called them both, asking to speak to the guest who lifts weights.”

“Jeez . . . and that was all it took?”

“The first one, they seemed confused, but the second motel, *The Breakers*, there was like this weird silence from the reception gal. So I told them I was a real estate agent, and was calling about an apartment I found for the person.”

“Son of a gun . . . So they put you through pretty quick, I imagine?”

“Oh yeah. Then Damon didn’t answer the first few times, so I convinced her it’d be simpler than going through the same routine to just give me the room number.”

“And they did that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“*Damon* though? You’re on a first-name basis? . . . And you got the name from ‘em too, to start off?”

“No that came later, when I met him. We left on good terms, so yeah, *Damon*.”

Chris let out an exhale through his front teeth. It wasn’t the way he would have handled it exactly, and he couldn’t picture the leaving on good terms part.

“Okay so anyhow,” Chris said, “how’d you work it, when he finally opened the door.”

“There wasn’t much to it. He was polite enough, invited me in. There was some small talk, and then I told him I didn’t care personally but I thought it was the right thing to do, to warn him that my boss is a very unpredictable person.”

“Oh my God.”

“It was funny, like I was saying, we got along pretty well. We found out we were both raised by our grandmothers.”

Chris was surprised by that one, thinking that’s a tough deal, but let’s stay on track here. “Fine, but just like that, this roided up maniac is scared of your ‘boss’?”

“I gave him a little more,” Ken said. “I pointed out the boss was a suspect in a revenge killing up in Marin County, that never got solved . . . I also threw in that he flew off the handle just the other night, only maybe a half mile from the motel, and nearly drowned me in a toilet bowl because he didn’t like my attitude.”

WHAT THE HECK

Ken said, “I think you’re making more of it than was there. It ended where *Damon* thanked me for letting him know, and I was

hoping I'd gotten a point across, but I wasn't sure until Mr. Zaman dropped in just now."

Holy Smokes. "I'm going to start in the middle," Chris said, feeling his jaw tightening by the second. "And it's *Sonoma* County by the way, if we're on the same page . . . which I fear we might be . . . But how in the *world* . . . could you come up something as cocymemeyed as *that*?"

The only thing Chris could fathom at this point, it must be *true*, after all, that he really *did* blurt shit out.

Maybe not in-private stuff with Emma so far, but just old-fashioned middle-of-the-night sleepwalking announcements, the kid picking up on it, bits and pieces.

Son . . . of . . . a . . . bitch.

Ken said, "That part, I got from Chandler."

"Wait just a second," Chris said. "*Chand-ler*?"

"Yeah. We played today."

Chris had forgotten all about that. Jeez. Not that the tennis part mattered.

He started to say, "And just how, exactly . . ."

But Ken finished it for him. "He said it was in a record base, that information. Not a public one. More of a . . . law enforcement one . . . that he had access to."

Chris went to the front window and pulled back the shade, just to make sure Sharif, or anyone, wasn't standing out there twiddling his thumbs.

"Let's hold it down," he said. "But what . . . You sat on the bench between sets and Chandler looked my ass up?"

"It wasn't like that. I told him I wanted to help you out on this, but didn't know how. He suggested using your past history to scare Damon off."

“*What* past history? I was playing around with him, inventing scenarios. We both were.”

“He said he checked you out after the first time you played each other.”

“Un . . . believable,” Chris said.

“So anyway,” Ken said. “Are we good? I mean it looks like it’s working out.”

No, they weren’t good. Way too much to process for tonight. But it wasn’t the kid’s fault, obviously.

Chris said, “You mean, no harm no foul?”

Kenny brightened up. “That’s it!” he said.

“But just to set you straight,” Chris said. “We were *all* suspects in that deal up there. Which included everyone, past and present, who taught that kid in high school . . . He got away with something he shouldn’t have, we could all agree, and a lot of us weren’t upset, frankly, by the final outcome . . . But *my* involvement, it began and ended with a few routine questions from the police.”

Ken listened to everything he said, took a little time, and said, “Thank you for that clarification.”

“You’re welcome. Now get some sleep.”

“And if you clarified it the *other* way,” Ken said, “that would have been okay too.”

FIFTEEN

Tuesday you had your first sign that there might actually exist a change of seasons in Manhattan Beach, the temperature down, the wind blowing, leaves crunching under your feet on the way into town.

It was late, almost 5, his routine out of whack. He’d spent most of the day getting organized, which included grabbing an oil change and

unfortunately having to spring for a new set of front tires, the oil change guy scaring him that you couldn't fit the penny in the tread any more.

That was the problem of course with trying to be responsible and dutifully following maintenance schedules; one thing that wasn't a problem *becomes* one.

Doctors as well. If you *didn't* go in, you wouldn't find out about something, which therefore wouldn't lead to something else. But that was a bad example.

He hadn't been back to the place since that time with Ned, the bottom of the main drag, just off the beach, *The Crow's Nest*.

Tonight seemed like a good time. Though it was surprisingly quiet so far, no sign of Ned, or the friendly waitress Cindy either, though the petite platinum-blonde one was working, and greeted him cheerfully and set him up with firsts, and after a while seconds.

The World Series was on, the opening game, the Dodgers *in* the thing, Chris hating everything about the Dodgers since he grew up a Giants fan, but you kept that quiet.

He asked Rory, the waitress, why it was surprisingly dead in here and she said the two hard-core sports bars were across the street and up two blocks, and she named them. She pointed out a percentage of the *Crowe's Nest* regulars were at the game.

She wasn't in any rush, her shift under control, and when she came back Chris said, "Does that include Lou Mancuso, the ones there in person?"

She said, "Oh yes. He wouldn't miss it. Especially Game 1. Clayton Kershaw and all."

Interesting that the *Lou* didn't throw her off, so Ned must swing both ways.

What popped out of his mouth next surprised him, even under the influence of his second double old fashioned. Six months ago or even four he would have considered it off limits, that you let sleeping dogs lie and don't screw around with the fact that you got lucky.

He also wondered, and not for the first time, did he have a bizarre, warped, maybe even pathological need to stir the pot?

Whatever.

He said to Rory, "How about a guy named Chip Reggio? Was he a customer *too*, sometimes?"

Chris could see that delivered a tiny but unmistakable jolt, like where you're in Arizona and you touch your car door and you back off from the static.

She said, "Yes he was . . . an extremely nice man . . . I'm assuming you're asking . . . because?" Leaving it right there, nothing heavy-duty behind it.

Chris said, "My brother knew him, better than I did, out in Las Vegas. By all accounts a good guy . . . Colorful, you could see where'd get in a little trouble, but no way he deserved what happened."

"No," Rory said. "We were all saddened by it. And shocked. That was a difficult week around here, after."

Chris said, looking at her very directly now, his diction a tad more precise: "Ned do his share of mourning too? Part of the shocked and saddened crowd?"

She was good, he had to give her that. Very little reaction beyond what was normal, if it had been a *normal question*. "Of course," she said.

"Hmm," Chris said. "Well one more thing you got me thinking now. Totally separate tangent, do you act?"

Rory smiled. "A lot of us do, or try . . . This is West L.A., don't forget."

“Ah.”

It would have been rude to ask how old she was. What he found himself saying was, “You ever date Ned?”

“Now and then,” she said, having fun with it, in character, spicing it up with a little defiance. “Any particular reason you’re asking?”

“Standard curiosity. You’re a beautiful woman, he’s a nice guy, I can tell, good energy, bought me a drink, plenty of stories . . . so why not?”

She was still having fun playing along, you could tell, but she wasn’t dumb.

“And along with all that,” she said, “you’re wondering how well he got along with Chip.”

Chris left a couple bills on the table and stood up, more wobbly than he wanted to be. He said, “Well, sure, that’d be good to know too.”

And he told her it looked like the Dodgers were up three to one, but she probably knew that, and to enjoy the rest of her evening.

She was right, the scene was more lively at those two sports bars, and it was at the point where the idiots would let out a big ‘*Ah, c’mon*’ when any pitch Kershaw threw that was close was called a ball.

Chris wondered if Emma ever ended up in one of these joints. Hard to picture, not a rah-rah person, though she did mention the cheerleader business. He dialed her number.

“I’m glad you called,” she said. “I’ve confirmed my reservation. I get in at 3:30. Southwest. It’s Oakland, but don’t worry, I’ll meet you in the city.”

“No, no, I’ll pick you up, piece of cake and we got a lot of time, don’t argue it . . . I’m calling now, one of the reasons, I have your

reunion ticket.” Which was a lie, he hadn’t done anything about that, and hopefully there wouldn’t be some snag.

“Fine then, just hold onto it for me. You needed to tell me that?”

“No. I want to hand it to you. So you can have it on your person. In the off-chance you got delayed, or something went haywire . . . What do you think of that expression by the way?”

“What are you talking about? *Haywire*?”

“No. *On your person*.”

“Oh. Well it’s dated, and obviously redundant. My grandfather used one all the time, *me*. As in ‘I’m gonna have me a bowl of maple-nut ice cream.’”

“So did mine,” he said. “Not my grandpa but my dad.”

“I never thought it was funny . . . Back to the ticket, if you feel so strongly, drop it off tomorrow then.”

“That’s the thing. I’m leaving in the morning.”

“What *for*, exactly?”

“Just want to make a couple pit stops up there. An old-guy friend of mine, actually my age, but he’s had some problems, has to go for medical treatments . . . You know, and check on my subplot.”

“You just left from up there I thought.” Sounding like Chandler, and of course they were right, it was ridiculous. “But in that case,” she said, “give it to Kenny, he’ll bring it in tomorrow.”

Chris said, “Oh yeah. How did that go?”

“It went nicely. He’s a very solid worker. He puts his head down, takes direction well . . . You have a real specimen there.”

Chris was thinking, she was making her point fine, so what was the reason for the last little part?

“Sounds good then,” he said. “And you were saying before, you have him earmarked to meet your daughter?”

“We’ll see.”

Taking it a step further . . . These next few days, him being out of the picture . . . Was it really possible she might stop by? Maybe give the kid a lift home from the library, invite herself in for a glass of water, the kid sensible and reasonable, not to mention loyal which Chris was pretty sure he was, but her escalating it to a point of no return where all bets were off?

Yes it was possible . . . Oh well. *What are you gonna do?*

“That won’t work,” Chris said. “I’m not going to see Ken overnight, he’s trying to straighten it out with his old girlfriend.”

Emma didn’t say anything.

“So,” he said, “give me your address, I’ll swing by right now.”

“No. Not now,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you to.”

He said, “Well everything okay on the home front? Jesse for example? He’s still alive, right?”

“Fuck you,” she said, and hung up.

That was probably for the best. Chris started trudging up the hill toward home, the sidewalk noisy, the baseball game over, everybody thrilled and a bunch of them going the same way he was, though not as far.

The truth was he didn’t feel like getting in the car to drive over there, and it wouldn’t be safe. He wanted the address for future reference, since he was still debating should he say something to the husband.

Plus he wanted to jerk her chain a little bit, feel her out on the subject.

He hadn’t accomplished any of it, but in a weird way her slamming the phone down on him was satisfying. No idea what that

would mean for the weekend, but like a lot of shit this past year, you roll with it.

SIXTEEN

Chris didn't sleep that great so he got up early, had it all together by 7, and Ken woke up and they sort of had breakfast together.

Another reason he got up early, catching Ken before he left for work, was gain a little clarity on what was going on last night.

Ken on the phone with Emma when Chris trudged in from the Crowe's Nest--which Ken said was stupid and he'd tell him about in the morning.

"Not trying to beat it out of you," Chris was saying now, "but the *Listen, I have to go* part right when I show up was curious."

"With all due respect," Ken said, "and I'm hoping I'm not insulting you here, but she's a strange lady. Something about, *Are you sure it's healthy to get back in a relationship so soon?* was how she started it off."

"What," Chris said. "You're not saying you and Stacey are back together . . . Or do you have something else working?"

"None of that. That was the thing, the way she was talking, I think she thought I was at Stacey's, yeah."

