

# **JUSTICE RAIN**

## **by Rex Bolt**



**Chris Seely Vigilante Justice**  
**Book 11**



## **Author's Note:**

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

**That said . . . if you are reading one at random, here is a brief**

### **BACKGROUND SYNOPSIS:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



- 1 Days Go By**
- 2 Closer to the Edge**
- 3 Raised Just Like You**
- 4 Like Crazy**
- 5 Gabriela**
- 6 Middle of the Night**
- 7 Share this Dance**
- 8 Barbed Wire Fences**
- 9 Trouble Right Here**
- 10 Bad Days Over**
- 11 In School**
- 12 Choose Or**
- 13 Cherry Pie**
- 14 Simple Tune**
- 15 Swimming Pool**
- 16 Rehearsal**

**17 Valerie Drive**

**18 Summer's In**

**19 Around**

# Chapter 1

When the cop with the cowboy hat and the gut hanging over the belt asked Chris if he had a second, Chris thought here we go again -- even though we're not supposed to be.

They were at the Hallmark *Left* Golf Course, a pristine 18 holes, sprinklers currently doing their thing all over the place.

As opposed to the Hallmark *Right* 18 holes, which were over the footbridge and across Sunscape Road. Chris's understanding was the left course favored the big hitters, but the right course was technically trickier.

This was Eclipse, Arizona. The *Rancho Villas Gold Star Residential Living and Resort*.

Once again.

Chris said sure he had a second. What else could you say?

The cop asked if he'd heard about the dead body overnight.

"I have," Chris said. "Before we get into that though . . . something I've been meaning to clarify -- is there any restriction on watering around here? I mean you have to transport in your water, right?"

"I hear ya," the cop said. "all for the snow birds. On account-a which, my personal water runs me over three bills."

"A month?" Chris said.

"You bet. Any idea what happened last night? What we got?"

Meaning back to the body. A woman unfortunately. Discovered by Jose and Alberto around 5am, driving around with a maintenance truck, adding sand to the sand traps. A foot was sticking out of the chihuahuan sage bramble near the 11th hole.

"All's I know," Chris said, "I get up, grab a coffee in the lobby on my way to the fitness center, everyone's on edge. An hour later, we get the word the gal was a prostitute. Allegedly . . . Everyone relaxes a little."



“Human nature,” the cop said, his eyes following an attractive woman decked out in high-end yoga pants, heading to the next station of the par-course workout thing they had paralleling the golf.

“I guess,” Chris said. “Whenever there’s a bad crime where I’m living -- in the newspaper, or on TV, the first thing I always want to know -- was it random, or was it self-contained.”

“How do you know this one was random?”

“I think you missed my point. I *don’t* think it was random. At least I’m hoping not.”

“I know what you meant,” the cop said, unwrapping a Juicyfruit gum stick and putting it in his mouth. “I’m playing with you . . . why do you think it *wasn’t* random.”

Okay, this was about enough. Chris was rambling like an idiot, mainly because he was relaxed speaking to a cop for once, not worried about being accused of something.

Of course he was Jeff Masters here, and if the guy checked -- really ran his name through -- that could be an issue. But before the guy got to him he’d similarly questioned a couple other golf course employees, and Chris was pretty confident it was routine canvassing, and in fact so far the guy hadn’t asked him for *any* name.

The employment part being, Chris was working the noon to 5 shift at Hallmark Left under an awning, checking out golf carts, clubs, driving a modified vehicle around now and then that scooped up loose balls off the practice range, grabbing beverages from behind the counter for the exhausted golfers, microwaving nacho-type snacks as well.

It wasn’t bad. \$10.50 an hour, Arizona minimum wage, not a penny more, but that wasn’t important. Last time he was here -- and that would have been January, when he found out from Ned in the middle of the night that he possibly needed to be on the run from the authorities -- he landed a

job passing out towels in the fitness center. And also bartending a few shifts in the Rancho Villas in-house restaurant.

None of that was available this time, but you wanted to keep busy, and the golf gig was just right, now that they were into May, highs in the low 80's, lows in the mid-60s, perfect conditions to be outside out here in the Salt River Valley surrounded by all the cactus and red rock.

Ned had come to *him* this time, not in emergency mode, but in strong-suggestion one, and convinced Chris to take a little break.

The translation being, if there was a repeat -- or escalation -- of the fallout from New York that involved Ralph, and now the Bucks County guy, The Tank -- Ned said he'd feel better personally if Chris had a little distance on the situation.

Meaning . . . if someone really needs to find you they normally will . . . Chris had learned that . . . but don't put it right in their lap, Ned was saying.

Chris explained to Ned that he wasn't particularly afraid of another guy showing up -- and what he left out, was he was more afraid of being apprehended and electric-chaired *himself*, for something *he* might have done -- though Ned had him pegged pretty good by now, and likely was thinking along with Chris.

Ned's point was simply take a little vacation, let's see what happens . . . and they were in the Crow's Nest following a somewhat contentious meeting of Finch's writing group, where Holly really went off the deep end with her *inciting incident* assignment, and even Finch told her to maybe start over, and Holly ended up in tears and Rosie had to run outside after her and talk her back in.

Ned had gotten to the key point pretty quick though in the Crow's Nest, and he looked Chris in the eye and nodded, and there was no act connected to it this time, a rare serious side of Ned . . . and Chris said he'd think about it, and Ned said he'd be by in a couple hours with some plates.

Ned was true to his word, tapped on the door after midnight, handed Chris the license plates, Virginia ones. Chris wasn't sure how necessary that was, and he figured he'd leave his own CA plates on for now but keep a screwdriver in the trunk just in case . . . and Ned told him to stay safe and don't rush back . . . and that was it, and Chris was on the road the next afternoon, everything happening pretty fast.

He figured he'd start off on I-10 and see what destination ideas might come up, and there were none so far, past Riverside or Palm Springs either, and kind of like a magnet the Malibu stayed straight and drove itself to Phoenix.

At that point Chris debated it for about five minutes -- that he had admittedly been active out here last time -- but the resort lifestyle sounded so good, and really, all you had to do was *stay* there, right? Meaning don't re-visit Scottsdale, don't get involved in road rage business on any county back roads either . . . and things should be fine.

So he rented another condo. It wasn't complicated. This time he used better judgement, and leased the thing month-to-month . . . unlike last time when he got fancy and pre-paid 3 or 4 months upfront to save a few bucks . . . and then got burned by Pat trying to recover it.

That was something he was afraid of too, running into *her* again -- and especially having to do business with her -- and she *was* still working here, her name plate was on the sales office door, but a friendly new gal explained that Pat spent most of her time these days selling pre-construction units at Phase 3 up the road.

So Chris got out of there unscathed, key in hand, Unit 512, an upper one this time, the square footage a little tighter than back in January, but you had a little deck with a view, though it was of the pickleball courts.

But overall -- fine. And now two weeks later Chris was gainfully employed and a cop was chewing gum, taking a couple notes, and you could smell garlic in the mix too.

And Chris was finishing answering the guy's question. "I'm thinking it wasn't random *because* . . . our manager made an announcement to that effect."

"What did he say?" the cop said. Jeez, this guy was good at asking questions, but Chris was starting to wonder if it ended there, that the guy may never have experienced a homicide and doesn't know what to do next.

Chris said, "He said it was apparently a relationship." Which the manager *hadn't* exactly said, he'd said 'hopefully there's nothing to worry about', but same difference. More or less.

"Well that's how we're working it," the cop said. "You familiar with the Haliday Jay Express? Down in Merritt?"

"No," Chris said, though that may have been wrong too -- dang, that could have actually been the place where he trailed Monica and the Kyle guy that time. Small world if it was. "But why?" he said. "They're known for some of that activity?"

"They are. Thing of it is, what's up to us now to put together . . . did someone *dump* her there?"

It seemed kind of obvious to Chris that's what happened -- as opposed to a poor gal strolling around the 11th hole of a golf course in the middle of the night and running into trouble -- but hey, let the guy do his thing.

"Anything else?" Chris said.

"Nope, for now that's a wrap," the cop said, a strange way to put it, and the guy added, "these things start complicated, but they end up going simple on you."

And the guy extended his hand and moved on, and Chris noticed a bunch of the maintenance guys now on the patio near the first tee, waiting to be questioned, and Bob, the manager who made the 'hopefully nothing to worry about' comment, sort of supervising.

Chris figured he could have set the cop straight on one thing . . . that yeah, they may *start* complicated . . . but they never *end up* simple . . . but that would be *way* out of line.

And meanwhile, when today's golf-rental shift was over, you had one of the nice perks of this place, a little Tuesday night social out by the main pool, barbeques going, the whole bit, everything on the house.

## Chapter 2

Wednesday morning Chris was in the hot tub bright and early. That was another thing here, there were four of these, spread out over the complex. The claim was that the big one sat 40, and billed itself as the largest spa in the valley, but Chris preferred the 8-person job outside the fitness center because it stayed hotter. The other two he'd never sampled, and wasn't even sure where they were.

One guy was in ahead of him, a burly man about 35, unshaven, real broad defined jaw, rolling his neck around.

"Morning," Chris said.

The guy opened his eyes a slit and nodded the same to you.

Chris battled it for a minute, where have I seen this guy, and then he remembered, the golf hat and outfit that day throwing him off . . . but this was the guy who got mad after a poor shot and threw his 9-iron -- we're talking really *fired* it -- out over the fairway into a stand of cork oaks . . . and one of the maintenance guys tried to climb up and get it, but they ended up needing one of those trucks with a bucket.

At any rate, it had been a powerful display, there on the 2nd hole, and Chris had a good view of it and asked someone later and they said they'd heard the guy played in the NFL.

So . . . what the heck. Chris said, "If I'm bothering you, let me know." Which he figured he was, but there was something about the guy that didn't rub you quite right, so why *not* bother him.

The guy didn't say anything. He kept his eyes closed and was done rotating his neck and dipped everything into the water up to his lips. Chris said, "Pro football, huh? Now that's really something."

The guy opened one eye and said, "*You* try it sometime."

"Well," Chris said, "you're more honest about it than I pegged you for."

"How's that, then?" the guy grunted.

Chris said, "I figured, if you *did* play in the league, you'd be strutting around letting everyone know it." Which the guy sort of was, but still.

"Brother, I got aches and pains," the guy said. Chris introduced himself -- Jeff of course, from Jeff Masters -- and the guy said Waylon. Chris didn't recognize an ex-NFL guy named Waylon, but he was admittedly a casual fan and would have to look it up before you questioned the guy's integrity. The guy was hoisting himself up on the side now, legs hanging in the water, and he was built thick, no doubt about it. Not like a tackle maybe, little more flexibility to him, but man, everything oversized, look at those forearms alone.

Chris said, "I don't want to sound like a dumb fan, but what . . . you played like, defensive end? Linebacker?"

"Quarterback," Waylon said.

"Oh."

"Backup. Made the rounds. Drafted by KC. Lasted a season. Then Miami, the Bills, Jaguars. Finished my career with the illustrious San Diego Chargers."

"Gee."

"8 years in the league. I got in at mop-up time. I started *one* game, Miami in '09."

"What happened?"

"Why'd I start? Or how we did."

"Both, I guess."

“We had two guys who could air it out pretty good. Chad Henne, and Chad Pennington . . . see now, we were *already* in trouble, they pick two knuckleheads with three quarters the same name.”

“I remember both those guys, actually,” Chris said, “I mean not real clearly, but they ring a bell.”

“I was the back-up to those dups. They used to call it taxi-squad. Anyways, the Denver game, the one guy tweaks a finger in practice, the other guy commits a curfew infraction. So they start me.”

“How’d you do?”

“1 for 3. They pulled me the 4th series.”

“What -- they stuck in the guy they were supposed to be disciplining?”

Waylon nodded, slid back in the water and closed his eyes. “Ain’t it a bitch?” he said.

Why bug the guy any more, you didn’t want to behave like a dumb fan, except Chris admittedly was a bit in awe of this Waylon, how could you not be . . . though when he had his stint at The Chronicle way back when, he was working the city desk news, but they rotated him in and out of sports briefly, and he did interview some of the 49ers, and he’d see them in the bars on Union Street.

Still, we all want to dream we could play in the NFL, Chris supposed.

A new guy showed up, eased into the spa, and Waylon opened his eyes and they gave each other a minor fist bump.

They didn’t say anything further, and soon Waylon had had enough and left, and Chris said to the new guy, “Interesting chap.”

“He is,” the new guy said. “I’m McBride, by the way.” Easygoing and friendly. The guy seemed around Chris’s age, so both of them 8, 10 years older than the NFL guy.

Chris said, “This is something I recently got into with a friend.” He couldn’t remember who that *was* . . . and then yeah, okay, it was Finch.



“The last name business. Should I be Masters then? Forget the Jeffrey part? Or it doesn’t matter.”