"I see what you're saying," Chris said. "I'd keep a wide berth, personally. I'm trying to get a handle on her myself, and it may have fizzled out."

"What do you mean? Aren't you doing that reunion thing-a-ma-jig?"

"I am, yeah, against my better judgement. *Her* participation, more questionable."

Ken said, “Well . . . would that be the worst thing? I mean you’re a single guy, you still look decent, you got your hair and stuff--if it were me, I might be looking to play the field a little bit.”

“You mean with the happily married wives? Or the ones where things didn’t work out and they’re starting all over?”

“Wait a minute--*you’re* not starting all over. And you’re single . . . What’s the problem?”

“True . . . My man, I’ll be honest with you, I wish I could bottle some of your enthusiasm . . . You take care. I’ll see you in a week, give or take.”

Ken was set to leave for work, standing near the door now, shuffling his feet, not quite ready to open it.

“What?” Chris said.

Ken didn’t answer, and Chris put down his bagel and walked over there and stuck out his hand, figuring that’s what the kid must want, and Ken took a half-step forward and put his arms around Chris and wedged his head in there pretty tight.

Chris tried to reciprocate, but wasn’t expecting this at all and wasn’t used to it, and he patted Ken on the shoulders, and it was over and Ken was out the door, and just for a split-second it felt real empty in the apartment.

The intention was to be on the road bright and early, but Sharif had scared him so much about the traffic that he figured the last thing he better do was tempt rush hour, so he waited until 10, and when he got to the bottom of Rosekrans and hit the 405 ramp it was bumper-to-bumper anyway.

They had a car pool lane here, smarter than the Bay Area because you could use it 24 hours, not just during the dumb 2-hour windows, the only problem of course, you needed a couple people.

Either way, it didn't look like the car pool folks were having the greatest luck either, and Chris found an oldies station at the end of the AM dial which helped.

Traffic finally picked up around Magic Mountain, but it was a false-positive and soon you were bottle-necked again and crawling.

Everyone called it the Grapevine but it was technically you driving over Tejon Pass, which connected the northern L.A. suburbs to the San Joaquin Valley.

Chris liked knowing they filmed the old Westerns up here. It struck him more than once: Don't we need, as much as ever, frontier guys riding off into the sunset?

There was an exit near the summit, and that second cup of coffee was kicking in so he stopped at Burger King. He thought about Emma, and Ken . . . and Ned. Ned delivering the 'you tell *me*' at the end.

In any case . . . fine, he used bad judgment there last night running his mouth to Rory.

The day had gotten bright and you could see a long way from up top, Claremont and Pasadena and the San Gabriel mountains,

When he got to the bottom, the other side, it felt like you'd accomplished something, knocked off that first leg. There was Highway 5 now, straight as string, 3 hours and 40 minutes to Tracy it said, then you were in the Bay Area.

Which meant why not stop again, find a couple CDs in the trucker section of Pilot.

The nice thing, the old Camry still played 'em, and you could throw it in cruise-control and take in the scenery, pushing anything that might be concerning you onto the back burner, at least for the rest of today.

SHIT.

The storage guy. FUCK.

Chris got in the right lane.

Not for the right reasons now obviously.

What the heck time was it? . . . That meant, what . . . the guy'd been in there 45 hours?

Today was Wednesday, they'd had the art meeting Monday night, right? . . . It was blurring together, especially now that he was worried and his brain was cloudy . . . But yeah. He'd closed it up maybe 6:45? So you had the one night, then Tuesday, then another night, then most of the day today . . .

You could get back there in what, two hours, maybe three with traffic?

So that'd extend the guy to the full 48.

Hmm . . . Would he still be around, in that case?

Jeez. The idea had never been to kill anyone, for heaven's sake.

You just wanted to press a point. Like a teacher--in the old days--making you take a couple laps around the school when you mouthed off . . .

The idea had been . . . to stop back there of course . . . but when?

Son of a BITCH

Chris wondered--should he *call* someone? Right now? . . . The place? . . . The fire department down there?

He decided it was a little late for that. Unlikely you'd just now remember, two days in the future, that you might have shut the door on a guy by accident.

Ooh boy.

He swung it around and re-entered going back south and was once again heading up the Grapevine.

Could the guy have gotten out, so this was a false alarm?

Could the security guy making his rounds back there have heard him screaming?

A possibility . . . unless Marcus got too weak to yell.

Aviation Boulevard *was* loud, and it being an outside unit, it was hard to gauge the odds. Plus the other thing . . . if they did cut the dude out of there, wouldn't Chris have been notified pretty quick?

Wow.

It was a real grim ride. Back over the top, down into the flats, Northridge, finally Wilshire coming up and UCLA on the left, another 15, 20 miles to go, but the distance was irrelevant now that traffic was stacking up again.

Chris hadn't wanted to consider it, but he had no idea how long a human could go without food and water. He'd read some survival stories in the news, thinking of one that ended badly up in Oregon a few years back.

And it was pretty hot in the unit, no ventilation.

Then he remembered the *Qworokis*.

There'd been an event up in San Francisco before he left, a neighborhood fundraiser. Chris picked up 10 cases of *Qworokis*, one of those exercise beverages.

Hardly anyone drank any, so he'd hauled 9 cases back with him when he moved . . . and son of a gun, those were currently being housed in Unit 147 of Accu Lock-n-Store.

So Marcus could drink . . . and even pick up some sugar. *Un-real*.

Chris felt his neck and shoulders relax just a fraction, and then . . . he wondered, how buried under all the other useless garbage in there, were those *Qworokis* though?

He decided you had to let that one go, that in survival mode people *found shit*.

He wondered how the guy went to the bathroom, and what might be presented on that front, but that was child's play if the guy could at least drink.

Finally he got there, pausing at the security hut in front, no one around this time. It was 4:18.

He took a deep breath and drove in and made the left and stopped at his unit and got out.

So far no noise.

He reached down and opened the padlock and rolled the door halfway up, and there was the guy laying down in back, not fresh as a daisy, that was for sure, but at least sitting up now shielding his eyes.

“What the *hell?*” Chris said. “What in God's name are you *doing* here?”

Scowling at the guy, hands on the hips for effect. Outlandish as it was, *accusing* the guy of something. And waiting.

The guy made it onto his feet, and he wobbled his way forward . . . and yep, it didn't smell good in here at all.

Chris thought of lending a hand and helping him get out of there but figured that would dampen his incredulity act, so he let the guy stumble around until he was outside.

Chris started to say something and Marcus swung and hit him in the mouth, a decent punch actually for a guy in his condition, and Chris went down to a knee and was afraid to feel around, see if everything was still intact, but he did and it was okay, though there was blood.

He looked toward that side gate and he could see Marcus on the other side of it, wobbling his way toward where Chris was assuming he'd parked Monday night.

Highly unlikely the guy believed his act, but the only important thing, he hadn't expired.

What Chris was going to add on to the act, if Marcus had been interested, was: *Well very lucky thing indeed my friend, because I'm taking a road trip and I needed something . . . So . . .* even though the conversation didn't get there, it'd be wise to follow through.

And Jeez, what would *that* be that you needed so bad? You required a gas mask in here, but Chris was able to spot a cylindrical pouch halfway back, jumper cables. He already had a set in the trunk, but so what, and he grabbed them and a few minutes later he was back in traffic, crawling toward the 405, rush hour in full bloom, and it was going to be a *dang* long night.

SEVENTEEN

He wasn't getting any younger, that was for sure. Once, in his early 20's, when he had the stout constitution of a Ken for example, he and his friend Rocky drove it non-stop, Florida to San Diego in three days.

Rocky's friend Cecilia was along too, and she was a refreshingly voluptuous presence--Chris had always envied Rocky pulling that off--but she didn't contribute anything to the effort, mostly sleeping in back.

But you did what you had to do back then, and you didn't consider it anything special.

Now, finally dragging his sorry rear end out of the vehicle, on Lombard Street, 2:16 in the morning to be exact, the aging process was undeniable.

And in situations like this, the paranoia crept in: *Here we go now*, with the medical condition.

But . . . most fit, non-sentenced-to-death 42-year olds would be at least a *little* beat-up too at this point, right?

Not worth dwelling on, and the instinct was to head to straight over to Weatherby's, just a block, and take a major edge off. Catch up with Shep, the whole nine yards. Except of course the bars closed at two . . .

Something he should have considered when he took his time in the central valley, stopping not once but twice to eat and getting caught up the second time talking to a an air ambulance pilot who was full of stories.

Now all you could do was knock on few motel doors and hope they didn't shaft you too bad.

Which didn't go well, none of the five in a two-block radius entertaining the concept of a discount--since Jeez, he'd only be there seven, eight hours tops--and that might still be okay if the prices weren't already over the top, \$189 the cheapest and not even including a continental breakfast.

The original plan before the storage detour had been to stay in Novato, and when he got there forty-five minutes later it felt like the sun was almost coming up.

You could still check in, go to sleep . . .

Or . . . You could continue . . . see if you could tell what Jerry Smith might be up to these days, crack of dawn.

So he kept going, past Novato, through Petaluma to Cotati, where you got off and took 116 west the 8 miles to Sebastopol.

But man, it was smoky up here, real bad.

The big fires you'd been hearing about were under control, supposedly, but the news reports had not been exaggerating, because this was like being inside a barbeque smoker, without the meat.

Meanwhile Chris had a mind to knock on the door, the Mill Station Road mini-estate.

4:30 in the morning. It might be interesting, in fact it definitely would be, to get a load of the guy's reaction.

Standing there, your hands in your pockets looking a little confused, asking *is Mr. Smith available*.

But what would you gain from that? It was an ego thing, wasn't it, to shake him up first.

The air conditions were getting worse, and the knocking on the dickhead's door--sensible or not--wasn't on the priority list now, since getting *out* of here *was*.

Chris thought you better get out to the coast for a while, at least until his lungs adjusted.

There was a neighborhood he liked, a development, a mile south of Bodega Bay on Highway One, and Chris pulled in, found the parking lot he remembered across from a trail head that took you to a beach, and just barely got it in park and killed the engine before he was out like a shot.

What woke him from a beautiful slumber, three hours later, rapping the knuckles on the window, wasn't a security guard or county park ranger, which might have been understandable, but some guy asking would he mind helping him change a tire.

An older guy, with a Ford pick-up, hooked up to a modest trailer.

Chris said give him a minute, even though it killed him.

They got the trailer unhitched and Chris changed the tire, the guy an old hand who knew what he was doing but afraid he didn't have the strength.

The guy's wife started up a camp stove and made making pancakes, dollar sized, and invited Chris to please sit down, and he polished off about twenty-five of them, which may have shortchanged their own breakfast.

They told him they were from Santa Rosa--Calistoga Road--and they had to get out in the middle of the night last week, though fortunately they hadn't un-hooked the trailer yet from a trip to Yosemite.

They tried to go back a couple times, couldn't get through, and then a few days ago they got the word from a neighbor that a whole slew of houses up there were gone, including theirs.

They were nice folks, Jim and Margaret, surprisingly upbeat under the circumstances, and he could have spent more time with them except it seemed wise to get a move on.

So he said goodbye, patted his stomach for effect, and went across the road to the trail to stretch his legs. The air was perfect here, no issues, and you could feel the ocean and smell the familiar local licorice plant, nice and strong.

He stopped at a clearing, deciding that was about enough distance, and he checked his phone . . .

One.

An Officer Garcia. Redondo Beach PD. Following up on a report from a Mark Schneiderman.

To please return his call.

Chris's first reaction was a strange one, that if anyone needed to talk to him about the storage unit it would be LAPD, he thought.

Picturing the geography, you had Manhattan, Hermosa and Redondo right in a line, but you didn't think of Redondo or any of them extending this far out, away from the ocean, east, so you assumed the Accu Lock-n-Store was in unincorporated territory and therefore serviced by LAPD.

Apparently not.

He felt like slapping himself in the face. What on earth *difference* did it make?

He wanted to come across responsible, which meant getting back to the policeman right away, loud and clear and, hopefully, fully transparent.

But there was something else, and he felt the panicky feeling coming on, the one he hadn't experienced since the second Detective Cousins visit.

Chris took a couple deep breaths, steadied himself, and called Chandler.

"Yeah Buddy!" Chandler answered, sounding like some fraternity kid idiot. "Hey we're missing you on the courts. What's the story?"

Chandler was fading in and out, so either it was the connection or Chandler was on the floor in the middle a workout.

Chris said, "You told Ken something. I need to get that straight."

"Ah, I know what you're referring to, and that was nothing serious," Chandler said. "I was providing him a little backbone . . . to help you actually, is I believe what it came down to."

"Fair enough. And next time you help me like that I'll shoot you in the side of the head."

You could hear the phone moving around on Chandler's end, and the connection got better. He said, "All right, let's don't fly off the handle here . . . Fine, I looked you up. Jesus, you dumped a load of grease right in my lap, I sort of had no choice."

That wasn't it, necessarily. What Chris wanted to shoot him in the head for, or drown him in the duck pond at the tennis courts, was why would you tell someone *else*? Out of all the suggestions you could have made to Ken, how to strongarm the Damon guy, you had to let him in on *that*?

But that wasn't important right now, what Ken knew or didn't. Chris said, "The database thing though, how's that work?"

“Not technically a database,” Chandler said. “I simplified the concept for Kenny. You’ve never been arrested, from anything I could find.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So . . . you’re not going to show up in that kind of record, at least in California. Interestingly if you were arrested however, and even if they ended up dropping the charges, then you would.”

“Get to the damn point, please.”

“The way it worked, and believe me this isn’t unusual, I popped someone an email, with your name in it . . . The next day I had a handle on you, you get what I’m saying.”

“Popped *who* an email?”

“A guy I consulted with up there in Sonoma one time. Private investigator.”

Chris said, “So-NO-ma? . . . What the heck?”

“Sure. Where you told me you’re from.”

“I did?”

“You said you taught there, they have you on substitute teacher detail.”

“Oh,” Chris said. “Jesus. That should have been Marin, by the way, what I think I said.”

“Maybe I got mixed up, I think I told Kenny Marin, but what’s the difference, we figured it out.”

“Great then. Whoopee.” Bracing himself.

“So,” Chandler was saying, “without boring you . . . my guy knows his way around local law enforcement up there. You don’t have to worry about him, he’s a pro, one of the better PI’s I’ve worked with.”

God DAMN It.

“So now . . . *What* . . . You got someone just happening to ask questions about me? . . . FUCK.”

“Chris, you have to trust me on this, it doesn’t work that way.”

The point was, he *didn’t* trust Chandler on *plenty*.

But . . . letting it sink in . . . his instinct told him, okay, maybe don’t start World War Three.

Chris said, “All right what about this . . . If a cop--a bunch of miles away--ran someone’s name, say for a traffic stop . . . the first guy wouldn’t show up?”

“What first guy?”

“I mean *me*, Jeez . . . If *I* got questioned about something, forget the traffic stop, I mean really questioned . . . would the new questioner know I was also questioned once upon a time about something else, different jurisdiction . . . *Yes or no?*”

“No,” Chandler said. “Why?”

“I can exhale then. I think . . . Wow.”

“I take it you spoke to someone recently?”

“I’m about to. Something stupid. But this you-and-Ken business in my head, I was picturing the worst.”

“*What* stupid?”

“No big thing. *Craigslist* guy. Nothing like what you put *your* guy through.”

“Did you put your hands on him? Injure him?”

“Not even close . . . he thinks I took his phone, is about it. I didn’t. I’m sure he’ll figure it out . . . But he’s mad, reported that I *did*, because he still thought, even being physically *there*, the painting was a fake.”

“You’ll be fine then. They’re contacting you out of obligation, but they rarely work a case like that . . . Make sure you reiterate you didn’t take the phone, and stick by that . . . Even if you discover you took it by accident . . . Unless there were any witnesses--were there?”

“Oh no.”

Chandler said, “Probably what’s pissing the guy off, if he really is a collector who runs around--the time wasted. Sounds like a pretty despicable human, but I do see his point, especially if your painting really *was* a fake.”

Chris was trying to think, if this was in person, would I smash him in the face with the tennis racquet? Or would there be a better way?

Though he supposed you could see where he’s coming from, Chandler. He finds out what happened up north-- not the light version Chris gave Kenny but the real version where who knows, Chris may have been a suspect until Joyce’s boyfriend came along.

So maybe it did stand to reason, in Chandler’s mind, that Chris would fake a piece of art.

“Well I’ll wrap it up,” Chris said. “I have to return this call, and then there’s a few errands . . . I’ll be curious if I don’t ask, so real quick, what was your Sonoma case?”

“Nothing violent like yours. Wine fraud. Mostly white collar.”
Yours. *You believe this guy?*

But Chris was curious, and said, “How’s wine fraud work?”

“It wasn’t complicated and it definitely wasn’t creative. It was intentionally mis-labeling shit, shorting the process. Stealing grapes as well, that was part of it.”

The stealing grapes aspect, that did sound dumb. “Hijacking trucks or something?”

“Not that direct. Accidentally farming off someone’s land. We got the case because there was distribution here, the guy’d set up a tasting room in Santa Monica . . . One good idea he had though, bikini clad women doing the pouring.”

“Jeez, yeah,” Chris said. Meanwhile not really wanting to bring up Joyce’s big guy, since *he* apparently was in the wine business, but what were the odds?

He said, “A guy they were looking pretty hard at, when I spoke to them . . . in *my* deal that you keep wanting to dwell on . . . who was *also* in the wine business . . . that couldn’t be the same *guy*, could it?”

“It’s funny you mention that,” Chandler said, “and I think I know who you’re talking about. My contact up there touched on that, but no it’s not the same individual.”

“So . . . what’d he say . . . when he *touched* on it?”

“First of all, let’s back up. You’re mixed up. Your gig up there was in February right? Just this year.”

Your gig, now.

Chris said the incident they’d questioned him about, yeah, it was around then. Realizing he *was* confused and he should have hung up while he was ahead.

“My case was a few years ago,” Chandler said. “But it was interesting that my PI buddy the other day-- and I called him back after he emailed me your info, to shoot the breeze, good guy—he mentioned another wine guy on law enforcement radar up there, who, yes I believe is the gentleman you are referring to.”

“I see,” Chris said. “So wow . . . now they’re looking at him for funny business dealings, in *addition* to that thing with the food emporium kid . . . Well I met him once, difficult gentleman, so I guess that makes sense.”

Chandler said, “ Sounds like he *was* their man for a while, the homicide, but he’s been cleared now . . . Not sure about the wine part.”

“Ah,” Chris said, not liking the direction of this conversation at all.

“Well it’s about that time,” Chandler said, and Chris agreed it was and said goodbye.

Holy Jiminy.

Before he returned the Redondo call he needed to clear his head yet again.

One more time . . . Joyce’s wine guy was off the hook? Who Cousins said they knew well, going back to when he ran a strip club on Santa Rosa Avenue . . .

A couple things, then.

Was the wine guy cleared because of Joyce’s second guy, where they didn’t like the fact he still lived with his mother?

Meaning that would have been *back then* they did the clearing, right? So don’t worry about it . . .

Or . . . did it unfortunately mean the case could be still red-hot active . . . and the guy was only cleared a month ago? And they were working it hard, despite Cousins bowing out? . . . And maybe even worse, the Cousins replacement had re-energized the son of a bitch.

Bottom line, no reason to question the wine guy being cleared . . . and similarly . . . no reason to think he’s not in the clear right alongside the guy.

In the clear *always*, or having been eliminated back then, or even a month ago . . . it was the same.

The problem of course, that was a specific question it wouldn’t be wise to ask Chandler:

Do they have me down as good too?

Even if they did. Now you got one amused guy telling another, *shooting the breeze*, that the new tennis guy wants to make sure he’s okay.

Anyhow . . .

The Redondo cop answered and told him please give him a minute, and Chris was back at the parking lot when he called back, Jim and Margaret still sitting there, not much on the agenda, and he turned left into the main development for a little privacy.

“Thank you Mr. Seely,” the Officer Garcia was saying. “Now to clarify--the gentleman contends you attempted to sell him a fake piece of artwork. Via the internet.”

“Not me, no,” Chris said, wondering . . . was that *it*?

“Excuse me then--no, it wasn't you at all transacting business? Or no, the item in question was authentic?”

“That'd be yes, and yes. I mean Jeez, as far as I know,” thinking out loud, wondering, Holy Smokes--could you question the credibility of his friend Bill . . . Bill Dole, the art restorer who gave him the piece?

There was no way. Could something else have interfered . . . like maybe someone switched the sign on *Bill*, and Bill had no idea?

“I'll be honest,” Officer Garcia was saying, “Mr. Shneiderman, we're familiar with him, he's been in before. He takes these matters seriously, considers himself a watchdog of sorts.”

Hard to read, if the cops rolled their eyes at this guy, but either way, the theme was starting to sound familiar.

“All I'm trying to do,” Chris said, “is sell this thing I got that's in the way, blocking me out of my storage unit. *My* understanding is it's real. Far as I know, this is the first guy's ever complained about something I put on *Craigslist*. What can I tell you.”

Too late now but that wasn't the best, encourage the guy to look around . . . though they probably already had, and if anything, that would back him up, wouldn't it?

“That's the other part of it,” the cop said. “The storage unit.”

Oh no. Relief there for a minute, now the attempted murder business he'd have to explain away.

He had his answer prepared, the showing up to get the jumper cables, and *Holy Toledo, what have we here?*

That he'd been wrapped up, Monday night, in organizing some of the other crap in the unit, after the guy declined on the item, and had no idea the guy hadn't left when he shut it down--and for that matter, what would the guy still be doing there without at least telling him? Sheez.

But Officer Garcia said, "Mr, Shneiderman maintains the unit is overloaded, and thus a hazard, and you should be forced to vacate . . . Which frankly we don't give too much credence to, since off the record I got one of those myself, and that's the nature of the beast, right?" He laughed, a friendly enough cop.

"But," he added, "the other allegation is a serious matter. The alleged fraudulent listing. That will need to be verified, by an independent adjuster. And I'm afraid that's something you'll have to arrange, on your dime, since you are the accused. There is reimbursement you can apply for, but it's an arduous process . . . The adjuster needs to be AXY certified by the way."

"Ah my God. I'm not believing this."

"I hear you . . . There is one quirk that the gentleman added, and I'll present it to you. He says he will drop the report if you sell the item to him for \$50. He says the materials are worth that much, regardless of the questionable authenticity."

"Is that right," Chris said, trying real hard to contain himself.

"In any case," the officer said, "please let us know where you stand. A couple days, does that work?"

"Not great. I got a reunion and stuff, staring me in the face."

"Understood. Let's see, today's the 26th . . . so I'm putting you down for November 7th, a Tuesday. That'll give you 10 days to get the

appraisal squared away. We'll need it hand-delivered by then . . . And if there's nothing else today?"

Chris said there wasn't and Garcia told him take care, and Chris decided he was real hungry, those pancakes starting to wear off, and he wondered did they have any tavern-type places up the road where you could get a real beverage this early?

Which wouldn't help matters, but couldn't hurt.

EIGHTEEN

Driving through Bodega Bay there wasn't much at this hour and Chris settled on the hole-in-the-wall joint on the hill with the fisherman owner. At least they opened at 10:30 and you could get a beer.

Sitting there, trying to push the latest round of garbage to the back burner, he couldn't quite do it, and the first AXY authenticator person he found was at 7 for the report, Jesus, seven hundred *bucks*, and when you read a little further that was only for the verbal edition.

Should you require the written job, that'd be \$1250 . . . and *that* might not even cover it, since there was a bonus blurb, should you require a certificate of authenticity on top of everything else--which the police likely *would* require--you just tacked on another \$175.

So there you had it.