McBride laughed. “It rarely matters, when it comes down to it. All this stuff we think’s important -- my mom was mixed up her last 20 years, was always losing her purse, sending her bill payments to the wrong companies -- she never straightened any of it out, and it didn’t make any difference.”

This guy going off on kind of a weird tangent there, but Chris got the idea, leave people alone, what they want to be called. He said, “How about the homicide, huh?”

“Tough thing,” McBride said. “Not unexpected *anywhere* I suppose these days . . . but you don’t equate hard crime with Eclipse.”

“How long you been here?” Chris said, pretty sure this guy wasn’t around in January, during Chris’s previous stint.

“I’m a month in. Hopefully it’s my last stop for a while . . . You?” The guy did the same as Waylon had, dipped himself in up to and even a bit over his lips.

“I guess I’m a return-ee,” Chris said. “Not sure if it’s *my* last stop though, I doubt that . . . On the homicide deal -- this might not be the worst place to commit one . . . if someone needed to. I mean I spoke to one of the cops on it, he didn’t evoke a ton of confidence.”

“Do *you* need to then? Is that why you analyzed it like that?”

Fortunately McBride was laughing again, but Gee, you keep putting your foot in your mouth for no reason.

Chris said, “You wonder if they’ve dealt with one before. Wouldn’t you think the sheriff would take over? Or *is* there one of those? What county are we even in -- is this still Maricopa? I should know that.”

“No problem,” McBride said, “yes, we’re still Maricopa, another 10,12 miles. Then you’re in Yavapai, or if you’re headed northeast that’d be Gila.”

“Either way,” Chris said.

“I hear you,” McBride said. “You can ask Dale, how they typically handle these matters.”

“Oh. Who’s Dale?”

“Dale? He’s a cop. Not local Eclipse. Good guy. No chip on his shoulder like you sometimes get.”

“You mean like . . . a Phoenix one?” This wouldn’t be a good development at all, having one of those residing right here with you at the ostensibly trouble-free Rancho Villas.

“Dale’s out of Gilbert,” McBride said.

“Unh. Gilbert’s . . . where the heck is it, relation to Phoenix?”

“Half hour, maybe a little more. You know where the 60 interchange is?”

“With 10, you mean?”

“Past that. Not a bad community. I looked at a unit over that way too, before I settled on here.”

Chris said, “But separate departments you mean? Gilbert, Phoenix, Mesa, whatever?”

“Not sure about Mesa. But Gilbert, sure. Technically it might still be part of your metro Phoenix, but they’re set up independent.”

The *technically* part wasn’t the greatest, but what could you do. Chris said, “Shifting gears here, where were you before this?”

“Chicago area. Are you familiar with it?”

“Only for a guy’s wedding once. In Wilmette. I thought I’d be his best man, but he snubbed me. I went to a White Sox game during the rehearsal.”

“Why’d he snub you?”

“I tossed that one around for a while. I never asked him directly . . . One time we were camping out in my back yard? We were probably 12. You get into telling those tall stories, and I told one about my Dad, bragging about him, that my friend Axe didn’t believe. So I did the next best thing, and bad-mouthed *his* dad about something.”

“There you go, that happens. But the little grudge from that night may have extended 20 years?”

“Oh easily. I think it’s *still* there. When I got married I didn’t even tell the guy.”

“I see.”

“Although mine only lasted a couple months. We went Justice of the Peace.”

“No huge gala then. That would be one positive.”

“Oh yeah. She’s long-since remarried and happy. Race car mechanic, one of the Nascar tracks in Florida . . . I’m rambling here, sorry about that.”

“Don’t mention it,” McBride said. “I lost my wife too.”

Chris wasn’t thinking exactly, the he *lost* his wife, Katie, down there in Florida, just that it didn’t work.

McBride continued. “My case, we were solid -- so I thought. No kids, but 14 years in the books. Then I got locked up for a bit, and she lost interest after that.”

“*Whoa*. Locked up . . . as in, for real?”

“White collar, but yes.”

“Lemme halt you there for a sec -- honestly we just met. You’re opening up pretty good.”

McBride put his whole head under for a minute . . . and the minute started to drag a bit and Chris was approaching getting concerned when the guy re-surfaced.

McBride said, “You tend to relax, older you get. No reason to keep a lot of secrets. People don’t always get it, but I guess it’s a case of been there, done that.”

Chris could identify with this guy, that was for sure. Maybe envy the guy would be more accurate, since of course Chris *couldn’t* sit in a hot tub the same way and let it fly.

He said, “Ooh boy, though, the lock-up business. Where was *that*?”

“MCC. Not a hell-hole or anything, and it was only 90 days.”

Chris didn't want to ask too many dumb questions. He'd vaguely heard of MCC, assumed it was one of those facilities that held you while you awaited trial, and that probably included the convicted short-timers like this McBride too, if he wasn't making it up.

“Federal though . . . or no?” Chris said.

“Oh yeah. They got me good there . . . I say not a hell-hole, I should qualify that a bit. My cell mate spit on me periodically for 2 and half months. I had to sleep with one eye open . . . you know how it is, half these guys are mentally ill, entirely unpredictable . . . Finally the last two weeks they transfer him out, and I have the place to myself.”

“Dang. Jeez.”

“I know. Then, they stick me in a halfway house for 18 months. That wasn't bad, once I got the routine handled. Maybe I grew up, who knows.”

“Well,” Chris said, “this story's getting interesting, but I'm getting hot, here.”

“This's is a good one,” McBride said. “They keep the temperature up. The other good one, back past the shuffleboard, they got it set-up nicely, surrounded by those ferns, plenty of privacy.”

“You mean, if you have a date or something?”

“Sure. You want to relax, after hours. Less liable someone comes plunging in fresh off some workout activity . . . You ever try pickleball, by the way?”

“The sound is a little hard to take,” Chris said. “I mean I'm used to it now, sort of. My condo is a bit close to the courts, if I could have done it all over.”

“Ask for a discount then,” McBride said. And Chris was thinking here we go again with the lodging wheeling and dealing in this place, and McBride added, “That was my old life. What got me in trouble.”

So Chris had to hear this, and you still had plenty of time before you ate and got ready for work, and he used the term loosely . . . so he took a patio chair and a couple minutes later McBride turned off the spa jets and joined him.

“What fucked me,” McBride said, “was getting greedy. I had a nice operation, flipping properties before everyone and his brother started doing it. Mostly north shore, but all over Chicago if the deal made sense. I even had guys bird-dogging for me. A couple full-sized billboards on I-94, the Edens Expressway.”

“Saying what,” Chris said. “You mean the We Buy Houses kind of pitch?”

“Exactly that, with a subtle variation or two. So then I have party -- and I had a nice spread, summer place on Lake Michigan -- and some guy says you should be a guru, like on TV.”

“Ah.”

“Unh-huh, you understand . . . so first I’m thinking, yeah right . . . but my ego, it gets the better of me, and I had to admit, I liked the ring of *guru* . . . so wouldn’t you know I start doing that, the books and CD’s, the whole 9 yards. Funny part, it wasn’t the money -- I wanted to be on TV.”

“Well,” Chris said, “we’re all human. Why not, if you can work it.”

“Thing of it was, I sold a couple hundred thousand of them. If you can believe it. Maybe more. House flipping how-to packages . . . The kicker, to sweeten the pot, the last thing I mention -- you know what I’m talking about?”

“Sure. If you act now, we’ll throw in the set of *8 inch* carving knives as well . . . And exclusively for the first 50 callers, our world famous sharpening stone, hand crafted at a secret location off the southern Italian coast.”

“You’re not too bad,” McBride said, “though you’re over-doing it a bit. *My* deal-closer was, they got free 5-year email consultations with me, or a member of my staff.”

“Hmm,” Chris said.

“Unh-huh.”

“So what . . . you didn’t always get back to them, when they emailed?”

“I didn’t get back to them at *all*. In fact I made a g-mail account special for the product, and I only checked it once, that I can recall.”

“You’re bad,” Chris said, “I’ll admit. I apologize for laughing, which I shouldn’t be.”

“Be my guest . . . So there you have it, in a nutshell. The complaints come pouring in, which I didn’t anticipate -- or if I did, I had blinders on. The feds get into it, since of course I’m transacting across state lines.”

“Oh boy.”

“Right . . . So the aforementioned MCC stint, then the 18 months in the halfway house -- which was actually a hostel, for travelers -- they filed that under community service. After that I was a free man. That was 6 years ago.”

“What about restitution? They hit you there too.”

“Big time. I had to declare bankruptcy. That goes without saying.”

Chris said, “But you figured out . . . a nest egg . . . where you can live the good life in the Rancho Villas at present -- and pretty much not *do shit*? Or do you?”

“*Do* anything? Yeah, I’m online. Not exactly up to my old tricks -- hopefully it won’t angle that direction again -- but it’s a working wage.”

Chris couldn’t tell, the sun in his face, if the guy was winking at him tongue in cheek, but his guess was this guy had recovered enough to be earning *more* than a working wage -- and you wouldn’t put those old tricks past him, either.

Chris said, “Well thanks for that. I’m not going to say you brightened my day, exactly . . .”

“But I added some color to it?” McBride said, big smile again.

“You did. The other guy, meanwhile, Waylon. Pardon me if you have a relationship with him, but I wasn’t picking up the all-time best vibe there.”

McBride smiling again. “You’re saying Waylon could be a suspect, our current situation?”

Chris wasn’t saying that and hadn’t considered it, but Jeez, maybe you don’t rule him out. “What I had trouble with,” he said, “the guy tells me he’s a backup quarterback. First of all, doesn’t he resemble more a position player? But secondly, he’s complaining about his aches and pains. How do you acquire those, if you only get in one game?”

“He got in more. He only *started* one, I think. But I hear you.”

“Of course I ran into Kenny Stabler once at the airport,” Chris said. “You know who that is?”

“Sure, the Snake. The Raiders. Tremendous in the last 2 minutes of a game, if they were trailing.”

“That guy was huge too,” Chris said. “Not on TV so much, but in person. And that was a football generation ago.”

“So you’re giving Waylon a pass?”

“Sure, why not. Until proven otherwise, like they say.”

“Well,” McBride said, “that’s makes two. Of your evaluations that I agree with.”

“What’s the other one?” Chris said.

“The cop you mentioned, who spoke to you. Fat guy?”

“Yeah?”

“He spoke to me too.” It took Chris a moment, and then he assumed that would be logical, on account of McBride being a likely rare resident here who happened to have a record. Chris was extra-glad now that he was

going with Jeff Masters -- no record for Chris Seely, that he was aware of, but Jeez, don't hand them a look-around.

Chris said, "Oh yeah? What kind of questions he ask you?"

"You know, the usual. Any idea what happened? Do I play golf? How do I enjoy living here?"

"Not much juice there," Chris said.

"No," McBride said. "I don't like to comment, but if there was a jackpot for not knowing your ass from a hole in the ground, that guy'd probably hit it."



## Chapter 3

The golf course rental shift was a bit more low-key today. Not back to normal, quite, but it was a perfect cloudless afternoon and plenty of foursomes came out of the woodwork -- apparently undeterred by having to play the 11th hole.

That was another thing yesterday. It sure didn't seem like there'd been much forensics action involved. The poor woman was discovered at daybreak, and by 8 the full course was open for business as normal. You'd think rope off the 11th for a while and make the golfers go around, skip from 10 to 12, but they'd wrapped it up pretty quick.

Meaning -- Chris assumed, Eclipse PD? That didn't sound quite right, that it would be handled that simple. Maybe he would, for his own curiosity, have to ask that Dale guy about the protocol around here.

What lingering discussion there was, among the employees, had most of them in agreement that the Haliday Jay Express, 8 miles down the road toward Phoenix, was known for shady activity -- one guy saying that some of the hookers actually had rooms on the first floor, lived there. Chris wasn't sure he believed this, but either way, none of the staffers seemed real concerned about the homicide being a threat to any innocent folks in Eclipse.

Chris agreed, but he did wonder why the guy -- assuming the murderer was an individual -- would choose the Rancho Villas grounds to dump a body, if that's what happened.

Then again -- and Gee, unpleasant to think about -- but maybe there weren't many options, most everything else *besides* your golf courses consisting of cement and desert.

Chris couldn't quite shake an eerie feeling that he was possibly greeting, and renting a cart to, a killer today -- since someone obviously had known about this place -- and you didn't have to be a resident to play here, you could pay a fee, though it wasn't cheap.

Either way, he kept busy, and a woman tripped near the coke machine and Chris had to apply some ice to her forehead, and the lady was a good sport and joked that he had a good bedside manner -- which is what *her* dad always told her too, that she'd be a good doctor. But her mom was old-fashioned and steered her toward nursing.

"Which way'd you go?" Chris said.

"Scuba diving," the woman said. "I opened a school in New Zealand. Have you ever tried it?"

"I don't think so. That's with the tanks, right? The whole bit."

She said that's correct, and if he's ever in California, Monterey, they have a wonderful certification program, and it can truly change your life.

"But despite it all, you ended up here," Chris said.