He'd gotten cute with the mope--not to mention allowed Chandler to work him into a frenzy about it, the *You can't stand by and let someone disrespect you* business--and he'd made the mistake of responding to the guy's first email, and the floodgates opened.

Meaning big, slick, clever Chris Seely gets the last word on the guy--only to turn around and get smoked.

He did end up with the guy's phone, but upon further review the thing wasn't that new, and definitely not an iPhone, and the screen had a crack, so it couldn't have set the guy back much.

Still interesting there was no mention of the phone or the lock-up, and highly unlikely the cops would be holding something like that back, like they might in a real case . . . After all, he's not a murderer here, it's just a damn painting.

Chris finished eating, the fish once again fresh off the boat, but he didn't taste much and got out of there, and he looked in the general store for one a masks, but they didn't have any and he decided that's it, you better start sucking it up and not being so wimpy if you're going to accomplish anything this weekend.

In fact screw it. Those two phone calls had got him mad, especially the second one, though obviously the first one was the bigger deal, making sure you're off the hook in Santa Rosa . . . but the second thing hit a nerve right now.

So why not take it out on Jerry, at least ring the bell-- and a half hour later he almost did.

But instead, fortunately he came to his senses and drove past the place.

What he was *going* to do, feed whoever answered the door a line about wanting to help with the fire effort, and that'd he run into someone in town who told him his best bet would be talk to Jerry Smith, yada, yada.

No.

If something *did* happen to the guy, doubtful a recently confused wannabee volunteer, *at guy's actual house*, would stay off the radar.

So he drove another couple miles to where it teed at Graton Road, and hung a U and doubled back slowly.

Trying to think, would there be any other way you could work it, ringing the bell, or was that just stupid all around . . . and this time there was a young gal up ahead on a bicycle, looking like she could have fed into the road from Smith's driveway, though you couldn't tell for sure, but with the properties this spread out there weren't many options.

She was pedaling east toward town . . . which seemed too dangerous on these deceptively fast country roads, but that was beside the point.

A mail truck showed up and was making sporadic stops, and Chris was able to get himself stuck behind it, while keeping the bike rider gal in view, and she turned left onto Occidental, which meant she'd be connecting to the trail by Andy's Market which took you into Sebastopol.

At this point Chris said forget it, what was he wasting time for, what was the point? Okay maybe someone did come out of the Smith compound and was currently riding a bicycle. So?

He turned off onto a familiar back road, grapes all over the place and a small tasting room recessed in there that some years ago Joyce duped into giving her a little art show.

He ended up in town, not sure what next.

He made a right on Main Street and at the light, in front of the ice cream place Screaming Mimi's, there was the bike gal again, angling it onto the sidewalk and locking it up.

Chris figured he could at least park, couldn't he?

He went into Mimi's and looked over the menu. The bicycle person was carrying a cup of coffee and grabbing a small table out front.

Chris said to her, "Sorry to interrupt you--do you know where the fire relief stuff is happening?"

“Sure,” she said. “Two places, the senior center and the high school.”

Which was interesting . . . her coming up with it that right away, considering the Australian or New Zealand accent that was spilling out.

“Well thanks,” Chris said. “That’s a better solution, seems a little early for the ice cream.” Meaning her coffee.

She smiled and said, “It’s not their specialty. But I enjoy the vantage point.”

She was young, early 20’s, a nice spirit.

Chris said, “Going sideways a second, I saw you getting off the bike. Do you *have* to ride one around here?”

“In terms of safety, are you saying?”

“Heck yeah,” Chris said. “Don’t do that. Once upon a time you might have been okay. Now the drivers are looking down, either dealing with an urgent matter, or anticipating one. Much more hazardous.”

She laughed and extended her hand. “I’m Abigail.”

“Chris.” He took a seat without asking, and she was fine.

She said, “I’m hooked as well, I’m afraid. I did have the opportunity to hike recently, on Cobb Mountain. It was exquisitely beautiful. Of course this was before the devastation. I shudder to think what’s it like up there now.”

“You mean the smoke, or that areas burned that you hiked through?”

“I guess both.”

“What was your point? You started off, you’re hooked as well.”

“Ah. Only that it was half a day of nature, with curtailed electronics. A lovely wake-up call actually.”

“The person or people you were with,” Chris said. “Did they curtail usage as well?”

“That I’m not sure,” she said. “It was my host family. A wonderful man and his wife.”

“Gee,” Chris said, “so they’re local?”

“Yes, the Smiths, do you know them?”

Chris said it didn’t ring a bell.

“Jerry is a remarkable person,” she said. “In fact he’s one of the organizers of the fire relief. You should say hello if you drop in.”

Nothing she said, in particular, but Abigail was starting to have an appeal here. He was tempted to say, if you want to do some *real* hiking, I’d be happy to show you Mount Tam, maybe the Dipsea, working you from the redwoods up through the open high ground and wiggling your way down to Stinson Beach.

Pretty world class, blowing that Cobb Mountain nonsense out of the water.

Then maybe what, little restaurant dinner, the modest place that’s been in Stinson forever, cozy, changed hands a few times but still called *The Sand Dollar*.

That would beat the heck out of fire detail, wouldn’t it.

Chris had a feeling he could pull it off. But then what?

He said, “So your host Gary, he’s a county official?”

“Oh Gosh no,” Abigail said. “It’s *Jerry*, but they’re in private business . . . and extremely busy I might add.”

“What kind?”

She laughed, “It’s a bit tricky to keep them sorted,” she said. “At the moment, the focus is on developing property . . . is it U-Ki-Ah?”

Son of a bitch. Of all places you could choose to stick your greedy little hands . . . that’s where it happened, your Eric Mossman snuff-out . . . April of ‘90 . . . Highway 20, north of Ukiah.

“Yep,” Chris said. “You got it perfect. 45 minutes up the road, where I guess you can still afford a vacant lot . . . You *help* them, it sounds like.” He forced a smile.

“Very little, I’m afraid. It’s mostly errands and picking up lunch at Whole Foods. The office is just round the corner if you cut through *The Barlow*, you’ve probably noticed it, **Megatron Productions.**”

“So you’re going there now?”

“No, I have a yoga class in twenty minutes.”

“In any case,” Chris said, standing up, “I should be off. Thanks for the information on the fire relief.”

“A pleasure,” she said.

Chris was thinking, a yoga class, what a surprise.

The senior center relief effort was on High Street next to the library. There was action, but not the hustle and bustle he expected. You had all manner of donations piled up--food to clothing to sleeping bags to toiletries to soccer balls and toys.

Chris had an image of Smith from that festival and thought maybe he’d look different here but you could spot him right away.

Smith was standing up behind the volunteers at the main table, answering questions and directing traffic, like a coach in ice hockey where the guy stands behind the players.

An older woman told Chris to please help himself, whatever he can use, and he *was* tempted to pick up a couple things, which was easier than volunteering . . . but that was getting sidetracked.

He thanked her and fiddled around until Smith was free, and Chris said, “You got it under control, or what?”

Smith looked at him for a second before answering. “Well we can use a food run, that’s one thing.”

A few of the volunteers' heads popped up at that, Chris thinking you have enough food in here to hold you until Christmas, but seeing the point unfortunately, they were hungry for something fresh from the outside, and wouldn't mind being surprised.

He'd opened his big mouth and no one else seemed to take the lead so he thought of a deli, and then remembered that taqueria, where he and Joyce did the little take-out.

A bit of rough math, it was going to run you a couple of bills, accounting for the table people as well as the stand-up ones in circulation and a couple guys at the loading gate in back, and what could you do now? He lugged it all back, 25 super carnitas burritos, plus about 80 little plastic things of hot sauce.

He had a crazy thought, too bad you couldn't poison the *guy's*, that would do it, but how would you direct that one burrito.

He put the bags front and center on the main table, and Smith announced that lunch was here, and that woke everyone up like an air raid siren.

Smith said to Chris, "Thanks for picking this up," no mention of course of any reimbursement, though Chris had to admit they were in the middle of a crisis.

"Anyhow," Chris said, "it looks like you got enough staff, for the time being."

Smith studied him for a second, maybe recognizing him from the brief conversation they had at the festival, but not being able to place it.

Smith said, "They can use you at Analy," and went back to running the show.

Chris didn't want to stand out by asking where Analy was, but he assumed it was the high school.

He GPS'd it and it wasn't far, except on the way there he kept seeing these signs for *The Barlow*, which according to Abigail, the Smith business operation was housed next to, so why not.

Megatron Productions was on Morris Street, the Laguna side, and you had to hand it to the guy, big spread.

Too big, Chris was thinking, to walk in during business hours and baseball-bat a guy, so forget that.

The high school gym was a designated shelter, you were a few miles from the western fringe of the fires, but far enough that someone decided it wouldn't burn down.

It was a more intense deal than the senior center, with whole families huddled around looking like they weren't going anywhere soon, and there were animal rescue people out front where you could house your pets if you'd been able to save them.

There was a teenage kid pulling cots off a truck and Chris helped him. It got him sweating and at least getting some decent exercise.

They'd gotten most of the cots unloaded and set up in the gym when Smith showed up and took charge. A few minutes later Chris noticed Abigail, and she asked him how it was going.

Smith had taken over in the gym now too, was directing volunteers with clipboards how to go around family-to-family and obtain information. Some people from the Red Cross were here also, and you could tell they didn't like Smith thinking he was in charge, but he continued doing his thing, not paying attention to them.

Anyhow Chris is standing there finishing his donut when Abigail turns up, nice and cheerful, asks him how it's been going.

Chris said he didn't do much but it's good to see people pull together. Abigail agreed, and wished him the best . . . and there's Smith carrying something and Abigail goes over to help him.

Meanwhile Chris was picking up parts of a conversation about *tiny houses*, and son of a gun, Jerry's name was mentioned in there too.

The guy got around, didn't he.

Something about the tiny houses being donated to fire victims, and event in Berkeley, in Tilden Park.

Unclear what the story was--whether it was fundraiser or fire victims simply showed up. Bottom line, it was happening Sunday.

The whole thing probably a long shot, but still, not the smartest idea at this point to ask Smith to confirm he'd be at that event. Chris looked back over there, and the guy finished carrying whatever, and he was standing under the basketball bleachers and Abigail was talking to him.

Then . . . she cups her hand and leans close and whispers something in his ear.

Which can happen, Chris supposed, after all it was noisy in here.

But then the guy cups *his* hand, she leans in again, he finishes talking in her ear, except then on the pull-away he strokes her cheek.

Jesus Christ, she's banging the guy.

Now it really was time to get out of here, and Chris realized he was an awful gauge of people.

One call he forgot to make, Gloria Johansen. That extra ticket he needed for Emma--maybe.

The Alumni office told him Gloria was the person to talk to, and Chris had taken his time dealing with it, but you better now.

Gloria was happy to hear from him, one of those glass-half-full people back in high school, her name always showing up in Class of '94 announcements.

There was noise in the background on her end, but Gloria was in no rush to get off, and she had questions for him, and Chris answered

a few of them but said, “Lemme jump you here. I might have a date, for the big gig? Which was a late development. How do I get her in?”

“Well . . . you obviously didn’t read the fine print, did you?”

Gloria said.

“With all due respect,” Chris said, “are you nuts? And if somehow that bus ride to Half Moon Bay--in the *large* print--was mandatory, you wouldn’t have seen me for sure, for another 25 years.”

“You’re more amusing than you used to be,” she said.

What did that mean? . . . He’d *tried* back then, and fell flat? Or he just walked around pissed off?

“What’s in the fine print?” he said.

“You can bring a spouse, guest, whatever you like. Everyone can. It’s included.”

“Oh,” he said. “Okay then. Good to hear.”

Gloria said, the din in the background louder for a second and then calming back down, “What are you doing now?”

“*Right* now?”

“We’re having a little thingy. You’re welcome to come over.”

Chris considered his other prospects for the evening, and admittedly there was zippo.

Which again, was pretty dang sad. Him being *from* here and barely away long enough to let the paint dry.