"Allergies," she said, pointing to the side of her nose, and she thanked him for the ice, and Chris could understand that, there'd been a guy back-to-back with him in Petaluma one time, their yards sharing a fence, and that guy sneezed solid for three weeks every spring, and the volume could have rattled your window panes, and probably did.

Chris finished his shift and ate light -- a couple of those pho soups you get from Costco that require opening about 5 different packets and adding tiny ingredients, but they were pretty tasty, though again minimal -- but the reason being, he was going to try a little pickleball tonight.

McBride had suggested it this morning, hey it's harmless fun, you meet some folks.

Chris had his own routine by now, and you hated to break it -- he'd typically take a long walk through the neighborhood, cross over Sunscape Road at the end, the cut-through into the Dirca Villages complex, and walk around there for another half hour. That community had a different vibe, cheaper units, more noise, cars revving up, even motorcycles sometimes, and there was a park in the center with some intense half-court basketball going on, and where everyone sat outside until late. The place had some life to it, people'd remind him of *other* people he once knew, his mind wandered, not the worst thing, and it was kind of a scene over there.

The Rancho Villas was more controlled and plastic-ie, but Chris always liked to return to it, with a little perspective thrown in.

But tonight he headed to the pickleball complex, that he could see -- and hear -- off his little back deck, though you had to loop all the way around the aquatic complex to get there.

He was counting them up, and there were 12 courts, and he hadn't been paying attention but there seemed to be some postings in the rec center about meetings where they were trying to get *more* built. What McBride had told him, laughing, was it was a dumb sport, but it was the fastest growing one in the country, so what the heck.

Chris sized it up, and there was an option . . . you could wait your turn and blend in with whoever needed a doubles partner at the moment, or you could fork over 8 bucks and let the female pro take over, a round-robin she had going on a couple designated courts, which included a little instruction.

And dang, this gal was kind of striking. Snug outfit, just a tad overweight in all the right places, wavy black hair tied back, and wearing a visor . . . and of course the first comment out of Chris's mouth is, "Hi, I'm Jeff. Why do you need a visor at night?"

The woman pro was handling two paddles, like she was comparing the weight or the balance. She looked at Chris and said, "And I'm Karolina,

pleased to meet you. The sun's still around, if you haven't noticed. After that, the lights get in the way."

"Ah, you can't see the ball as well without it then," Chris said. "Do you ever watch football on TV?"

Karolina said sometimes. She had a trace of a European accent, Chris thinking that sort of fits.

He said, "Macho sport, but then these head coaches are strutting around the sidelines with visors. I don't know, not the best look." Speaking of which, Waylon the NFL guy was making *his* way through the far gate, some players greeting him.

"Anyhow," Chris said, "any tips? And Gee, you live here, or what? I've never run into you before."

"I do," Karolina said. "They take good care of us." Whatever that meant. Chris said, "You coach, like tennis too . . . or this keeps you busy."

"This," she said. "Would you like a lesson? I'm at 54 an hour. Check around, in the valley that's a bargain."

Chris was trying to remember, there'd been Jenna Lee, the Asian tennis pro in Golden Gate Park, and yeah, she was probably more.

Chris said, "But honestly, these people can barely hit the ball. And the ones that can, they don't need any technique, the thing's got holes and it slows down and stays in. What are you going to help?"

"You're a bit of a wise guy," Karolina said, and she moved on to organize her round robin pupils, but Chris felt like an idiot after a couple minutes and came up with the fee and gave her a 20 dollar tip and apologized for being a know it all.

It wasn't bad, the sport, if you could call it that. There was a silly rule, how close you could stand to the net, something that would be designed for a little kids' game, to keep them safe.

But you moved around and started to sweat pretty good, and Karolina was conscientious about rotating you in with different partners . . . and

after an hour and a half Chris had partnered with not only Waylon and McBride, but Dale too, the cop -- pretty nice guy . . . and there were a few interesting women as well . . . and everyone seemed to know each other from before, except for Chris, and by the end he could see how this could work out for people.

Something else that unfolded was Karolina had a husband too, who showed up and helped her with the round robin and who someone said worked as a tennis pro over in Anthem. Chris was partnered with Waylon at that point and he made a comment and Waylon said, "Don't worry about it there, partner. It ain't how it looks."

Chris was thinking Gee, plenty of inside information here, even Waylon throwing out a nugget . . . so for argument's sake, Karolina was available, Chris supposed, if you twisted things funny and didn't over-analyze.

When Chris had enough he retired to the little courtside bleachers they had, and there were two older women sitting there, not part of the round robin but plenty energetic.

"I spotted you a couple times," Chris said, "when I had to hit a low backhand and turn dramatically toward the next court."

"We weren't *on* the next court," the first one, Lucy, said.

"You're giving me a hard time," Chris said. "*Next*, next court. We call that busting chops."

"My brother called it breaking something too," the second one, Gertrude said.

Chris said, "You know something, you gals have some spunk. Some overhead smashes going on out there on your court too -- filtering through to your post-match courtside demeanor . . . Shall we take a hot tub?" Chris was feeling kinda goofy, the exercise endorphins doing their job, and these gals were good sports. And Jeez, no spring chickens, they both had to be pushing 70.

“Now you’re pulling our leg,” Lucy said, with a healthy smile. “But what did you have in mind?”

“You never know . . .” Chris said, and it was good natured all around, and then McBride showed up and said, “Hey man, you acquitted yourself well out there. Let’s take a little tub.”

“This guy dragged me into it,” Chris explained to the women. “Never tried it before.”

“A built in excuse then,” Lucy said.

“Really,” Gertrude said, and the women got up, a little stiff, Chris thinking he might have heard something pop, like a joint, but they adjusted fine and said good night.

McBride said, “Have you met everyone?”

“I guess.”

“I saw you playing with Amy. How about Reba?”

“Not sure. The one with the black tennis dress? Who kept telling herself, *come on*, and calling her own name?”

“Navy blue dress, but yeah.”

“Didn’t meet her. Was aware of her though.”

“Anyways . . .” McBride said. “We’re gonna . . . get together, a few of us. You’re welcome to come.”

“Ah,” Chris said, thinking what could *this* be. “But take a tub first, you mean?”

“Nah, take a tub and . . . You know . . . you never *know*.”

“Jesus.”

“Unh-huh. We usually start off, the one behind the shuffleboard. You know where I’m talking?”

“Not really, but I’ll find it, I guess.”

“Good then,” McBride said, slapping him on the shoulder. “Like I say, you never *do* know.”

The lights were on until 11 -- and that was a point of contention around here too, the opposite sentiment of the new court construction enthusiasm -- that the sport was too damn loud, and people had to blast the air conditioning in their units, whether they wanted to or not, to muffle the sound.

It didn't *look* loud, you had these flimsy lightweight paddles and the plastic ball, but there was likely some refined engineering involved in the chemical reaction when ball met paddle. No doubt there was an original marketer behind the pronounced *pop*. Even the ones who could barely play could achieve the jarring sound.

But tonight once the round robin ended that was about it for all the courts, and Chris followed the remaining herd out the gate and went back and took a nice shower, and almost stuck on the terry-cloth robe that was hanging there, and called it a night . . . but what the hay, you better at least see what McBride was talking about.

## Chapter 4

It *was* a little tricky to locate spa number 4 in the Rancho Villas Phase 1, Chris thinking did I actually need to ask McBride directions . . . and he passed by it a couple times before perceiving some human noise and realizing it was wedged in there among these standing planted ferns behind the tall shed where you picked up your shuffleboard sticks and pucks, if you were so inclined.

It was an interesting scene to walk in on and say hello to.

You had 6 of them in there looking quite relaxed, the jets going strong, white water all over. Left to right were Waylon, Amy, the Reba gal who Chris hadn't met, McBride, Dale the cop -- Jeez, him -- and rounding things off, the far end of the spa, one hand on the railing of the steps that fed into it, Karolina.

What was going on currently, Chris wasn't sure, though he figured it would be clarified soon enough.

Karolina had her top off, some kind of gold lamee business, which was currently resting on the edge of the spa . . . and she was leaning against that same edge but arching her back a little extra.

"Yo, man," McBride said to Chris. "Good you could make it, find a slot."

That part alone would be interesting, since unlike the world-renowned 40-person spa over at the main aquatic complex, this was quite a bit more intimate, and Chris guessed it was designed for 4, along the lines of the back-yard jobs that people have in modest tract-home neighborhoods.



So he squeezed in between Amy and Reba, why not, and Karolina sort of acknowledged him with a finger wave, and went back to what she was saying.

The crux of the matter was, she'd had breast augmentation recently, and was throwing around a bunch of medical and anatomical terms.

Chris listened for a minute, trying not to stare too much, but what else could you do really, she was evaluating and pointing and occasionally cupping her hands under one or both, and additionally raising them to apparently make some point.

It didn't sound like her procedure was this week or anything, that she'd had the increases for a few months at least, from a couple comments she made . . . but for whatever reason tonight was when she was showing them off exclusively and in detail for this little group. Chris speculated that perhaps one of the other women -- those being Amy and Reba -- was considering something similar, and Karolina was providing a little education.

Who knows.

They were admittedly a beautiful sight, but you weren't going to be an ass and state the obvious -- were you?

Waylon and McBride and Dale were exercising good manners in that regard, though just when Chris was giving them credit for it McBride spoke up. He said to Karolina, "Welp. Don't take this wrong, but if you'd opted for the atom bomb sized option, there wouldn't be room for *all* of us in here, I don't suspect."

"Wait," Dale said, "I was thinking the same thing, but I was biting my lip. The playing cards, you mean?"

"You got it then, *too*," McBride said.

"I remember that deck," Waylon said. "We devised a couple games around Atom Bomb. Kept it lively."

"What on earth," Amy said, "are you adolescents talking about?"

“I can guess,” Reba said. “It’s not rocket science.”

“No doubt,” Karolina said, easing herself up and onto the edge, no restriction of her efforts necessary apparently, the gold lame top still laying there. “Who would like a beverage?”

And everyone’s hand went up, and Karolina opened something in the corner and pulled out wine coolers and handed them out -- and that part was a bit awkward in itself, her dangling above you while handing you yours.

“For clarification purposes,” Dale said, “we don’t play that card game any more. In fact those things are probably collector’s items.”

Chris knew the game *himself* but no need to add anything. It was a well-known deck of cards -- and yes, probably most popular with adolescent youths -- women on the faces of each card in various stages of bikini undress -- but the crowning jewel being a cartoonishly awesome gal nicknamed Atom Bomb.

Chris was feeling a little light-headed with the wine cooler kicking in, mixed with the heat of the hot tub, and he typically avoided that type of refreshment, and his flavor had the weird name *Fuzzy Navel*. Waylon picked up on it said, “What? You’re thinking it over, partner?”

“Sorry,” Chris said, “thinking *what* over?”

“Showing *up* here. It’s pretty rough, ain’t it.”

“Well,” Chris said, “you ever read the book *Semi-Tough*?”

“I seen the movie,” Waylon said. “I know where you’re going.”

“*Where* is he going?” Amy said.

“All kinds of action depicted,” McBride said. “Pro football guys and groupies.”

“Did that happen to you then?” Reba said to Waylon.

“Sure, why not,” Waylon said. “What I was getting at, buddy of mine, played with Houston Oilers, he was one of the influences on that movie.”

“Gosh, really?” Amy said.

“Which character was that?” Dale said.

“That defensive backs coach, where the cops and then the fire department have to show up at the team hotel in Minneapolis. You remember that scene?”

“That *was* pretty clever,” McBride said.

“That was on my buddy, in real life. With him, it happened in Cleveland.”

This was getting awfully confusing and Chris wasn't sure he was buying this guy . . . though he *had* checked the online NFL database after meeting Waylon this morning, and son of a gun, yep, there he was, more or less like he said . . . the 8 years in the NFL, mostly listed as a backup quarterback, though one season they had him as a punter as well . . . and yep, not much game action, a grand total of 32 passes attempted with 14 completions for 136 yards and no touchdowns and 1 interception. They also credited him with 7 career tackles, so Jeez, the guy must have played special teams a couple times, which is the real mccoys, so there you do have to give him credit.

The timeline though didn't ring true, his buddy's exploits versus when the book was one reason, though Waylon had mentioned the Houston Oilers and that *was* a while back, before they moved to Tennessee.

Not worth challenging the guy on, that's for sure, and Chris said to Karolina, feeling reasonably loose now with the booze hitting the extremities, “So do you sit around like this, after pickleball-pro-ing? Typically?”

They all glanced at Chris for a second, no big deal really, and Karolina said, “I've told the story, and the others are comfortable with it. But for *your* benefit . . . I spent a summer in Estonia. I won't expect you to know where that is . . . Suffice it to say, the culture embraced the veracity of the human form. Ever since, I've been relaxed with mine.”

“Ah,” Chris said. “It liberated you then. The experience.”

“You might say that. Is there a problem?”