He was on the outside looking in now, wasn’t he, no sugarcoating it, and the same would be true at Gloria’s get-together . . . but he got the address and said he’d see what he could do.

Traffic crawled back into the city, the opposite direction of what you’d expect. Mercifully you had the far right exit at the toll plaza, into the Presidio, and a few things came flooding back, one being the Damirko guy following him to Birgitte’s that time.

Gloria lived on Jackson near Cherry. Extremely high-rent district, in a market gone berserk.

Gloria opened the door and seemed shocked that he showed up, and a little embarrassed, Chris wasn't sure why, maybe something with her appearance, though she tried to disguise it. There were about 15 people there, most of them standing in the kitchen, the rest sitting in the family room off of it.

Gloria tried to introduce him around, tugging him by the arm a couple times when he didn't need to meet anyone else, and pretty much as he expected, it was a small prelude to the main event Saturday night. Some of them had come from out of town for the weekend and they were getting right to it, the old spirit, the red and white.

When there was a break in the conversation, which wasn't often, someone would pretty inject, "*Hey*, how about the time when . . . !"

One guy Chris remembered, Steve Proctor, from freshmen football, didn't have a clue who *he* was, and that was fine, Chris picking up he was in Atlanta now, separated but that was for the best, and running software for the transit authority. It was hard to tell if he and Gloria were an item tonight but it looked that way. Hard to gauge *her* story as well . . . did she earn, inherit or divorce her way into this 5 million dollar spread.

It was dessert time already, though there had been trays of appetizers, but those were totally scavenged. Someone was having a birthday that overlapped the reunion, Jeannie Battaglia, so naturally there was a cake and a few of them got up there a little shaky from the booze and said kind things about her, and the toasts continued and gravitated toward Lowell High School and friendship and life.

The final toaster, some guy Chris couldn't place but who insisted remembered *him*, got all choked up and could barely finish, the gist of

it being, we'll never replace those days, but we keep them alive in spirit forever.

Chris started to feel a little nauseous, probably his imagination, though it could have been the apple fritter from earlier mixing with the champagne . . . mixing with the bullshit.

He went out in back and sat down, a small yard but impeccable, everything red brick, and he could hear as much from inside as he needed to. He checked his messages, nothing there at all, Emma the main one he was wondering about.

Then he had a thought, Jeez, not a bad one . . . Why not let this be it, on the reunion business. He'd caught up sufficiently, admittedly had a few laughs, and had the idea now. Something to consider . . .

"*There you are,*" came Gloria's voice, closing the screen door behind her. "That's a relief, I thought something might have offended you."

"Are you kidding?" Chris lied. "I wouldn't have missed this tonight, really glad you invited me, all that emotion in there . . . What it is right now, I kind of haven't slept much." Which was true, he wasn't positive he'd be able to get out of this chair.

"Yes," she said, "I could tell when I saw you, you don't look great."

"I don't?" he said, always wary of a development in that regard.

"I mean you look handsome, that's not it," she said, Chris thinking, oh no, too much to drink, plus what about the other guy in there, Proctor.

Gloria continued, "You're welcome to stay right here if you like." She excused herself a moment and went back inside.

Now what did that mean? Luckily before he wasted too much energy trying to figure it out, she re-surfaced, Proctor with her now, the party inside winding down, and he had his arm around her.

Chris said, “Didn’t really dawn on me until now, but man you got a fair amount of smoke down here too.”

The Steve Proctor guy from freshmen football said, “You say too. I take it you live in the north bay then?”

“I don’t, but I was up there today. Then coming back through Marin it seemed okay.”

“Ours is from the east bay, the outer perimeter,” Steve explained. “Different flow systems. The marine layer is a factor.”

For sure you didn’t want to extend this into a meteorology lecture, but Chris said, “What about in closer, the Berkeley hills? There any threat *there*?”

“Always,” Steve said. “We all remember what happened in Oakland, in the 90’s. It’s supposed to rain soon though.”

Chris had no idea where he was going with the Berkeley hills bit, except he was curious again if Jerry would somehow be making an appearance there.

Gloria said, “On a funner note, Steve and I are going out for dinner. Would you like to join us?”

“Well where’re you going?” he said. Always interested in the restaurant scene, though didn’t everyone just eat? But he supposed that was irrelevant.

“We thought Tadich’s,” Gloria said.

“Wow, old time San Francisco,” Chris said.

“Appropriate this weekend,” Steve said.

Chris considered it for a second and said thanks but he can’t quite handle it tonight, and to have a great time and he’d see them at the reunion.

Gloria asked where he was staying, and he said he was all set, but she didn’t believe him and she insisted he stay here. Chris protested but there wasn’t a lot of oomph behind it, and soon enough she was

ushering him into an upstairs guest room, which was about as big as a master suite.

That bed sure looked good. He figured he better ask one final question, that he's not going to be surprising anybody is he, and she said definitely not, it was her daughter's week at her ex's, and he could sleep here all day tomorrow too and no one would notice--and she closed the door and he barely made it past the click.

NINETEEN

It felt real quiet when he woke up, and Chris was pretty sure it was the middle of the night, but he checked the time and wow, it was 10:47 in the morning.

The room was still pitch black so it must be the shades, everything in this house the best apparently, and he'd have to remember to ask Gloria about those, since it would be great to work something like that into the mix in MB.

He showered and dressed and made a little noise to let anyone know he was in motion, but there was no response and when he came down to the kitchen there was a note from Gloria, big flowing decorative strokes to her cursive, that they'd gone out but there are fresh scones in the bag and all he has to do is push the button on the coffee.

Jeez. Awful nice.

It was hard to know what to do today, and in what order . . . or if anything was actually necessary. You were a tourist in your old home town, so you could sight-see. Go out to the Cliff House, maybe check if any hang gliding was going on at Fort Funston, which it was if the wind was right. Coming back, stop in Golden Gate Park at the DeYoung, catch the tail end of the Summer of Love show, art and

whatever else from 52 years ago, Haight Ashbury 1967, a little before his time but man, what a music scene that must have been.

But Chris knew if he really was serious about handling this business--and he hadn't convinced himself yet--that today was a work day, and you better get your ass doing *something* productive.

Driving all the way up there again, continuing to establish the guy's routine, looking for some crack, an opportunity--that didn't seem worth it. Every angle he tossed around up there, there were reasons why that'd be a dumb way to approach it.

The better way might be Berkeley, Tilden Park. On the off-chance--and it did seem pretty unlikely--but it was at least a lead you needed to follow up, that this guy could be going over there.

If he were though . . . maybe you pick up an oar out of the boat rentals in the lake and take care of it that way . . . if there was a boat rental, with rowboats . . . *and that was the worst idea yet . . .*

But get the fucker out of his comfort zone, at least, maybe you have a shot.

The thing of course was to establish that there actually would be an event there on Sunday, before worrying if Smith would be on hand.

There was a library on Sacramento Street but he liked the Chestnut Street branch better. You could drive, mess around with parking on a Friday, or walk it, and it was a no-brainer, and Chris stuffed down the second of the two scones, and dang this coffee was good, he'd need to ask Gloria about *that* too, and he was off.

There were more computers, he noticed, since last time he was here, which seemed silly since everyone *had* computers already. It was just guys like him, who were paranoid about every keystroke on their own computer being traceable, that needed the library ones, but whatever.

Chris googled *tiny houses Sonoma fires* and there was an article from a couple days ago, titled **Expanded Shelter Options for NorCal Fire Victims**, and the focus was on the small house companies pitching in.

The Tilden Park event was mentioned, and the city of Berkeley was on board, donating the Tilden softball field and picnic ground as a 'safe harbor,' where 32 displaced families can live in the provided tiny houses for the time being, and there was a lottery.

One company kept being mentioned. *Eclectic Housery*. Without worry about why, Chris went on their website, found the *About Us* link, and there were seven or eight smiling photos and finally **Advisor:** Jerry Smith.

Hard to know what it all meant, except there was an event scheduled for Sunday and a chance Smith would be there . . . and you needed to commit to finding out.

Plenty of speculation, Chris's head was spinning, the blood sugar dropping, and it was time to get out of there.

There was a pizza joint on Scott, a window counter, and it was the only place around here you could eat for ten bucks anymore, including tip, and have a little something left over, and that did the trick, and the day was getting on, 2:30, and why not take a chance and stop in on Ray.

From here on Scott Street Chris had a clean line, up and over to Ray's place on Webster, but if he wanted he could detour a half-block and there was the Mossmans' old house.

A happy place, gregarious parents, something always going on. Plenty of laughing and wisecracking in the family.

That all ceased, after Smith decided to cross that double line.

Chris asked the security guy in Ray's lobby to please call up there.

The guy, the same one Chris remembered from before, told him Ray was in the hospital, Saint Francis.

God *damn* it.

It wasn't all that far, Hyde near Pine, and he grabbed an Uber, and navigated the place and there was Ray sitting up, looking irritated, pointing the remote control at the TV.

"Seely, you mother-*fucker*," he said. "Now that you here, how 'bout finding me some fresh batteries."

Chris never knew whether to shake hands, give the guy a hug, whatever else, since Ray didn't particularly like any of it.

"What *happened* to you, man?" he said.

"Ah I fell."

"You mean at home, or something? What'd you do?"

"Naw, picking me up some wrestling tickets . . . They got so much dog shit on the sidewalks now, was trying to avoid stepping in a pile, got tangled up and went down."

"Jeez . . . Well, not the worst thing. I mean at least you were out and about, compared to old people reaching into an upper cabinet or something."

Ray said, "Whyn't you shut up while you ahead."

"What kind of wrestling?" Chris said.

"Only one kind. Why you asking that?"

"You mean, the stuff we watched as a kid? Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage?"

"Yeah. The Honky Tonk Man coming over the top rope. The Junkyard Dog and shit. They re-enacting it next weekend, the Cow Palace."

"Not bringing the same guys *back*, you're not saying . . . you mean re-igniting it? The sport?"

“You call it what you want,” Ray said, “and you can take the tickets too. I won’t be able to make it.”

Chris said, “Hold on, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here . . . You look good, I’m not seeing a cast anywhere. You just got shook up, hit your head, what?”

“My hip. They calling it a hairline fracture. Not putting me under the knife or nothing, but I got to go to a rehab joint.”

“Oh no Ray, don’t do that. If you can avoid it. Something like that, it can beat you down, the atmosphere. You can lose your motivation, start thinking like the permanent ones.”

Ray laughed. “The lifers, you mean. I keep saying it, you pulling out the surprises . . . Didn’t know you was now a medical doctor too.” Ray’s shoulders jiggled as he continued getting a kick out of it.

Chris went down the hall to the nurse’s station and asked for new batteries. No one could find any, but they gave him a new remote and Chris tested it on Ray’s TV.

“You got some college ball coming up, usually a couple games these days on Friday nights, so that should be good,” Chris said.

“Fine. I’ll keep it in mind.”

They were both avoiding the subject, Chris announcing to him a few weeks ago he was moving to L.A. for a while. He’d told him it was no big deal, he’d be around on a regular basis, and here he was in fact, just like he said.

Ray said, “I appreciate it, you checking on me. I know you got more important business to take care of, now that you a Hollywood type.”

“Okay,” Chris said, “Let’s don’t be going all serious on me. You got my number, nothing’s changed. I’m an hour away, hour and a half tops, on the airplane.”

“I know,” Ray said.

And that was that.

Chris walked out of the place, good to get some real air, the medical smells were tough, but it was always a little rough saying goodbye to Ray.

TWENTY

There was a text from Gloria. She and Steve were going out for Chinese noodles, and did he want to come.

That sounded tempting and he called her back, saying he'd be glad to, as long as he wasn't wearing out his welcome around here.

Gloria said you're kidding right, you just got here.

There were certain people, not a whole lot of them, where you just felt like you were in good hands. Even if they were sugarcoating it. Which Gloria wasn't.

He met Gloria and Steve at a place on Irving Street. Big piping hot noodles and greens with garlic, and Chris gobbled it up and realized he'd been eating pretty bad, not just on the road but down in MB too, and he better clean up his act.

Gloria said, "Well how was your day? Good to be back in the old stomping grounds?"

"It is," Chris said. "Without getting too nosy, how'd you end up at Jackson and Cherry?"

"My husband. He's done exceedingly well for himself. He comes from Connecticut family money as well."

"Pardon my two cents on this," Steve said, "but haven't you been over-using that expression, do you think?"

"Which one?" Gloria said.

"The exceedingly well one."

“Okay, then, I apologize,” she said. “What he’s referring to, Chris, I assume, is other events these last couple of days. Cocktail parties and so forth.”

“Reunion related,” Steve said.

Gloria said, “And I’ve naturally been asked that question, you know, the how’s your family thingy.”

“Unh-huh,” Steve said. “And always answering ‘em the same way.”

Chris could see the guy’s point. If she kept bragging about the ex-husband, why didn’t she get back together with the guy, he was so perfect?

To deflect things Chris said, “So . . . that’s the story then, people checked in at various hotel locations, you making the rounds?”

“We’re trying to,” Gloria said. “Some of them are spread out, and a bunch have already checked into the Marriott.”

“Kind of reminds me of those UFC fight nights,” Chris said. “They give you the pre-lims on TV for free. In the end they’re probably as good if not better than the main event you’re paying the big bucks for.”

“That’s an interesting analogy,” Steve said.

“But the Marriott,” Chris said. “The airport one, right?”

Gloria rolled her eyes and smiled. “Correct,” she said. “I suppose you were going to double-check that tomorrow night about 6:45, where the reunion might actually be taking place.”

“No need,” Chris said, “since you just confirmed it . . . I’m sure there’s a logical answer, but that’s Burlingame, right? You’d think everyone would want to re-une inside the city limits.”

“Good point,” Steve said. “Are you bringing a date, or--I’m sorry if you told me--are you married?”

“Hopefully,” Chris said, “I mean a date. We had a little falling out there, right at the end, and I haven’t heard from her since.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Gloria said. “If she hasn’t officially backed out, I’d call it a hopeful sign.”

“Right at the end of what?” Steve said.

“That came out wrong. When I was getting ready to drive up from Manhattan Beach, is what I meant.”

“Sweet,” Steve said. “What do you do there?”

“To be honest . . . walk around. There was a guy my dad used to talk about. When people asked the guy what he did, he said, completely serious, *I walk* . . . That was always a funny story, but now I understand it.”

“I envy you then,” Steve said. “The location, and the occupation both.”

“Hey, come on out any time,” Chris said. “I got a guy sleeping on my couch, temporarily, but I’ll kick him out.” Steve was turning into an okay guy, and Chris meant it.

Gloria said, “So Chris . . . you were married briefly, though, correct?”

“Right out of the gate, yeah. She’s done *exceedingly well for herself*, post-me.”

Chris meant it as a joke, figuring they were getting along pretty well and the mood lightened up, but it backfired, and Steve brought it up again to Gloria and she got defensive, and then she threw in a couple habits she didn’t like about *him* these past few days either.

Chris said, “Hey, I got a place, over on Chestnut . . . can I set us all up with some after-dinner beverages?”

“Works for me, I suppose,” Steve said.

“That would be fine,” Gloria said.

It was the same old Weatherby’s, things heating up on a Friday night. Whenever Chris walked in he felt like a stranger. There was no

one in the various herds of Millennials he could relate to, not even close.

Until he got a seat at the bar, and Shep came by. Then it felt like home.

“Yo, baby, my brother!” Shep said. “You been hiding yourself in the white sand, or what?”

Chris introduced him to Gloria and Steve, and they went with Brandy Alexanders, and everything seemed fine, and they both agreed this was a great place, and what a colorful bartender, but a couple sips in, they started arguing again and told Chris please excuse them, they were going to move to a back table.

When Shep returned he said, “Nice folks, your friends. There an occasion, connected to it?”

“There always is,” Chris said. “Listen, I can see you’re pretty busy, so let me ask you about that one thing, in case we don’t catch up much tonight.”

“You’re a funny guy . . . among other qualities. You put that to me every time, first thing, same way, like a machine. No, no sign of ‘em.”

Chris was referring to his brother Floyd, if there’d been any sighting of the guy in here, and if so, with which member of the female population.

It felt good to unwind, and Shep brought him another without asking and said, a little quieter, “So . . . you suspend all activities, since you’re a beach bum now?”

“Been suspending ‘em for a while,” Chris said.

“Good then,” Shep said. “Wise. No need.”

“Except I might be un-suspending one tomorrow . . . I mean Sunday.”

“*Ho-ly Shiminiy,*” Shep said.

“Depending,” Chris said. “How someone conducts themselves. Takes responsibility. That type thing.”

“You grill ‘em first, you mean? A *q & a* situation? . . . Wow.”

“Then again, I might not,” Chris said.

“Not go through with it, you’re saying? Just *picture* it? . . . I can see how that could work, bringing you almost the same satisfaction in the end, and complication-free.”

“No,” Chris, said, “not bother with the pre-lims.”

No one was in shape to drive when they exited the *Booker Lounge* a couple hours later, the second stop of the night in the Marina.

Instead of calling a cab, Chris suggested, why not walk it?

Gloria and Steve shrugged their shoulders and said fine, not anticipating the hills and the distance, and the three of them crossed Lombard and started up Pierce Street.

Steve limped a little, you could see now, while Gloria was powering along like a mountain goat.

Chris said to Steve, “You’re reminding me of me, your stride, little short. It the shoes, or something deeper-rooted?”

“Deeper. I tried rugby in college. Nothing fancy, club stuff, up at Whitman. But a mistake.”

“Walla-walla, Washington,” Gloria said. “Fwhittman.”

“Huh?” Chris said.

“I had a girlfriend at work, older,” Gloria said, “she’d gone there too. She always called it Phwhittman. An f or ph in there at the beginning.”

“She from down south then, your friend?” Chris said.

“She was from Alameda. If you listen carefully, you can hear Steve pronouncing it the same way.”

“Oh,” Steve said, “the implication being, I’m talking down to you then, via my delivery?”

“What’d you guys think of the Booker Lounge?” Chris said. “As compared to the first place, Weatherby’s.”

“I think I’m going to crash at my cousin’s tonight,” Steve said.

They walked in silence for several blocks, and luckily around Lyon Street the endorphins kicked in, and Steve brought up a movie he’d seen and Gloria responded, and by the time they got back to her place any disaster seemed averted.

They sat around a while and Gloria announced she was exhausted and heading upstairs, and when she’d gone Chris asked Steve if he was in the way, sleeping here another night.

“Because *I* can always go to your cousin’s,” Chris said.

“A,” Steve said, “stay right here . . . B, you’re all right. I *get* you.”

“Well you’re a good man too,” Chris said. “Tonight was fun.” He didn’t want to go all *Kumbaya* here, but maybe there *was* something about people you went to high school with. You’d been through some of the same shit on the same timetable.

“What’s it run you,” Steve said, “living down there?”

“A lot if you let it . . . But I ran into a guy down there made a good point: How much place do you need, because you’re not gonna be spending much time inside.”

“Well I won’t lie to you,” Steve said, “that’s a mindset that I could embrace.”

“So go for it,” Chris said. “The gusto.”

“I remember that. An old beer commercial.”

“This thing with Gloria, that gonna continue after the weekend? Or you have it limited to a reunion-only effort.”

“Why? You into her?”

“I don’t think so. She’s too nice. I mean okay she was ribbing you and stuff, but man, what a good heart.”

“I know . . . So you prefer the ones who keep you guessing whether they’re going to show.”

“Yeah . . . I lived here all my life. A *few* years other places, but forget that . . . I come back, I’m trying to think, who do I want to see? And who might want to see me? . . . I come up with one person, the guy who beat me up 30 years ago. How pathetic is that?”

Steve was listening carefully. “I think I see where you’re headed,” he said, “how it could apply to your taste in women.”

“I’m cynical,” Chris continued, “and I can be an ass, that’s for sure.”

“More fun though, that way,” Steve said.

“It is, yeah.”

“Something you don’t learn overnight though, you need to live a little first.”

“You do,” Chris said.

TWENTY-ONE

Saturday morning Chris woke up once again pretty darn energized, thinking maybe it’s the mattress too, in addition to those blackout shades.

No one else was up yet this time and the Presidio was pretty close, and feeling so refreshed he decided to jog there, up to the end of Jackson and then a right turn into the Arguello Gate.

He would have continued the loop he used to run, the 5-miler, except his fasciitis kicking in bad, and it was a tough trek back to Gloria’s.

Gloria and Steve were having coffee when he got back, but they both seemed a little more stressed today, not a carryover from last night, Chris didn't think, but the actual event looming and stuff you apparently needed to do.

Gloria was getting her hair done, and she had taken on decoration obligations, and Steve had to go see his dad who he didn't get along, and he'd been putting it off since he got here.

Then they were both going to be checking in at the airport Marriott. Not clear if that meant together.

"I'll see you there then," Chris said, after downing a second cup of that award-winning coffee brew. "This has been . . . beyond the call of duty, honestly."

"Here," Gloria said, handing him a set of keys. "Since you're a party pooper and aren't staying at the hotel."

"Jeez," Chris said. "You're embarrassing me now. You sure?"

"She's right," Steve said. "Stay at the hotel, we'll be getting some late poker going. I plan to get back at a few people."

"Steve has carried around some grudges, all these years," Gloria said, shaking her head. "I've heard about them the last few days, more than once. The hows and whys."

"Grudges can be over-rated," Chris said. "People change. It can end up, *you're* still ticked off about something, the *other* person doesn't even remember it happening."

Steve said, "I hear you, but I'm remembering them the way they were, I can't help it. No benefit of the doubt."

"At any rate," Gloria said to Chris, "what's on *your* agenda today?"

"I thought I'd wander over to Berkeley," he said.

"Oh terrific idea, always one of my favorite places," she said.

“Wow, the second *one* now,” Steve said. He was on his ipad, scanning the morning news.

“What?” Gloria said.

“Mountain lion. Same guy. It can’t be far from here.” He held up the device, and there was a 10 second black-and-white surveillance video of a pretty big looking cat walking across someone’s driveway at night.

“There’s a prominent gentleman who lives in the neighborhood,” Gloria was explaining to Chris.

“One of the many,” Steve said.

“Yes,” she said. “They don’t tell you where of course, but I’m guessing he’s on the Presidio wall . . . Either there, or Broadway by Lyon Steps.”

“Guy’s a big start-up CEO,” Steve said. “He’s sharing his videos, having a busy week. Whichever location, it’s the same Presidio they’re coming out of. People don’t realize, you’re in the old-fashioned woods there, especially at night.”

“Those things,” Chris said, “they ever finish off people, that you hear about? Or is that like a one-in-a-million shot?”

“Oh they absolutely can,” Steve said. “The lucky thing for us-- unless something goes haywire with one ‘em--they don’t like conflict. Allegedly. So you see one, make sure you stand up to him.”

Chris thought, *that’d* be a clean way, get one of them to go haywire and stick Smith in the mix . . .

Why can’t things be simple?

The idea was not to overdo it in Berkeley, but maybe you pick up on *something* you could put to use.

Or maybe not.

Chris still had no idea how you'd approach it, and that's assuming the guy's there tomorrow.

The original thought, why it made more sense than Sonoma County, you get him out of his comfort zone, like the initial concept with Thad, you meet him in New York at a trade show.

Of course now you're out of *your* comfort zone too. The only memory Chris had of Tilden Park was going off the rope swing into the lake, and then cutting his foot on something and having to go for stitches. That was a lot of years ago.

Still, driving up Grizzly Peak now, it was reasonably remote up here. You had million dollar houses tucked away but there were stretches with nothing, and maybe you *could* put a gun to a guy's head at a turnout and force him off the edge. Something else in his favor, just last weekend they switched the clocks back so it was pretty dang dark at 5:30 if no other humans were around brightening stuff up.