“You mean they sat around over there in hot tubs too,” he said, “comparing the handiwork of plastic surgeons?”

“No one has compared anything,” Reba said.

“Well Waylon did stand up that time and show his private scar,” Amy said.

“I forgot about that,” Reba said, “though we’ve seen it anyway.”

Whatever *that* meant. Holy Smokes.

Chris said, “But either way, *Estonia* liberated you, is what you’re saying?” He wondered also, could her trace accent be fake, or even Estonia-*influenced*, but more likely she was from a country *near* Estonia that wasn’t as liberating?

“*Jeffrey* here,” Karolina was announcing to the others, “feels he’s too good to take lessons.”

“I didn’t mean I was too *good*,” Chris started.

“I hear you to a degree, in that regard,” Dale said. “I mean like in any sport, the foundation is active competition.”

“Is that so?” Karolina said.

“No that came out wrong,” Dale said. “There’s always a need for a professional.”

“Along those lines,” Chris said, “your husband’s a tennis pro? Seemed like a good guy.”

There was a little silence, it didn’t last long, and Karolina said, “He is.”

“Jeez,” Chris said. “I was anticipating this complicated explanation . . . that I could stick in a novel someday, or something. All’s you do, you *agree* with me.”

“Well stick *this* in your novel,” she said, giving him the finger loud and clear, the foam from the spa dripping off her right hand.

“Karey,” McBride said, and her eyes met his that certain way, where it was pretty clear they were friendly, beyond the pickleball courts. “Take it easy,” he said. “No biggie.”

“My fault,” Chris said. “I do that. It’s a flaw.”

“It may be,” Amy said. “I’m not saying you need it, but perhaps some therapy can help.”

“Figure out why,” Reba said, nodding.

“The man may be looking for a little attention,” Waylon said. “Don’t crucify him.”

“Really,” McBride said. “We all are. We just dip into different bags of tricks.”

Dale said, “That’s why I went into Law Enforcement. Or so my one-and-done therapist told me.”

“How did *that* work?” Reba said.

“We had a chief back then,” Dale said. “He’d served in Viet Nam. Right or wrong, he was a proponent of getting checked out not just physically obviously, but mentally before you came aboard.”

“Don’t they test you for that shit automatically?” Waylon said. “Like what if you were already a sociopath, some guy carrying a grudge against society?”

“No, that they do,” Dale said. “A battery of psychological tests. Absolutely. But this chief, he wanted us under therapy -- the one-time deal anyway -- so we’d understand *why* we wanted to be cops.”

“That sounds a bit thin,” Karolina said, and dang, Chris didn’t mean to dwell on it, but there was nothing thin about what she continued to present to the group.

“What’s *thin* about it?” McBride was saying. “They want the man to know what he’s getting into.”

“Explore himself internally,” Waylon said. “His motives. Makes sense.”

“Anyhow,” Amy said, “so what was your one-and-done therapist’s blockbuster conclusion?”

“Why I joined the force?” Dale said. “Not a conclusion, no written summary from the guy or anything . . . but he hinted that I liked -- and maybe had a need -- to get physical with people.”

“Well yeah, we don’t *mind*,” Reba said, and most of them laughed, and this mostly confirmed to Chris that more was in the works here than just the hot tub and wine cooler activity.

Dale said, “No, I’m serious. I think the guy was convinced I was gonna, like crack a few heads with the baton, every other shift.”

“Have you?” Amy said.

“Of course not,” Dale said. “What do you think I am?”

“Speaking of which,” Karolina said, “Dale, can we fully relax? The incident?”

“We can, is my understanding,” he said. “They’re looking at a guy downtown, not a john or pimp or anything, simple previous relationship with the poor woman.” Chris assumed downtown meant Phoenix, and again, you hoped this guy Dale wasn’t overly close to the various situations down there, though this kind of information no doubt filtered across his department too, out in Gilbert.

“But,” McBride said, “as I was telling Jeff here, the guy handling it didn’t inspire a lot of confidence.”

“No,” Dale said, “that’s the thing. Eclipse can be stubborn. It’s their call if they want to bring in the county. I know who you’re talking about. We play poker once in a while, at the guy’s house.”

“The one with the \$300 a month water bill,” Chris said.

Dale laughed. “That’s a bargain down here.”

“Just like Karolina’s pickleball lessons,” Chris said. “And yes, I am going to sign up for one. What’s your schedule Saturday? It’s my day off from my demanding job.”

“In that case,” Karolina said, getting out again, and the others seeming to as well, “what’s your schedule the rest of tonight?”

“You’re back in her good graces, that means,” Waylon said.

“That’d be fine, we don’t mind,” Amy said to Chris.

“We don’t,” Reba said.

“Oh,” Chris said, and it took a few minutes, everyone toweling off, grabbing their stuff, and following McBride and Waylon -- on the various connecting footpaths of the Rancho Villas, and then into the brown-shingled section called Residential 7, Oyster’s Nest -- and it was Waylon in the end who pulled out his key and said to come on in.

## Chapter 5

Waylon's condo was cozy. Ground floor, no view, but more spacious than Chris's, and definitely a bachelor pad job, set up for social action.

There were framed pictures on the wall, football stuff, Waylon not over-doing it, one or two from each stage apparently -- pop warner ball, high school, college, and the pro gig.

As Chris moved up close to the photos and followed them back down the hall, it was a bit more extensive than he thought. Maybe *over-doing* was still the wrong word but it was closer to that now, more postings, more detail. And Gee, and the end of the hall there, the guy had not one extra bedroom but two.

So a 3 bedroom. Pretty sweet actually. Chris hadn't even paid attention to what those might run, either renting them or buying one of the suckers. Thinking about it of course, the minimum annual salary in the NFL you'd assume would be close to half a mil.

So the guy hangs on for close to a decade, meaning that figure likely increased pretty nicely, incrementally, what with the players' union and collective bargaining legalese you were reading about every couple years when they threatened to go on strike.

Chris always thought those strike threats were ridiculous, that the league should just cut the over-paid idiots loose and start over . . . but then the last 4, 5 years the concussion business in the news did sober you up, and yeah fine, these guys are earning their money.

That meant Waylon, if he didn't have a gambling habit or something, would have more than a decent nest egg socked away -- and in fact you



wondered what he was doing *here*, didn't these guys typically snap up a house with a bunch of acres, or if you went the apartment route, a penthouse in Boca Raton?

But you assumed Waylon liked it here, just as Chris did, and obviously McBride too, and they each had their reasons, and the relative modesty of the RanchoVillas worked.

Anyhow, this west wall of the apartment did give you the whole shebang if you were so inclined -- where the guy was born (McMinnville, Tennessee) where he lived later and played high school ball (Fort Smith, Arkansas) the college ball years, Morton State, in Winalston Illinois, where he set a single game total yardage record of 518) and the pro stuff, as he bounced around.

The high school section included basketball and baseball clippings as well, and it was no surprise really that your top athletes who made it as far as the pros, in any of the sports, typically dominated everything back then.

There was a high school basketball mention for example -- which included a photo of a young Waylon and a couple teammates surrounded by a pack of cheerleaders and one of them on a ladder cutting one of the nets off the rim -- obviously following a significant win. The point there being, in the news clipping, Waylon had scored 42 that night, on 16 for 30 shooting from the field.

So yeah, you had to give the guy his props, and maybe he *was* entitled to talk down to you a bit -- and let's face it, here you were in his place and the man was being a decent host, so shut about about all that.

A TV went on with no sound, and then some separate music started up, a bossa nova type vibe but modernized with some hip hop elements, and there was a steady beat . . . not an incessant one, not driving per se . . . but it was there.

There was a liquor station in the living room, everything available and out in the open, no having to ask for anything, and you could smell some

food heating, probably pizzas, Chris hadn't been paying attention to the kitchen.

Meanwhile there were two interfacing sectional couches, nice classy glove leather, and Chris figured the guy *had* spent some money on *those*, and when it came down to it the whole place was pretty tastefully set up.

And -- as was Chris's first impression -- it was definitely set up for human interaction too . . . and Amy and McBride were pairing off on one of the sectionals, soon to be joined by Reba and Dale on the other.

Chris stood by the TV and absorbed it. Slowly but surely an item of clothing here and there was shifted around, and then removed . . . and no one seemed the least bit self-conscious as the intensity level of both parties-of-two ratcheted itself up.

Scanning the rest of the place, you didn't see Karolina and Waylon anymore, and Chris figured if he wandered back to the bedrooms and started opening doors and saying "Hey there, what's up?" that it wouldn't have been a big problem, someone may have looked up and then gone back to their business.

He did feel a bit conspicuous and wondered why exactly he *was* here, though he had an idea that there might be a warm up act, which was going on now, and then possibly a gravitation toward some sort of group effort . . . and he found the TV changer and tried to find a sporting event, but all he could come up with was the NCAA baseball tournament, and the first guy up struck out on the 3 pitches and Chris switched to a little European league basketball, and that had the funny key and slightly different rules and that didn't work either . . . and he turned back to the activity and Amy and McBride were going at it -- no joke -- neither of them completely naked but so what, *Man Alive* -- McBride was inside of her . . . and it was only a matter of moments, you assumed, before Dale and Reba caught up with them . . . and now some kind of laughter from one of the back bedrooms, or

Jeez, could it have been a moan . . . and Chris quietly let himself out the front door.

\*\*\*

He ambled across the Rancho Villas grounds back toward his place. Well . . . that had been some evening.

The pickleball was actually something you might continue . . . and the camaraderie wasn't bad . . . Unexpected sure, but reasonably well-intentioned, you'd have to say.

Sticking around Waylon's at that point though, whether he'd be . . . needed . . . or anything, eventually . . . he couldn't get behind the concept tonight.

It was good the others were apparently enjoying themselves -- there could be worse applications of your time, Chris supposed.

It was a balmy evening down here, just right, 10 degrees warmer than Manhattan Beach this time of year, no marine layer in play, and the desert fragrances were pungent right now. The problem was, Chris couldn't recognize any of them -- he'd have to educate himself -- but he assumed the general stuff he heard about down here was in the mix . . . and that would be the flowering cactuses, the cottonwoods, the velvet mesquite, the night blooming cereus . . . Even if those *weren't* exactly what you were smelling tonight, good enough.

He'd admittedly gotten a little revved up there, back at Waylon's . . . and as he closed in on his apartment he figured what the hay, may as well check out the pool-rec center area, see if anything is going on, pick up a loose Time Magazine . . . the night's still young, though not really, it was after midnight, but whatever.

You could make out a few figures lounging around the main pool, only a couple yellowish lights on at this hour, and this had been the case another time he was up late, you had these clusters of older folks who couldn't sleep.

Tonight, one of them was Lucy, one of the women from the pickleball, and she looked absorbed in a book, and Chris thought should I or shouldn't I butt in . . . but, you could at least say hi, so he did.

"Well *you're* a night owl," Lucy said, closing the book, same perky smile as from the courts.

Chris took it as a signal to sit down for a minute and he said, "I used to live in LA. You could leave your windows open full-time, no bugs like you do get in most of California."

"You can *here*, as well, usually," she said.

"What I'm getting to -- the ocean air makes a difference. That's what everyone says . . . But I didn't sleep great out *there* either."

"Well how old are you?" Lucy said. And Gee, was that factoring into it already, in people's view? Chris reminded himself to stop complaining so much, this gal had 25 years on him, at least, and look at her going strong.

"43, but not important," Chris said, "all's I was getting at, it's nice they give you an alternative around here, should you require it."

"I frequently sit outside until the wee hours," she said. "Have you utilized the library?"

Chris had been to the Eclipse one, it was new and nice, but she likely meant the the in-house deal, in the main complex behind the restaurant. "Once," he said. "Too many James Pattersons."

Lucy laughed. "I like more edge to my crime thrillers too. But the price is right, and you never what someone may donate." This was true, it was the honor system, plus the dang room was open 24 hours, with real comfy club chairs and good lighting. Lots of perks in this place.

Chris said, "I'm going to bore you, but I'm kinda trying to write one of those myself."

"Really," she said, leaning forward a bit. "Please tell me about it."

"I might. First, I always like to get a backstory off people . . . How'd you and your friend end up here?"

“I don’t want to mis-speak for Gertrude,” Lucy said, “but in my case, it was my kids. They essentially forced me.”

“Hmm.”

“I grew up in New Mexico and lived most my adult life in New Braunfels, Texas. Do you know it?”

“That the hill country? It’s supposed to be beautiful, different than *typical* Texas.”

“Oh very much so, I loved it there. But Matt, my son, and Faye, my daughter, they didn’t trust me to be isolated out there any more. I didn’t feel I was, but they won out. Faye’s in New Jersey, but Matt lives in Phoenix.”

“Ah. In the ball park then. They’re right, better to be closer.”

“This was two years ago. It was an adjustment, I’m still not completely on board . . . but one must go with the flow.”

Chris said, “I was either telling someone, or thinking it to myself . . . but you have a spark. You know that?”

Lucy laughed. She said, “How did you enjoy you pickleball friends? You had some good rallies out there. They seem like an interesting crowd. Gertrude and I, we don’t get on court with them much, we stick to our comfort zone of about 4 other senior citizens.”

“Funny you ask,” Chris said. “They *are*. I mean I don’t know any of them real well, but yeah. Someone invited everyone back to their condo . . . except I had a strange feeling they were going to start to pair off . . . so, here I am, that’s sort of it.”

“Well,” she said, “I suppose we all remember a few of those. Back in high school . . . It is awkward being the odd-person out.”

“That was definitely part of it,” he said. “Unh-huh.” No need to go into more detail, that Holy Toledo, there was a full-fledged orgy developing back there among the ‘interesting pickleball friends’. Chris added, “Well you’re

an attractive woman. I think you're being modest, overstating the odd-person-out business."

And this was true, Lucy was a sturdy lady with an appealing presence, no doubt had to fend off more than a few suitors in her day. At this point, it was clear she took care of herself but kept it natural, let the sun do its thing, unlikely to entertain plastic surgery-type intervention.

Speaking of which . . . man, he hadn't fully processed the intent behind Karolina's display back there, either. That was dang weird. Not that you complained, but still.

"Well," Chris said, "fine, the novel. And you don't understand what a generous assessment it is, calling it that. The whole thing, it's part of a class. Or was."

"What does *was* mean?" she said.

Chris wasn't sure himself. His understanding was Finch suggested talking a week off, following the fireworks last time. Not sure if it fell apart after that. Chris hadn't checked in, even though he probably could have kept up online. The truth was he felt out of the loop there as well.

He said, "It was contentious. We were coming from different directions I guess, contrary life experiences."

"But it got you going? The course?"

"I'll give it that. What mine was evolving into -- and hopefully still might . . . you sure you want to hear this? When I summarized it in that final class, people shifted around, cleared their throats, and essentially waited for the other person to say something."

"Go ahead," she said. "If it's boring, I might fall asleep right here in this chaise lounge, which is fine too." She gave him a playful wink.

Chris said, "Fine. I've got a guy, he gets a terminal disease."

"How old is he?"

"Old. I mean, not ancient or anything . . . but a retired type guy, compared to someone like me."

“You’re not retired? I sort of assumed most people here were.”

“Man, your firing off questions, staccato-like. And that’s good, don’t let me hamper that . . . I’m talking a typical *retired* guy, worked for the utility company or something, full career, straight through, got the gold watch at the banquet.”

“I see. Do you think he got the disease due to inactivity in retirement?”

“I don’t get you . . . but now I guess I do. Not the physical slowing down so much, you’re saying, but more the spirit being broken?”

“Yes, being bored. Nothing dynamic to get up for in the morning.”

“So you don’t. Good point. That may be my guy. Then again, he might have smoked two packs of Camels a day for 50 years.”

“That could be, as well,” Lucy said.

“Anyhow,” Chris said, “the guy’s kids, grown of course, are hounding him every day on the phone. Subtle stuff. Not coming at him direct, but prodding him.”

“As far as treatment options? Experimental therapies and so forth?”

“No I don’t think he’s going to get treated. His doctor might recommend it, since that’s what they do, they don’t want you doing *nothing* . . . but my guy is a straight shooter, he asks his doc for a couple example patients, who were in his shoes and got the treatment and are still around a few years later. The doc says he’ll check into it, and my guy says how about one? Just give me *one*.”

“You’re implying, the recommended treatments are ineffective. That the physician is *unable* to produce the one example patient.”

Chris said, “I feel like you know me pretty well. You’re on my same page . . . Could we have been married, or brother and sister perhaps, in a past life?”

“Don’t laugh,” Lucy said, “I may very well believe in those.”

“I never did,” Chris said, “but then on late night radio -- when you can’t sleep sometimes, like now -- various guests do get you thinking . . . One thing they agree on, if there is such a force, people, or their spirits or whoever, tend to travel in the same packs, in and out of lifetimes.”

“I’ve heard that theory too.”

“Meaning, if you were my wife, I was destined to run into you in this life at some juncture -- and in the next one I might be a woman and you could be my son. Or next door neighbor. Or barber . . . but I’m overdoing it.”

“Possibly. So your character does what? Regarding his grown children.”

“Yeah, so no -- they’ve given up hounding him on the treatment options. He’s a stubborn son of a bitch -- and a logical one too, since the doctor came up short -- and he’s made it clear he’s facing his future with no intervention. Not an option.”

“So they’re persuading him to visit them more? Perhaps move in, so his final care is established?”

“They haven’t got that far. They’re trying to get him to live to the fullest, before he starts deteriorating.”

“Do they use that word, in speaking with him?”

“They try not to but he puts it in their face, so they agree, that yes that’s their motivation, while he’s still in good shape, to have some adventures.”

“Well, the premise seems reasonable then.”

“You’d think. Did you ever remember the old show Run For Your Life with Ben Gazzarra?”

“Yes. I haven’t heard *that* one mentioned in years.”

“So you remember the set up. Each week he does something he probably wouldn’t otherwise do, takes a chance and goes for it. He’s trying to grab all the gusto he can in the time he has left.”



“It’s an admirable concept,” she said. “I enjoyed each episode being fresh, not tied to any previous week.”

“Right, standalones,” Chris said. “So they’re making suggestions -- my guy’s offspring -- like go experience New Zealand, go snorkeling in the Carribean . . . let’s see what else . . . go on one of those tours they have of 9 major league ball parks . . . even go skydiving if he wants . . . anything at all, and they’ll take care of it.”

“They mean well. I could see my kids coming at me with a similar approach.”

“Sure, they do. But my character, Bobby, he doesn’t want to do any of that stuff.”

“I’m picturing him more of a Trent,” she said. “Or a Gregory.”

“Fine, I can change it. Anyways, he stops taking their calls. I mean he might start up again, but for now they can’t take no for an answer.”

Lucy nodded, “That *could* beat you down . . . So what does he *want* to do? Surely not simply sit around?”

“He’s got two things he’s dialed into. He wants to go to Area 51 and see a UFO. And then maybe stop in LA and kill a particular guy.”

“Golly.”

“Those are his words, not mine. So he starts calling ex-wives. And he has four of them. Number three, June, who he was least close to -- and not the mother of his kids, that was number two who politely tells him to get lost -- but June’s the most interested in helping him.”

“June still has feelings for him? Or is it out of compassion.”

“Good question, not sure he knows. But he’s in Reno when he calls her, and she says give her 24 hours to get organized -- she’s in Oregon -- and she warns that she’s gained back some of the weight she lost last time he saw her . . . but she’s a good trooper and she shows up like she says.”

“Then what?”

“Then I don’t know, dang, you need me to write the whole thing ahead of time?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

“I’m kidding, Jeez . . . I think what’s going to happen, they go searching for the UFO, and meanwhile they re-connect. Not lovey-dovey, but they can talk shit out, and there’s a comfort in that . . . At some point he mentions his plan B.”

“Committing the crime.”

“Unh-huh. Mind you, in his view, he’s settling an old score. It’s not going to be, like, some random homicide.”

“What kind of old score?”

“Not sure. First I was thinking, some guy threw him out of a video store once, when he was questioning an extra charge on a movie he was returning. But that seemed a little weak, even though the guy manhandled him, and sort of really did toss him out of there.”

“You’d need something better,” Lucy agreed.

“So I came up with, a guy beat him up in junior high. My character lets it go all those years, though it eats at him occasionally -- then maybe 10 years later he’s working the county fare, parking cars, and the other guy happens to be too . . . and my guy brings it up, and the other guy remembers and tells him he’d do it again too. Finally he sees the guy at a 50th high school reunion, and the guy remembers it *again*, and starts telling his wife about it, laughing.”

“No,” Lucy said.

“Right,” Chris said, “not enough. I think I’m gonna go with him zeroing in on the sub-human who raped his sister, and has gotten away with it for several decades.”

Lucy thought about that one. “That’s better,” she said. “As the reader, I’d probably buy in.”

“Thanks. I mean it could still change, but that’s the ballpark.”

“So what does June say?”

“Well they’re in this little roadside cafe in Rachel, Nevada, in the vicinity of Area 51. In fact Chris has been telling her to watch for UFO’s as they’ve been driving, because he can’t, since there are warning signs for cattle in the road . . . Bottom line, she processes it, where he’s going in his head, and suggests they drive to Nova Scotia first.”

“Long way, and you typically take the ferry to get there, I believe.”

“That’s it. Or they’ll have to go around, up through Newfoundland. Weather can be a factor as well, slow you down quite a bit.”

“So . . . he agrees? And then passes away, on the road?”

“Wow, that’s pretty brutal. Hadn’t thought of that. Could be, though.”

“What was *your* ending then? He still acts on settling the old score?”

“Hard to say. I’m at the point -- still in the scene in the cafe, they’re having dessert -- where he questions her motivation -- but doesn’t say no exactly, either.”

“That’s nice. They sound like a sweet couple actually.”

“Remains to be seen . . . but hey, you’re a heckofa good sport. Not only did you not fall asleep from boredom, you may have jumpstarted my plot line, in more than one spot.”

Lucy took a moment. “I saw one of those myself,” she said.

There was a serious tone to it, and Chris didn’t say anything.

“With my dad,” she said, her voice cracking just a bit. “I was four.”

Chris waited a bit, in case there was a punch line, and there wasn’t . . . and he took her hand, and she was good with it.

A story he was going to tell her earlier, but it still applied: When they were on the subject of being the odd man out, Chris remembered one time having that happen and heading home from a party, but running into someone else on the way and shifting gears, nothing romantic, but having the night work out okay after all.

No, you weren't going to tell Lucy that now, but tonight reminded him of it.

## Chapter 6

The next morning Chris was swimming some laps in the main pool. And one more thing first-class in this place, a full-length 50 meter one, just like in the Olympics.

With the diving blocks and all . . . and there was a local junior swim team that came in after school and worked out here with a coach, and the Rancho Villas donated the pool time, as a good will gesture to the families in the Eclipse community.

The side pools weren't bad either, 2 of those, 25-yarders with the lane lines painted on the bottom, and one of the them doubling as a diving pool, featuring both 1 meter and 3 meter springboards, where you adjusted the tension with that wheel using your foot . . . Not that he himself partook, but *people* did.

Then you had the family rec pool, not sure of the dimensions there but pretty dang huge, half of it shallow, half of it deep.

You combine it with the 4 hot tub spas -- and Chris was educated on *those* now -- and a fitness center that rivals most fancy health clubs -- this was a darn sweet layout, no doubt about it.

Chris finished up his laps and saw McBride sitting there watching.

"What?" Chris said. "No comment?"

McBride was laughing. "You require one?"

"Nah," Chris said, wrapping himself in a towel -- that was another thing, they furnished you these stacks of unlimited plush, extra large towels, all with the green and gold Rancho Villas monogram in the middle. "But I mean if you want to summarize, sure, I won't object."

“Not much to tell,” McBride said. “It’s been a bit of routine for a while. One or two of the faces may change, but normally it’s the crew you met last night.”

“They’re solid then,” Chris said, “reliable.”

“You should have stuck around. You could have judged for yourself.”

“Well, it was looking more and more there, like 7’s a crowd. Among other issues.”

“An odd number’s never a crowd,” McBride said, “I mean, as the evening progresses it’s not a factor . . . What were the other issues?”

“Mainly,” Chris said, lowering his voice, even though no one was around, except some real old guy, out of earshot anyway, kicking his feet and holding on to some floatation device, “that would be Jeez, I don’t want to be . . . visible . . . in front of a bunch of people.”

McBride was smiling right along. “Jeff, keep in mind, this is Arizona, the desert. Things are more spiritual, if you don’t resist them . . . plus, you never messed around like that, even one iota? Not sure I’m buying it.”

“Pretty much, no,” Chris said, actually trying to think back a bit. There had been that one incident in the sophomore dorm room, the details pretty fuzzy other than there’d been a good dose of marijuana involved, someone with a water pipe, but the activity was quite limited, was his guess, certainly a whole different animal than the full monte on display there last night.

“Any-hoo,” McBride said, “I saw you doing your due diligence in the water. I’m on my way inside to hop on the elliptical -- I figured I’d throw you a bone, nothing major, but in case you’re interested.”

Chris said, “I was telling someone recently, when a person’s on their way to work out, you can normally stall ‘em and talk their ear off, because they’re looking to procrastinate.”

“I hear you. I gotta find me a sport. Chase something, or someone. Then I don’t realize I’m exercising.”

“Wait, isn’t that what that was about last night? The pickleball round robin.”

McBride looked at him funny and said, “You’re kidding, right?”

Chris said, “Separately -- that came out by accident, wasn’t trying to be clever. But that how it worked?”

“Okay my friend,” McBride said, “now you got *me* twisted around. Which round robin are you referring to?”