He found the softball field in question, and yes, there was an operation underway, a crew with a big dump truck laying down that crushed wood you see at county fairs.

In the parking lot, back behind the picnic area, son of a gun, there was a whole slew of tiny houses, each on its own little undercarriage with wheels, a connector sticking out the front so you could hitch it up to something.

The houses *were* kind of cute, some of them cedar-shingled, others with metal roofs, most of them painted with at least one funky-type color, but it was questionable how you'd stick a family in one.

Whatever.

Chris couldn't help himself, he did a quick scan, this parking lot and the one in back, see if Smith's vehicle might be here, but he didn't see it. In fact he only noticed two people besides the work crew, two

guys at a picnic table with a big sheet of paper spread out, both wearing sportcoats and hardhats.

The hardhat thing seemed over the top, and he could picture Smith wearing one as well, but Chris supposed you set a safety example at these events, which wasn't the worst thing.

Maybe not hang around too long, he was thinking, now that he'd established a couple things and also *because* of the situation being pretty quiet. He hadn't attracted any attention yet, he was pretty sure, but why push matters.

On the way out, Chris was wondering if there were any different access roads, and after a little trial and error and going in a big circle by accident, he found there *was* an alternate way out of the sucker.

You took Wildcat Canyon Road, which first got you to Inspiration Point when you exited the park, and then you zigzagged like hell, serious switchbacks all the way down until you ran into San Pablo Dam Road.

And Jeez, seeing it all unfold now, that put you in Orinda. All these years, Chris never knew about that . . .

Whether this impressive new knowledge could help you tomorrow though . . . that was questionable.

Bottom line, this was going to be a mess.

Chris figured since he was here anyway, might as well make the most of things and head over to *Top Dog*, and *over there* wasn't so simple since he had to jump on 24 and through the tunnel . . . and what the heck was this *traffic* now, lunchtime on a Saturday for God sake's.

He wondered if Cal might be playing football, and sure enough, flipping around the radio, they were taking on Oregon State.

He found a spot on Hillegass, a mile from campus, and he made sure nothing theft-worthy was visible in the Camry, since Berkeley was bad--and was crossing Derby Street when Emma called.

“Dang,” he said.

Emma said, “Chris, I’m hoping you can lighten up. I’m looking forward to seeing you.”

“You’re . . . *here*, you mean? Or looking forward to it when I come back?”

“I’m at the airport. Bob Hope. We’re getting ready to board, I should be in Oakland by 3:15.”

“Oh,” he said.

“Again, no need to trouble yourself picking me up. I’ll call you when I’ve reached San Francisco.”

“No no, I got it.”

“Fine, do want my flight number?”

“I’ll find you,” he said.

Wow-eee.

And he was scratching his head about, Bob Hope Airport.

You had LAX right next to MB, then you had Long Beach, and even John Wayne out in Burbank was closer than Bob Hope.

She had her reasons, no point asking, and the main thing was he had a date tonight, which he was starting to get used to idea of *not* having.

Probably for the best. Less awkward in the end . . .

You better reserve something, so he called the Marriott, way too late for the group rate of course which expired a month ago, which the receptionist was enjoying telling him, but at least a room was available and he booked it.

He could have saved the \$225 and brought Emma back to Gloria's, pretty positive Gloria wouldn't have a problem with it, but it was done.

He had to hustle now, make it quick on the franks, and *Top Dog* was a mob scene, and there was percussion thundering in the distance, the football drumline warming up. If you were going to re-invent yourself--besides a place like Manhattan Beach--a college town would be up there, Chris had to admit.

The plane was right on time, and there she was, traveling light, just a carry-on, and a reasonably big smile, and, boom, she planted a nice wet kiss on him, on the lips.

"So here we are," Chris said, throwing her stuff in the trunk. "Back to normal. Or even a little beyond it."

"Let's go somewhere," she said.

"We can, anywhere you want. Fortunately we have a post-card day, and you got a native in the driver's seat."

"No," she said, "I mean let's *go* somewhere."

Chris looked at her and she was staring forward out the window but nodding just enough, and he was able to absorb the whole package--a bit of a serious element . . . in fact an urgency . . . even a frustration.

The blouse open three or four buttons didn't help, nor did the fact that she kept shifting around . . . *What can you do?*

The Marriott was a good call, it turned out. One of the best features was the robes, thick, plush terrycloth, two folded up waiting for you in your room, and unlimited ones down by the pool if those weren't enough.

They were laying back, making use of the robes and both beds at this point, the sky getting dark, only airplanes visible out there, specifically the landing procession dropping into SFO from the south.

“This is worth the price of admission, you know it?” Chris said. “I love watching ‘em. I wouldn’t get tired of it.”

“You,” Emma said. “You’re goofy. Come back over here.” There was a dreamy edge behind it.

“I might actually consider it,” Chris said, “if I didn’t have to pace myself, save some energy for tonight.”

“Now you make me mad,” she said. “But thank you for inviting me.”

Jeez.

Now would have been the time, invite her over to his side, get her nestled in tight, head on his chest, stroking the back of her neck, and ask, “So what happened at summer camp?”

Except something like that, it didn’t fit right just now . . .

Downstairs on the other hand, little indoor pool action, hot tub, sauna activity with the touch of that eucalyptus oil they provided . . .

That’d be a lot more like it . . . how you did it before a 25th reunion.

TWENTY-TWO

The band was in full swing when they walked in, a three-piece job but sounding like more than that the way they they synthesized everything now.

They were playing current hits you recognized--your Billie Eilishes, your Ed Sheerans, your Lewis Capaldis --but they could turn on a dime and go back to the start of it all--the Bill Haleys, the Jerry Lee Lewises, the Chuck Berrys.

The lead guy was very good, could sing them amazingly close to the originals and he was sweating up a storm, one of those guys who needed to keep mopping his head with a big towel.

Naturally, they sprinkled in the high school years, and people would pull their partner out on the dance floor.

When they got around to ‘Under the Bridge’ by the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Emma did that to Chris.

“I don’t mind,” he said, “it’s one of my favorites too, but you know it’s about heroin.”

“Oh, it is *not*,” she said. “And if it were, so what?”

And that was a fair point, and it was a nice moment out here, and after all the paralysis of analysis he was glad he came.

“I’ll say this,” Chris said. “The guys look decent, for the most part. Wear and tear on a few of the women, from what I remember.”

“Who’s *that* person?” Emma said.

There was a guy dancing with Nadine Wing. Chris always liked Nadine, but Jeez, now she’s bopping around with Aaron Dreue.

Chris had a problem with that guy at a party junior year, and they’d had words. It was something trivial, but it stuck.

“Him?” Chris said, pointing with his head. “Guy named Dreue. Why?”

“He looks interesting,” she said. “The way he moves. I wouldn’t be surprised if he were a creative artist.”

“Well why don’t you ask him?” A little edge to it, and Emma didn’t say anything back, but a few minutes later, the band taking a break and a reunion committee person making an announcement . . . Chris in the middle of saying hello to someone who tapped him on the shoulder . . . and son of a bitch, there she is, over by the bar, talking to Dreue.

Gloria happened to stop by then, first time tonight.

“I’m so glad it’s working out for you,” she said. “Not to mention how attractive your date is.”

“She is,” Nadine said, standing there too. “Is that a serious relationship?”

Gloria moved on, continuing her rounds, permanent smile plastered on her face. Chris said to Nadine, “Do you want to dance?”

Nadine was fine with it and when they were out there he said, “Do you remember Mr. Peterson’s class? Where you sat?”

“That’s an extremely odd question,” she said. “But yes I do.”

“Someone brought it up recently, how Mr. Peterson configured his seating chart . . . How *did* he?”

“How would *I* know?”

“Well I’m going to take note of your answer, because I’m pretty sure that’s the first question you didn’t get right in the history of high school.”

She smiled. “*You* didn’t answer my earlier question.”

“I will in a second . . . one more observation, not only do you *talk* more than you did, but you’re pretty direct as well . . . No, I don’t think it’s a serious relationship. I might have answered you differently a few minutes ago.”

They both looked over there and Emma and Dreue were leaning in pretty close, engaged apparently in a fascinating discussion.

Nadine said, “Well how have you been otherwise? Do you stay in contact with people?”

“No, but I *should*, I realize. An occasion like this, it gives you perspective.”

“It does . . . There’s a funny dynamic to it. My husband, for example, he wasn’t interested in attending.”

“*That* I can understand,” Chris said. “He’s the odd man out, it’s your deal.”

“Right, but he went to Lowell. With us. Walter Clarke.”

“Dang, I remember him . . . you went out with him then? I guess I was oblivious.”

“No, we got together later . . . Speaking of which, didn’t you go with Leslie Stemphill?”

“Yeah?”

“I said hello to her. She seems good.”

The way Nadine said it, the *good* part might be a question mark. Kim mentioned, that one time, Leslie struggling with her relationships and her teenage kids.

“I did see her when we walked in,” Chris said. “But with my friend Emma and all, no need to pile on any awkwardness.”

“As you say, that might not be such a big issue now,” Nadine said.

“You know something? You’re a little devilish, aren’t you? You stick in the needle.”

“Only when appropriate.”

“I still like you.”

“I like you too,” she said. “Don’t be a stranger.” Whatever that meant.

Leslie was at a table that included, if he was recognizing people correctly, Pam Wallace, Susie Hennigan, Drake Andruss and Eddie Salz, plus their husbands, wives, partners, whatever.

Nadine had been right of course, that Leslie’d be someone you’d at least wanted to bump into. What was stopping Chris, separate from Emma, was the Chico obligation . . . the *first* thing, Smith, was already looking impossible, how could you have bitten off so much that’d you’d be considering a *second* one.

Anyhow, fine . . . he went over there.

“Well, what’s up?” he said, to the collective unit.

He felt a few sets of eyes squinting up at him, some recognition but not exactly unbridled enthusiasm. Susie did stand up and give him a hug, and Eddie responded with a *where you been dog*.

Leslie stood up a little booze-unbalanced and hugged him and introduced him to Adriano, and Chris pulled up a chair.

Leslie said, "I've heard all about you from Kim."

"Oh," Chris said. Running back through it--*what* did Kim know again? The diagnosis, she figured that one out somehow . . . But nothing about the other business . . . So fine, he could live with that.

"Do you still live in San Francisco?" Adriano said, very polite, and younger than Leslie.

"Mostly I have, yes. I wonder if you polled the room though, how many of 'em still do."

"You almost have to inherit something," Leslie said. "And my parents--you remember the house--they sold it quite some time ago."

Information he already knew, and didn't want to be dwelling on.

"We're in Walnut Creek," Leslie continued, "a bit pasteurized but it has its moments. Funny to think, my dad used to tell stories, when he was a kid the family'd come over and go swimming in the actual *creek*."

Chris heard one like that too, from his own dad. Either way, *Jeez*, move the subject away from her parents.

He took another glance over at Emma by the bar, and this time she wasn't there, and Dreue wasn't either.

Leslie said, "People are different at the 25th, have you noticed?"

"Different than in real life?" Chris said. "Or than the other reunions?"

"Both probably, but yes, the other ones."

“Well your earlier variety,” he said, “there’s more pressure to explain what you *do* . . . though maybe not the 5th or even the 10th, because those, no one expects you to be settled in.”

“That’s an interesting way to look at it,” Adriano said.

“You’re saying,” Leslie said, “people are done judging you by now?”

“Well we’re into that second stage, I guess.” Chris said.

“You mean *work*? Boob jobs, for one?” she said, a little louder than you wanted. “I’m detecting plenty of *those* in this room.”

Chris said, “Adriano, I’m sorry I haven’t asked you, where’d *you* go to high school?”

Adriano said up in Portland.

“What happened to your gal friend?” Leslie said to Chris. “You two look like a nice couple.”

Chris scanned the room another time. He said, “Looks like it may be a no go.”

“Which can happen,” Adriano said.

“What are you gonna do,” Chris said.

“Yeah, really,” Leslie said.