“Distinguishing them -- I’m hearing the *pickleball’s* not enough exercise, so currently you’re headed to a machine. Forget that . . . Part two would be, a more direct question, was it a *complete* round robin? Back at Waylon’s?”

“Partial,” McBride said. “Let’s not get sidetracked with trivialities. Reason I stopped to talk to you, Reba was disappointed you didn’t stick around.”

“Wow, really,” Chris said, and he had think which one that even *was*, and then he had it clear, that Amy was the more talkative one . . . and Karolina was an entity all to herself.

So Reba . . . hmm.

“What,” Chris said, “she said something? How’d that work?”

“*When*, you mean? Well, when we were wrapping things up, she looks around, and she says hey what happened to that other dude? He was kinda interesting.”

“Hunh.”

“I go: you should have expressed that to him earlier. She goes: well if you run into him, tell him I said hello.”

Chris said, “And . . . that’s what you’re doing now, then . . . I gotta tell ya, this is like outer space. Everyone so matter of fact . . . You guys all . . . been swinging . . . in your pre-Rancho Villas lives? Or it’s something that just came together here, under the influence of the high desert air and red rock.”

“Mix of both, would be my guess,” McBride said. “Listen, you have a good one. Maybe I’ll see you on the courts.”

Chris said you too . . . and told McBride he did enjoy meeting Dale, I see what you mean, nice guy . . . though to himself Chris hoped it would stay simple, having a cop right in your face who you socialized with.

The Reba part and the rest of it though . . . this was a first, not your typical early morning small talk when you exit a lap pool and are slipping on your flip flops and drying off, on your way to pick up a morning paper or otherwise start your day in innocuous fashion.

Though if you gave it a little perspective . . . Last time you were here, you were mostly running around trying to do away with the baseball idiot -- not to mention dealing with the fallout from the road rage guy, plus that dumb *ring* business, which got unnecessarily intense there as well . . . So don’t over-think it.

\*\*\*

Sorrentino’s was the grand-daddy of Eclipse, Arizona, restaurants, which wasn’t saying much.

Eclipse, Chris had learned, had been first acknowledged as an official incorporated town in 1982. At that point the ‘town’ consisted of a strip mall that paralleled I-17, a condo complex that pre-dated the Rancho Villas called Arroyo Grande, and 1200 tract houses spread over 4 neighborhoods that were so dizzyingly alike that if you entered the *wrong* one of the four neighborhoods you’d end up trying to get your key to work in someone else’s house that you thought was yours.

Anyhow, Sorrentino’s had been the anchor resident of the strip mall, and a few years later they paved a main drag around it, creating an official 3-block downtown, and then you had a multiplex cinema and a bowling alley and mini golf thing, and by the mid-90’s when the Rancho Villas *Phase 1* was up and running, they added a real shopping center that



included a smallish Target and in Chris's view, all the related garbage stores and fast-food joints we don't need.

If it was the intent of the planners at that point to make Eclipse a travelers' destination off the interstate, they were successful, and it was now one of the couple of key stops between Phoenix and Flagstaff.

Which Chris didn't like either, and he recognized that he was essentially a grumpy old man who mostly wasn't a fan of *any* change . . . but when he arrived here and was looking for a part-time gig, he figured if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, and he applied at the convenience store in the Pilot Gas and Truckers' Complex off the I-17 exit, but he never heard back.

He wouldn't have minded working there, as he did like that kind of atmosphere, people passing through from every which way, having a few adventures. No two days alike, always a tad of interesting conversation possible when you rang someone up.

Tonight though he was sitting in Sorrentino's with Reba, enjoying a glass of red wine that tasted a bit watered down but that was fine, and some bread sticks you dipped in the olive oil mixture while you waited for the entrees.

Chris said, "My first time here. Thanks for suggesting it. And for treating me."

Reba started to say something and hesitated. Chris said, "Took a sec to sink in. I'm fooling with you. When I go out, I try to pay, period."

"A traditional man then," Reba said. "My father was that way. Even if it took half his paycheck. He was a proud Irishman."

"From over *there*? Really? Or an American-styled one."

"Pittsburgh," she said. "That's where we grew up, me and my four sisters. He always wanted a son, my dad was an athlete -- or as much of one as you could be, when you laid bricks all day."

“Well,” Chris said, debating . . . should he go this direction at all tonight, or stay out of it entirely . . . but why not, and he added “you found one of those in Waylon then maybe.”

She was cool, you had to give her credit. “Dads you mean? Father figures?”

“I was thinking of it less complicated,” Chris said. “The athlete card.”

“Well certainly,” Reba said, “that was part of the initial attraction. I wanted to be a cheerleader in high school, but I had bad skin and wore glasses.”

“How was your dancing ability?” Chris said. “Bad too?”

The food came and it looked good, authentic. Chris ordered the cannelloni, which you didn’t see on a lot of Italian restaurant menus these days. Of course Reba ordered a dumb salad with a side order of something, but you couldn’t direct people how to eat.

She said, “I was -- am -- a pretty good dancer. But are you always a forward ass by nature, or do you instigate it on purpose?”

“Like an act?” Chris said. “Probably. Someone else asked me the same thing recently. I like to gain the upper hand from the get-go . . . I have a friend, Bakersfield where I used to live? He’s a popular guy, someone you envy, always upbeat and in charge, decent looking fellow, seems to have it all going on -- then he tells me he’s been seeing a therapist. I mean not heavy-*duty*, but for a session here and there.”

“Are you going to ask me a question?” Reba said.

“Like call on you for a prediction, you mean? I wasn’t planning on it . . . but fine, what does the therapist tell him?”

“He tells him -- perhaps not tells him directly, but urges it out of him, your friend--”

“It’s a she, by the way. The therapist. And she’s voluptuous as well, which makes it more complicated. My friend, I’m guessing, had to wrestle

with whether he was attracted to her, or just kind of *struck* by her, that she was making a physical impact on him.”

“Either way, he’s distracted, what I’m hearing. In that case, the therapy won’t be as effective, he needs a male. But I suspect what you’re driving at, whether it was discovered or not in your friend’s treatment -- he’s lacking in self-esteem, which he disguises with an outwardly ebullient and aggressive personality presentation.”

“*Jesus*. It sounds like you’ve had some training. I picked the wrong person.”

“To have dinner with?”

“Not that, probably. But *have* you?”

“I started off in an MFCC program but dropped out. So I’m just conjecturing . . . It might be fun to meet your friend though. See for myself. Is he around here ever?”

“He’s not. So far. He might have to show up one day and bail me out of some situation.”

“Mystery men then,” she said. “Was there a problem last night?” Here we go, the inevitable abrupt shift of gears. And that’s true, it was only last night. Chris hadn’t fooled around after McBride told him this morning about Reba wondering where he’d gone, and he tracked her down after lunch and asked her to have dinner in a couple hours.

Chris said, “Like I was telling McBride -- and what the heck’s his first name anyway, this is getting ridiculous?”

“He told us to call him Mac,” Reba said. “No one questioned it beyond that.”

“Yeah right, whatever. I told him,” leaning in quieter, “as I projected it forward, I didn’t think I’d be comfortable stark naked, or close to it, around a group of individuals. Well-meaning as everyone apparently was.”

“You were over-conceptualizing,” she said. “We all have our shortcomings.”

“Jeez. I wasn’t volunteering any of mine.”

“So I’m putting words in your mouth?”

“I’m not saying that *either*,” Chris said. “But to adjust the subject slightly -- is what you all were practicing . . . is that a modern-day take on swingers? I mean the swinging *lifestyle*?”

Reba actually gave it a bit of thought, like it was an important distinction she needed to make. “I don’t feel it’s what we’re all about, no. However, you say a modern *take* . . . my understanding is old-fashioned swinging *is* alive and well.”

Chris said, “Well, you never know I guess. There was this couple one time, husband and wife, I met them at an art class. This was up in Marin County.”

“See? It didn’t take much, and you have a story.”

“No, *they* didn’t swing. That I know of. But one of them’s parents did, I can’t remember which . . . I shoulda prefaced it, they were Mormons.”

Reba said, “I have a bit of LDS in my family tree, if you dig deep enough. Jeffrey, take it from me, you need to stay clear of those maniacs.”

“Right,” Chris said, “what I’m getting to, this couple left the church and moved to the Bay Area with their kids. The story they told, he or she, was when *they* were kids the parents left *them* with an uncle and aunt every weekend . . . and they found out later, as adults, that the parents were part of a swingers deal in Vegas.”

“Hmm,” Reba said, “that could make sense. Utah to Las Vegas is closer than people think.”

“You’re missing my point, whatever it was.”

“I’m with you. I believe you were simply confirming my contention that the lifestyle continues to attract its fans.”

“Yeah. And hopefully this couple, they’re better off. They did say they lost half their friends when they announced they were leaving the church.”

Reba said, “The way you tell stuff, and jump around without completing the first thing, I’m getting confused. Whether your friends swung, and that’s why they wanted to leave the church? It’s not worth clarifying, I get the thrust.”

“Not really my *friends*, these people. I did have to admire them for breaking away.”

“Following their convictions. What you seem to be judging *us* for. Back at Waylon’s . . . But do you paint, or what?”

“Me? No way. And I’m not *judging* you, per se . . . But the art class, it was a colleague of mine teaching it.”

“Another unfinished byte,” Reba said. “Like a tease, where I have to ask what’s coming next.”

“Ah.”

“Which is fine. We can pick up some rocky road ice cream, and put up coffee at your place. You can expand the story, if there is one.”

She had a point, they’d been finished for a while. Chris said, “*Up or on?*”

“It means, start a pot of coffee. Gee Whiz.”

“I know, but put it up -- that’s an idiomatic expression, likely a regional one. Don’t tell me where you’re from, let me guess.”

“I already did.”

“Oh yeah, Pittsburgh . . . How about where you’re from later, before you ended up here. I’ll try to pinpoint that one.”

Reba said, “People under about 60 don’t say put coffee *on* anymore either. I’d be in the minority both ways.”

“Kansas City,” he said. “The Kansas side not the Missouri one.”

“I do like the division there. I feel like the Kansas side is more blue collar and down to earth . . . But nope. Seattle.”

“Wow, you’re too dark,” was Chris’s first reaction, conveniently forgetting of course where she lived now. “But fine, mind you my

accommodations are a little bare, but we can challenge each other a while longer.”

\*\*\*

“You’re correct,” Reba said, opening a couple of cabinets. “A spartan existence in here. How long you were you planning on staying?”

“I don’t know. Forever’s not good enough?”

“What are you *doing* here anyway, Jeffrey? I don’t like to embarrass people, but guys like you and McBride kinda performing nothing all day, it does make one wonder.”

“I’ve answered this one before too,” Chris said. “We’re on the run from something. In my case, it’s from the Mob.”

“The Mafia,” Reba said, one hand on a hip now, biting her lower lip with a grin. “I mean I *get* it -- the average brain in this complex isn’t nobel prize level, so we’re dumbed down -- but you at least have to be more imaginative than that.”

“With my jive, you mean? . . . Come here.”

And she did as she was told, and the coffee sat there waiting a while, and it was old-fashioned high school making-out kind of stuff, nothing more advanced . . . and Chris hated to admit it, but while it was happening with Reba he was recreating the past in his head, a few specific girls from back in the day, at the forefront . . . and dang, Tracy Wilkins came to mind, the summer between junior and senior year, and he’d screwed that one up royally, hadn’t he. In fact he didn’t see her at the 25th reunion and someone said she married a guy up in Humboldt County, and they were growing dope as a career, had transitioned into the medicinal end when it became legal, and the whole shebang was pretty lucrative.

“It’s fine,” Reba said after a while, when it was clear Chris wasn’t into taking it to the next stage.

“Doesn’t *sound* like it’s fine,” he said, “entirely.”

“I understand,” she said, and when the voice sing-songed around on the syllables like that, you were pretty sure the person *didn't*.

“But,” he said, “we got some TV. You ever heard of David Foster Wallace?”

“Maybe. Was he a civil rights leader? We’re not going to watch a documentary, are we, where this is going?”

“A writer. Kind of an obscure one. But yeah, what made me think of it, I got Netflix, they did portray the guy in a docu-drama, and he watched like 14 hours of TV a day. Chomping on licorice whips and frozen ding-dongs the whole time.”

“*Frozen* ones now. I’m out of the loop. Sounds like an improvement. Why are you telling me this?”

“It wasn’t bad, the flick. It got you thinking. I mean the guy was a genius, no doubt about it. But it was like he required the zombie-like downtime to keep the mind acute.”

“What else is on Netflix currently?” she said. Adding, “Also, I’m a bit worried about Karolina.”

“Oh no. How so?”

“You can start the movie, it’s probably nothing. I’ll touch on it after.”

“I can’t operate that way,” Chris said. “Something’s on the frying pan, I gotta know about it. Otherwise, why would you bring it up?”

“Okay . . . well, you know those college admissions scandals we’ve been hearing about in the news?”

“No.”

“*No?* Do you even read a newspaper? There’s all kinds of fallout. Celebrities possibly going to prison, even.”

“I *should* be up on that stuff. I got an LA Times subscription offer -- online, but 4 months free. Then 2 dollars a week. I turned it down, because I thought I’d be wasting too much time.”

“That’s the thing,” Reba said. Not needing to point out again her impression that he didn’t appear to be operating with a huge sense of daily urgency, so what did that mean, *wasting time*?

The fact was Chris did read the paper most days, but he tended to skip to the sports and entertainment sections. There was always the possibility of running into some article that reminded him of some of his own business, so why put yourself through that.

“In a nutshell,” Reba was saying, “parents have been paying a service to get their kids into good colleges. Now they’re being charged with bribery.”

“Jeez. What schools?”

“USC I believe is the main one mentioned. But several others. Stanford. Yale. Wake Forest.”

“Wait a second. Someone’s going to risk jail . . . to send their kid to Wake Forest? Where *is* that even?”

“I think North Carolina. But that’s beside the point. Jeff, Karolina’s worried she did the same thing.”

Chris took a long sip of coffee. “All right let’s hold on now,” he said, “on a couple of fronts . . . *a*, you’re saying *she’s* going to be in the paper too? But *b*, Holy Toledo, Karolina . . . she has a college age *kid*?”

“She said she was young,” Reba said, like it was no big deal, and don’t worry about that part of it.

Chris was placing it, if the kid was 18 now, and Karolina was, what, 17 or 18 -- wow -- back in Estonia, or wherever it was she was liberated. That would make her mid-30’s now, which actually seemed about right. But still, not what you expected.

No point asking if the kid belonged to both of them, Karolina and the tennis pro husband, but Reba took care of that, adding that no, this guy’s not the father, and that either way, Karolina handled the college thing herself.



“How much money?” Chris said.

Reba said, “Or -- you could show a little sympathy for the woman. How about that?”

It seemed like an innocent enough question but Chris supposed she was right, and he opened Netflix and without asking he started ‘All The President’s Men’ . . . and once it got going, past the initial set-up where you’re not sure the Washington Post editor is going to leave Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman on the story once it appears there’s something to it -- from that point on Reba barely moved a muscle.

“Unbelievable,” she pronounced, when it ended. “I’m in love with both of those men.”

“A different reaction than I had,” Chris said. “Although I’ve seen it more than once before. My reaction is more like: that was one of the greatest detective stories ever told.”

Reba said, “I did like how they cradled the phones, and then when another important call would come in, they’d have to muffle the first one with their shoulder.”

“When I was younger I wanted to be like Robert Redford,” Chris said. “Every role, they were all perfect. Like tailor made.”

“But not any more? Now that you’re not young?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll still take being Robert Redford. Are you kidding? . . . Despite the cheap shot.”

“I should go,” Reba said. “Did you know I’m an artist? You weren’t even curious.”

“Ooh, sorry about that.”

“When you mentioned the Mormons at the art class -- I didn’t want to inject myself. But yep. I have a show going on, Red Valley Savings. The main area.”

Chris knew the bank, had never gone inside, but you could tell it was one open room, so there wasn’t anything *besides* a main area. He figured

her stuff was on the perimeter walls where people use those ledges to fill out deposit slips. “Good to hear,” he said. “I’ll definitely check it out.”

She said, “And when you say the art teacher was a colleague -- what does that mean?”

“It was a community college. So, only that I taught a class for a while. Remedial skills English. One of those 3-hour once a week deals.”

“What happened with that? Why aren’t you still?”

They were standing by the door. “Chain of events,” he said. “You kinda shorted me out though. On Karolina. No detail there . . . Why’d you bring it up, in fact?”

“I don’t know why,” Reba said. “Other than you strike me as someone who might have an idea.”

“Gee. Help her wriggle out of it, you’re saying.”

“Something like that. That you’re kind of a fixer-person. Just my gut feeling.”

“Well you’re giving me a lot of props for no reason,” Chris said. “What have you seen me fix, around here for example?”

“Nothing at all, so far,” she said, and that was that.

## Chapter 7

Friday afternoon Dale the cop showed up to play a round of golf.

He was part of a foursome, with three buddies, and you had to unfortunately figure one or two of those guys might be law enforcement as well. None of them of course the fat Eclipse cop with the cowboy hat who'd questioned everyone the day after the woman's body was found.

The three buddies went ahead and waited at the first tee and were taking practice swings and all that, and it would be a few minutes, there was a log jam ahead of them . . . and Dale hung back and asked Chris, "How's tricks?"

Chris looked at him and Dale said, "It's an expression. It won't bite."

And you had to like Dale, he was good company, and if you applied the old litmus test -- someone may be superficially friendly, but could you ride cross-country with them? -- Dale, you could, Chris felt.

Not that something like that was going to happen. Chris said, "So jumping past the other deal, Waylon and friends -- and you're the second or third person I've had that non-conversation with -- but what do we got, on the situation here?" Chris pointing up the first fairway with his head, in the direction of the 11th hole.

"Zippo. Is what I'm hearing," Dale said.

"I like that about you," Chris said. "No punches pulled, even with dumb civilians prodding you for information."

"Like I told you -- the department here, they don't inspire a lot of confidence. My impression is, they were overwhelmed. Still are. Even any chance of picking up prints, that's gonna be a pipe dream by now."

“You mean . . . they haven’t necessarily handled the evidence correctly?”

“Butchered it, would be more like it. The scene and the DOA both. You see Jeff, what we’re running into more and more, our line of work -- mine -- is paperwork and computers going wild, out of balance with good solid detective work.”

“Meaning . . .”

“*Meaning* -- and probably I’ve been guilty here too, I can’t give myself a total pass -- but too many times we expect the crime to solve itself, and we don’t cover our ass with details up the wazoo along the way.”

Chris got the gist of it, but Dale clarified, “You take this case specifically. You have a poor gal, ID’d now as Veronica Shepcolon, a troubled life, in and out the system, minor shit. She’s been holding court last year, year and a half at the Haliday Jay down the road -- which all cops on the I-17 corridor beat are familiar with.”

“Yeah I was thinking,” Chris said, “I mighta been there once. Picking someone up middle of the night who did something stupid.”

“Like what,” Dale said.

“Well the story I got, she met a guy in a bar, some married doofus, and they end up there. She calls me a couple hours into it, the guy’s taken off and can she get a ride.”

“You were living up this way then?”

Chris knew he was going too far, no need to insert any of this, but he had a good instinct about Dale, that he was simply curious, and not about to take any inquiries to a next level. So you might as well tell it straight, more or less. So Chris said, “Not *then*, I was visiting a friend in Mesa. This gal was a friend of his.”

And Chris was right, nothing beyond that from Dale, no who did that happen to *be*, and why.

Though uh-oh, Dale was asking now, “Why didn’t your *friend* pick her up then?”

And Chris answered, seamlessly as possible, “We were at a strip club in Tempe when she called. I volunteered.”

“Good judgment. Too much to drink, the other guy? And that the place with a healthy percentage of Brazilian women?”

“Oh yeah big-time on the Brazilian women . . . Not really, on the guy having too much to drink . . . It was more, I was starving, and there was a 24-hour donut place on the way, if I had it straight . . . so I volunteered for the assignment.”

“That’s funny,” Dale said, “I can relate.”

“I know it, I wouldn’t mind one *now* in fact . . . my long-winded point being, when I pick her up, she’s out of the room already, sitting in the lobby reading a paperback. I sat down with her for a few minutes, tried to lay a little lecture on her about meeting up with stranger-men -- meanwhile I’m getting some perspective on the place, and it seems like an upstanding, typical Holiday Inn Express clone operation.”

“What time was that at?” Dale said. “And what night?”

“I think it was a weekend, because of the strip club element seeming ramped up. I’m guessing, 2, 3 in the morning?”

“Interesting,” Dale said, “you must have caught the joint with a little downtime. Three managers at least, that I know of, have been pinched, the last 4, 5 years.”

“Ah . . . Looking the other way, you mean?”

“That, and taking payoffs. Some shakedowns. Desk attendants even helping book gigs, on occasion.”

“Dang.”

“A pimp got into it a few months ago in the parking lot with an employee, couple shots were fired, both of ‘em lucky. But the employee

turned out to be shadier -- and with a rap sheet twice as long -- as the pimp.”

The foursome ahead of Dale’s completed their tee-shots -- if you could call them those, all four balls squirting off their 3-drivers, nothing remotely down the center of the fairway, and it was going to be a long nine holes from Dale and his buddies behind these guys.

Chris said, “Kinda unreal, then. Wow . . . so what you’re getting at, in relation to Eclipse PD and all, our deal here, from Wednesday morning?”

“Point being,” Dale said, “chubby Jake over there who you met, and the others, they figure since it stems from the Holiday Jay, that there’s your answer sooner or later, meaning your POI. Myself, I like to work ‘em straight up, no contingencies that someone’ll likely be connected somewhere *else*. It don’t turn out that way, then you’re up the ass without a paddle.”

“Creek,” Chris said.

“Fuck you,” Dale said, but it was good-natured, and the guy clearly took his job seriously, which you had to appreciate.

Chris said, “There was a case up north.” Catching himself, since he wasn’t in southern California currently. “The Bay Area I’m talking about . . . The Zodiac mother-frigger. You ever heard of that one?”

“Course. The movie for one. We also studied it in the academy.”

“Really? Like -- what not to do, in 50 years, to solve 5 connected homicides?”

“That should have been part of it too,” Dale said. “3 or 4 jurisdictions with their own ideas what happened, not sharing the potentially significant shit . . . But in our case it was to study the psychological components of serial killers, and we had to create our own profile.”

“Not a bad assignment,” Chris said. “What’d you come up with on *that* guy?”

“Power-assertive all the way . . . except *one* of the crimes, can’t remember which one, there was some possible hedonistic-sadism mixed in.”

“The Lake Berryessa one? Where he wore the Zodiac costume?”

“Could be it. The bottom line with psychopathic thrill killers like him -- the process leading *up* to the act of murder is what they derive the most pleasure from.”

“Ah,” Chris said.

“Course that profile’d be in contrast with your Jeffrey Dahmers, your Son of Sams, your Dennis Raders.”

Chris didn’t know enough about those three guys, so don’t get Dale going on them. He said, “Well you’re already over *my* head. You’re good at your job obviously. Very conscientious.”

“Thank you my friend, I try. Always grateful for that.”

Chris figured what the hay, they were fooling around here, right? So he said, “In another lifetime, if *I* did something, I can see how I wouldn’t want you on my case. My goose’d be cooked, I reckon.”

“Now you’re giving me *too* much credit,” Dale said.

“The thing about the Zodiac,” Chris said, “why I brought it up -- they worked it that night as a cab robbery gone bad. Like the driver resisted and the gun went off. The San Francisco one, is what I’m referring to. The guy’s final appearance, possibly.”

“I see what you’re driving at . . . They worked it casual, figuring the guy’ll surface soon enough, as connected to other cab robberies. Or they’ll simply find the MF next couple hours hiding in the bushes somewhere.”

Chris wouldn’t be able to speak like this on many other cases -- in fact *no* other ones.

But he’d been a fan of the Zodiac case and had followed it in the online forums -- not to mention tried to track the fucker down himself, with Kenny, and the verdict was out on the end result -- so why not, it wasn’t the

worst thing shooting the breeze with this guy, some knowledge behind it, at least on the one topic.

“Right,” Chris said, “no one secured the scene, the body’s flipped over and back a few of times, you got everyone and his brother touching the cab including the neighbors.”

“I hear you . . . What’s the current *status* on that? Still nothing?”

“Nah. SFPD closed the case about ten years ago. They were getting too much action on it, tips from all over the world, nothing amounting to much.”

Dale said, “I can understand *that*, priorities and manpower issues these days in our cold case divisions . . . But you kinda got *me* wanting to go up there and have a look around, to be honest.”

“You should. Fresh set of eyes.”

Dale said, “But our deal here, I get your connection. We got Eclipse PD, same thing, assuming it’ll resolve *itself*, but they don’t always play out so simple . . . See you at the courts tonight?”

Dale and his buddies’ tee time was finally available, they were signalling him, and Chris said you might.

\*\*\*

Karolina wasn’t around tonight and apparently the round robin option under her guidance was Monday through Thursday, and Sundays.

So tonight everyone *self*-round-robined it, meaning rotated as best they could but it wasn’t the same as the pro moving you in and out of doubles teams and giving you some tips and ‘nice shots’ and otherwise challenging you a bit along the way.

Toward the end McBride and Chris ended up partnering with Lucy and Gertrude respectively, and the old gals weren’t that bad -- good reflexes at the net, ball control decent too -- their only glaring weakness was the low ball-stuff, they couldn’t get down to those very well.



They shook hands -- or actually, a pickleball tradition that Chris couldn't stand -- they sort of butted paddles, like you were high-fiving the other person with the edge of yours, and all Chris could think of was all's we're doing is *denting* each other's.