The thing wound down at 11, the band finishing it off with Boyz II Men, ‘End of the Road’, someone pointing out it was the year-end number one song back then, so fair enough.

There were a few final announcements and the committee members got up there and led a rendition of the school hymn. Chris never learned the words but you weren’t going to be a jerk and not at least stand there.

People were saying be sure to come by the 7th floor, and Chris went outside and got a little air. There was a section off the parking lot

that opened up to the edge of the bay, and you had the view of the planes landing at SFO, real loud.

One thought would be go back to Gloria's, since he still had the keys, and if Emma did turn up later she'd have the room to herself and there wouldn't be any strain.

The other thing, he was curious how Steve might be making out in that poker game he'd been carrying on about. He only talked to the guy for a minute at the reunion, but Steve made sure to remind him.

So Chris gave it a half hour and went back inside, and the 7th floor really *was* where it was at, half the doors wide open and music blasting out of a bunch of 'em, along with ice cracking and glasses clinking.

One of the rooms, the whole bed was flipped up on edge and a real poker table had replaced it, the green felt and everything. Steve's game.

Steve didn't look too good. He was slumped forward and he kept fingering his chips like a nervous Nellie, and there weren't all that many of them.

Cleaning up so far looked to be a guy named Calhoun. Big guy, huge forearms. Wrestled. Kind of happy-go-lucky in high school, but applied himself later and became an ER doc.

Also Wayne Ho, big stack, quietly doing the job.

Chris wondered who at this table, if any of them, were the ones Steve was going to get payback on.

Steve noticed Chris standing there and motioned for him to take a seat and join the fun, but it was a half-hearted gesture.

Chris put his hands up, like not just yet, and he watched a few more minutes and went down to the bar where the guy next to him, a salesman from Cincinnati, went into a thing about why the college

football playoff system was screwed up, and Chris listened to him ramble, and that was fine.

TWENTY-THREE

The scene was going to be different at Tilden today, you could tell coming up the hill. There were plenty of cars and you were moving slow, and when you got to the softball field there were guys directing you where to park.

By this time the 32 little houses had been positioned on the field, and the whole thing was reasonably tasteful, like a miniature village.

It didn't take long to find Jerry Smith. There was a group of tables up front, on the first base line, with *Eclectic Housery* banners draped over them, and he was sitting there next to a couple guys.

Yukking it up. A *Warriors* sweat shirt. No hard hat.

It was around 2. All you could do was bite your nails now and observe.

Chris checked his messages, and there was just one, from Kenny in L.A.

It said: **nothing important, everything's fine here, no need to reply back, I was just curious how your high school reunion went.**

This was a good kid.

And the answer would be, Chris supposed, it was uneven.

The hotel bar had been an okay place, and by the time he left he was ready to hit the sack and the concept of going to Gloria's wasn't going to happen.

When he got back to the room he noticed Emma's stuff, what little she had, was still there.

And nothing changed overnight.

Well . . . the good part, he figured in the morning, she had a key, should she need any of it before checkout time.

There'd been a final impromptu gathering in the coffee shop, and there were embraces and exchanges of emails, and the usual insistent agreements not to let time go by . . . and Chris didn't participate, but he could see it meant a lot to some of them, and what was wrong with that?

Meanwhile, the housing dedication was taking forever. The lucky families weren't here yet, and that wouldn't happen today, the moving in.

There were long-winded speeches--a couple mayors, someone federal, people from social agencies.

Mercifully, around 4:30 that seemed to be it, and they packed up the tables and podium and a crew started dismantling the stage.

Finally Smith and most of them were in the parking lot, a cluster of vehicles remaining, and they were ready to get in and go but no one had, and Chris wondered, *Christ*, are they making dinner arrangements on me now?

Fortunately a couple hands went up, the doofuses waving to each other, and you could hear the mumble of good-byes and everyone got in their own vehicle, which in Smith's case was the fancy beige SUV.

Chris put the Camry in gear and started following him out of park and back down Grizzly Peak Boulevard.

A crazy thought he'd had, you flash your lights, get him to pull over, and then shoot him, making sure you stole something, to blend in with the armed robbery epidemic they were having in Berkeley.

This was idiotic--unless you were trying it at 3 in the morning--way too busy now.

Bottom of the hill, at the 4-way stop, Chris let a car feed in, between him and Smith . . . and that was all you could do, stay on the sucker and see if anything abnormal might develop.

You had to assume the Smith didn't have a big meeting or rendezvous in the San Francisco tonight. That would have opened the door at least a crack, familiar turf to you but not to him as much, and maybe you figure something out.

Whatever. This piece of scum at the moment made a right on Marin Avenue, and Chris knew the drill from there. That fed you to Hopkins, which fed into Gillman, which a few miles later stuck you on 80 East, and then of course the San Rafael Bridge and back up 101 to stupid Sebastopol and you were nowhere.

You followed along for the ride . . . Thinking about it, since he'd be up there anyway . . . should he give Joyce a call?

She was in Terra Linda but close enough . . . The problem with Joyce, she'd laid something on you, something relatively heavy . . . Chris thinking, anyone *else* up that way?

What Smith did that surprised him, he passed the San Rafael Bridge exit and stayed on Interstate 80.

He could have missed it, maybe been on the phone with Abigail and got distracted, though Smith wasn't the kind of guy who *missed* stuff.

Hmm . . . This meant either he was heading up toward Sacramento for some reason, or he was going to take Highway 37 at Vallejo.

That was a longer way for sure, to get to Sonoma County, plus 37 was dicey because it could back up on you, only one lane and you were at the mercy of the light at Sears Point Raceway.

Maybe Smith liked driving this way better and didn't care about the time.

The 37 cutoff was a half hour north, so you had to wait and see . . . and the scum did take 37, which you tended to avoid before they added that center divider a few years ago.

The other road to avoid was Lakeville Highway. Eucalyptus groves, turns, people pulling on and off. There was a sign telling you leave your headlights on.

You picked up Lakeville at the end of 37. A trucker once told Chris it didn't save you any time, but the locals took it.

When Smith turned onto Lakeville it was like a switch went off, and Smith gunned it until he was riding the rear of some guy in an old pickup, and then . . . he swings into the other lane, oncoming traffic, across the double yellow line, and passes the guy.

Chris figured that'd be it, he lost him, and it was time to decide if you wanted to take a chance on Joyce . . . or forget that, head to Petaluma, get a bite, maybe one of those trendy river cafes.

Oh well . . . You couldn't have scripted this debacle worse.

Then he spotted Smith again. There was a lane reduction up ahead, the part of Lakeville that turned from rural to commercial, business parks lining both sides. God knows who'd be doing road work on a Sunday night, but then again you were in the fire zone so anything's possible.

Chris didn't think of himself as an aggressive driver, he was careful, but he found himself cutting off a couple people and lining back up behind Smith, four deep.

There were two ways the guy could go home from here, either across town and up Stony Point Road--where there might be a remote chance of an opening, though Chris couldn't picture it--or straight up the freeway, where you had no shot.

Which is what he did unfortunately, right before In-n-Out, the on-ramp to 101 North.

Now you'd be following the miserable son-of-a-bitch all routine the rest of the way, 101 to 116, eight miles to Sebastopol, a couple more to the estate on Mill Station Road and probably Abigail. Or maybe he meets her somewhere in town. Or does the wife even know about it, and not even care because she can't stand him.

And incidentally, how about that maneuver on Lakeville Highway. Not just because it screwed up Chris, but wouldn't you think the guy would have learned *something* by now?

Taken even a tiny morsel of common sense away from what happened that day, going on 28 years?

Then Smith surprised him one more time.

One exit before the usual one, he pulls off early.

Funny what you thought about at times like these . . . Chris had never noticed it, but this one was marked **481A**, meaning the normal one a mile up the road must be **481B**.

Smith had gotten off on West Sierra Avenue, and Chris had done that a few times too, but during the day. You looped up and around and connected back to 116, and it was pretty, and maybe you avoided one stoplight. In the dark it was a tough drive though, not worth it.

In fact no one went that way at night, who knew what they were doing, unless they happened to live on that stretch of road, but there weren't many of those either, since it was rolling hills and ranches and other big pieces of property.

And Chris was wondering why the guy'd be bothering now.

Except after he crosses under 101, heading west, a couple hundred yards further, he pulls into a flat, gravelly lot, continues back behind a work trailer, leaves the engine running and gets out.

Jesus, he has to take a leak.

Chris wasn't quite ready for this, how he'd handle it on short notice.

Which was worse than pathetic--since you'd had days . . . forget that, *weeks* . . . and when it came down to it, *months* . . . to prepare for this moment.

For starters, he figured he should at least pull up next to the guy .

..

Then he couldn't find him.

Then he saw it, at the edge of the lot, obscured by a small backhoe that was sitting there.

A porta-potty.

Smith not the type, most likely, to just use the side of the road or the bushes. Not surprising. Clearly someone who took pride in conducting himself responsibly.

Along those lines, you could hear the trickle of water now. Not from the *guy* into the deep tank, but from one of those side sink jobs that the better quality porta-potties had, where your responsible individuals could wash their hands.

There was a vineyard across the road, and Chris assumed whatever project was getting underway here had something to do with it, and there'd be big-bucks involved . . . so you get the deluxe porta-potty version.

The trickle of water stopped and there was a little delay, the guy wiping his hands, and the door opened, outward, and Chris wasn't sure if there was actual eye-contact and recognition, but either way he slashed the hammer into the guy's forehead.

It was surprising that it actually stayed there . . . not the main side but the jagged edge one you use for pulling out nails . . . but even so.

Smith staggered and put one hand to his throat, Chris not sure why you'd do that when you had other significant trouble zones at the moment, but it was what it was.

The guy toppled over a few seconds later, and then Chris panicked when he couldn't pull the hammer out.

Luckily he'd gloved up when he got back in the Camry at Tilden, he'd at least thought of that. Now he had to put one hand on the guy's jaw for leverage and pry the son of a gun out of there . . . *Wow*, that was a little dicey, but he was good.

The final concern, which always worked its way into these things, was do you do it again . . . just to make sure?

The position was reasonably conducive, the guy's head not impeded by an arm or shoulder or chest that might have got tangled up in there, but Chris decided you didn't have all day to be making an evaluation and plunged the thing back into the side of the guy's skull.

The first time the motion had been more of an overhand deal, tomahawk-style, but this one was sidearm, like skipping a rock on a lake, and Chris had always been pretty good at that.

The sound was similar to if you dropped a log on the hearth on the way to the fireplace, though a little higher-pitched.

More importantly it was in deep, which should take care of it, except there was the issue of digging it back out again, but he knew what to do this time, and soon enough he'd thrown the tool back in the trunk and was on his way.

It hadn't worked out badly, actually.

The interesting thing was the hammer part had been totally spontaneous. He'd opened up the trunk in a hurry, assuming gun or bat, but not thrilled by either one, and then he noticed the hammer, a *Stanley*, nice blue rubber handle.

What had happened was he got a flat on South Van Ness, a couple months ago, when he'd let some parking tickets go too long and had to go down to the city clerk and take care of it. He changed the tire himself, he wasn't that helpless that he needed Triple-A, but he

couldn't get the dang hub cab back on properly, so he picked up a hammer for future reference.

At any rate . . . he was back on 101, heading toward the city.

Similar to what seemed like a long time ago, him hustling it out of the Donny situation and a few minutes later feeding into the same freeway, same direction, same everything.

He was scared to death back then, but tonight he was surprisingly calm.

What's the worst that can happen, honestly, if you did the right thing?

The answer was *a lot* obviously, but no point worrying about it right now.

He hated breaking the no-texting law, which was a damn important one, but he let himself check his messages, and there was one from Gloria.

She was having one more get-together tonight, a *final-final* she called it, and Steve was still around and some others would be stopping by, and could he *please* join them.

Chris continued for a while, and he crossed the Marin County line, traffic light into the city so far, but of course that could change in a heartbeat . . . but yeah, okay, that sounded pretty darn good.

The End

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