After which McBride said, "How's a about you girls join me, my place, for a little iced tea. Chris you can come too, I think I can't handle them both."

Lucy and Gertrude giggled a bit and huddled out of earshot, and Lucy said, "We accept the generous invitation. We've decided we can trust you boys not to pull any funny business." And they giggled more, not *unlike* a couple of girls.

Gertrude asked what they could bring and McBride said just yourselves, and the women said in that case they better get cleaned up a bit first, and Chris and McBride headed back to his place.

"No . . . other fireworks tonight, then?" Chris said.

McBride shook his head. "No set schedule there. You kind of . . . feel it happening, or you don't."

"Ah," Chris said. "Speaking of which, I appreciated the referral. Reba. We had fun. I'm going to check out her art, in the bank."

"Yeah, well," McBride said, "I'll be interested in getting your take, on that."

Chris had an idea where he was going with it, but hey, you were going to still give the gal her due, with an open mind. He said, "Something else from Reba last night -- guessing you know about it, since you've achieved a specialized degree of intimacy with these people."

"Spit it out," McBride said.

"Karolina. With the college deal. And Jeeminy, the kid that age already."

“I know, it didn’t add up either, the kid. But I *have* heard about it, the admissions part. Doesn’t seem like a big concern. Some lawsuits flying around, sure, but unlikely to filter down to someone like her.”

“Hmm. Reba indicated different, that they’re worried about it. She told me to start reading the papers.”

“Well, could *be* then. You have to understand, the particular time Karolina mentioned it to me . . . she wasn’t worried about too much in general, as I recall.”

“So it didn’t trickle down,” Chris said. “The urgency factor.”

“Exactly.”

There was a knock on McBride’s door and Lucy and Gertrude were standing there smiling, spiffed up a bit, even a little rouge applied to the cheeks it looked like, and Gertrude had a big box of See’s candy under her arm.

“I told you,” McBride said, settling everyone in the living room. “You’re not allowed in, you bring stuff.”

“We like breaking rules,” Gertrude said, and the women were having fun with it, and Lucy added, “Her sugar level’s too high, they tell her. That box, it’s been on her kitchen counter since Christmas.”

“So dig in at your own risk,” Gertrude said, and McBride was good to his word with those iced teas, and Chris commented that, “Visiting South Carolina once, as soon as you sat down in most any restaurant they asked did you want sweet or unsweetened tea -- whether you didn’t want tea *period*, that wasn’t an option.”

McBride said, “Had the same experience there. Dabbled in real estate in Columbia a bit, the neighborhood near the university.” Chris was thinking, this guy’s been all over the place, you can’t one-up him on anything.

Lucy said, “Texas, we don’t *have* much sweet tea. I think it’s more a southeastern custom.”

“It is,” Gertrude said. “It goes back to Prohibition. The sugar syrup was the best alcohol substitute they could come up with.”

“Interesting,” Chris said. “So you used to teach history?”

“I did,” Gertrude said. “In Rhode Island. So anything on the 13 colonies, I suppose I’m fairly solid.”

“Sheesh,” Chris said, “I was just throwing it out there, I didn’t expect a hit.”

“Gertie’s a smart one,” Lucy said. “She frequently corrects me.”

“I do not,” Gertrude said.

“You do so,” Lucy said.

“Truly? When was the last time, for instance?”

“Well, okay fine. We went to the baseball game, I explained to the gentleman next to us, why the pitcher wasn’t batting.”

“Okay, and you had it wrong,” Gertrude said. “But technically I was correcting the gentleman, and not you.”

“You’re full of crap,” Lucy said.

“Testy, are we, all of a sudden,” Gertrude said.

“Okay ladies,” McBride said.

“You guys go at it, it seems,” Chris said. “Little feistiness though, not the worst thing. They probably have studies on that.”

“Only when one of us is dead *wrong*,” Gertrude said.

“Which I *wasn’t*,” Lucy said. “Jeffrey, and Mac, you fellows are familiar with the designated hitter rule, right?”

They both nodded. Gertrude said, “But it wasn’t interleague *play*. It was spring *training* rules.”

“Where was this?” McBride said, and the whole subject was hitting a little too close to home for Chris, meaning that guy on the Giants -- what the devil was the guy’s name -- that he’d had to deal with last winter.

Lucy said, “The Rancho has various excursions. This was the end of March, an A’s game in Mesa. They were playing Colorado.”

“You should come next year,” Gertrude said to Chris and McBride, and they both nodded with fake enthusiasm, like that could be a possibility, yeah, and Chris knew he’d never do that and was pretty sure McBride wouldn’t either.

“You do have to book early,” Gertrude said, “but it tends to be a lot of fun.”

“It was,” Lucy said, “until you had to be right about everything.”

McBride cleared his throat. “You know what, it’s perfect out right now. Balmy. Why don’t we head outside.”

Chris wondered what that meant but they all got up, and off McBride’s back bedroom was a little terrace, no bigger than Chris’s for sure, but it overlooked open space that might have been actual original desert, and there were signs of a red rock canyon in the distance.

McBride produced a couple chairs and the four of them squeezed out there. Chris said, “*Outside* seemed a little shaky, the concept, but you have a clear exposure, not bad at all. Mine overlooks people and asphalt.”

“Very nice indeed,” Lucy said. “Thank you for hosting us . . . Our routine doesn’t vary much, it’s quite simple, as one might expect.”

Everyone was quiet for a while, and McBride was right, it was peaceful, it felt good to let yourself stare into space.

Gertrude said, “All right, on a serious note. I feel we’re among friends here, that I’m not overstepping . . . Lucy has gotten through an always difficult anniversary. So yes, your hospitality -- and the timing -- is much appreciated.” She reached over and squeezed Lucy on the shoulder, and obviously the earlier banter, the spring training game nonsense, was a moot point.

McBride was pretty direct, the short time Chris had known him, and it wasn’t surprising that he said right away, “What anniversary was that?”

Lucy adjusted her position a bit. “Oh my dad. He passed away May 24th. It’s a bit difficult each year. But it’s sweet of you to ask.”

“How long ago?” Chris said quietly. You didn’t want to butt in, but they were sort of there already.

Lucy did an exhale thing and said, “It’s been 53 years . . . They say who knows where the time goes.”

More silence now. Chris was doing some mental calculations . . . And the story she told him by the pool, where she claimed she and her dad witnessed an unidentified flying object, when she was four . . . No matter how you put it together, she had to have been just a kid when her dad passed away.

Chris, quietly again, said, “So 1965?”

“Unh-huh,” Lucy said.

“It’s okay,” Gertrude said to Lucy, “you can talk about it.” Nodding her head as encouragement . . . And to Chris and McBride, “It’s good therapy for her.”

Lucy considered it a moment and said, “We all say it, our dad was a wonderful man. In my case it was true . . . he was my world. One hundred percent . . . Then he got in some trouble, and -- my dad -- passed away -- in the state penitentiary. In McAlester, Oklahoma.”

Now they really did all sit around for a while, this was tough to hear, and wrap your head around. Jeez. First of all, the guy ending *up* there -- and secondly the guy *dying* in there. How would something like that come about?

Finally McBride said, “If you don’t want to go any further, that’s understandable, but I’ll ask. What kind of trouble *was* it, that found your dad?”

“I’ll never know,” Lucy said. “Clearly there were some inner demons at work. But he kept that side from me, like the hero he was . . .”

“Her dad robbed a bank,” Gertrude said.

Lucy said, “He did, and they sentenced him to 12 years. That would seem harsh, but a gentleman was killed in the robbery . . . My dad went

away when I was 9. We'd travel up there to see him once a month on Sundays. It was through a fence, but you could reach out, he'd hold my fingers . . . One Sunday a few years in, we get there, and someone's shaking their head, they tried to contact my mom they said, but anyhow that dad had a heart attack last night and died."

"She thinks he died of a broken heart," Gertrude said.

Lucy nodded. "A broken spirit."

She started to sob, and Chris was thinking ooh boy, this wasn't part of the script tonight . . . but he and McBride both got up and stood on each side of her, and McBride told her to go for it, it's all for the best . . . and a couple minutes later Lucy was okay and attempting to make a joke, though it wasn't real comfortable trying to laugh at it.

"Tell them the other part," Gertrude said. "The 2018 update, or thereabouts."

"Oh," Lucy said, waving her hand. "Gertie here, she has a propensity for making mountains out of molehills."

"Blackmail doesn't sound like a *molehill*, under my definition," Gertrude said.

"What she's driving at," Lucy said, "since you boys will wrestle it out me anyway now -- someone's been asking for money, yes. But I've dismissed it as a non-viable threat."

"What kind of threat," Chris said, "exactly?"

Lucy said, "Gosh Gertie, see where you've taken us now? Darn you."

"Someone has surfaced," Gertrude said, "who claims to be connected to that robbery."

"Not surfaced as in suddenly *appearing*," Lucy said. "I've been in contact with the young man for some time."

"What young man?" McBride said.

"For how much time?" Chris said.

“Luce, go ahead and spill the beans,” Gertrude said. “It won’t kill anyone.”

Lucy said, softer, “This person says he’s the grandson of the poor man shot in the robbery . . . The man was an innocent bystander. He wasn’t shot by my dad or his accomplice, but very sadly by a security guard who tried to *stop* the robbery . . . who wasn’t actually the *bank’s* security guard -- they didn’t have one -- he was one of those men who picked up and delivered money, in the armored vehicles.”

No one spoke.

Lucy continued, “A few years ago I was introduced to Facebook by an old classmate. It’s been wonderful, for the most part. I’ve rekindled some 3rd grade relationships. I’ve joined a few groups. One of them is a Norman, Oklahoma, widows and orphans community . . . It’s not exactly as it sounds, but it encompasses folks who lost a loved one while growing up in the Norman area.”

No one spoke again, until Chris said, “So this grandson . . . he’s messaged you, I’m guessing.”

“He has. I’m told I could have handled my privacy settings better. On the other hand, I don’t like to hide from people.”

“How much money is he looking for? McBride said.

“Thank you,” Gertrude said.

“This man,” Lucy said, “who has me calling him Alan -- he’s been perfectly polite -- and he wants 10 thousand dollars.”

Chris said, “Off the bat? . . . Or he’s escalated his . . . demands.”

“It’s been perhaps two years, all told,” Lucy said. “At first, and for a good while, there were *no* demands. The young man simply stated, with no malice behind it, that he wished he’d had a chance to know his grandpa better. That he was reduced to hearing about him largely through bits and pieces of stories his dad would tell, from growing up with the gentleman.”

“He was feeling her out, she means,” Gertrude said. “Which is how bad customers engineer it.”

“I would agree,” McBride said.

“Any other threats mixed in?” Chris said. “As opposed to the *non-viable* ones you mentioned?”

“Not especially, no,” Lucy said, “which is why I never brought it up to my kids. They’d no doubt want me to go to the authorities, and my instinct is there’s no need, and that would only turn my life upside down.”

“She’s not a fan of intervention,” Gertrude said.

“What was the reason the grandson wanted money?” Chris said.

Lucy said, “I suppose I never questioned it. I mean wouldn’t *you*? On some level?”

“Want money?” McBride said. “That’d be human nature I guess, if you never lived to know your grandpa. Or barely . . . That you’d want to pick someone to go after. I mean we see those lawsuits now, some poor guy dying of cancer, the family is going after a chemical company because the guy sprayed his flowers with Roundup on Saturday mornings for 30 years.”

“What was your dad’s name?” Chris said, trying to keep it casual. But when Lucy told him, he filed it away.

Gertrude said, “Shall I open the box of See’s candy?”

McBride said that might hit the spot, and he’ll break out the ice cream as well, and he went back in the kitchen with her.

Chris said to Lucy, “That’s a tough hand you’ve been dealt . . . You’ve worn it well.”

She smiled.

Chris said, “The UFO, what was the story there?”

Lucy took a deep breath. She said, “It was *my* grandpa’s house. In Hillsdale, New Mexico. It was 1956. There was a silver mine there, but they closed it following the Korean War. That was the whole reason for the town, the mine . . . obviously I learned all of this later -- Anyhow, my grandpa



stayed to the end, until he finally passed away. He was stubborn just like my dad. It was him, and maybe one other person, literally, left in the town. All the other houses were mine-workers' cottages, and abandoned."

McBride called out there, did anyone want something *real* to drink, some booze, that he'd be happy to concoct something tropical -- and Chris spoke for Lucy and said yes please, they wouldn't mind.

Lucy said, "My dad was deciding what to do with my grandpa's stuff. He said there wasn't a lot worth saving, but let's see what was in the back, in the blacksmith shop my grandpa had. The shop was across the yard in an old cedar barn with a weathervane on top. It was nearly dark out.

"In later years I remembered how the air felt thick, like something was pressing down on you, even though there was no wind at all. Then we heard this high-pitched hum, and we looked toward the base of the mountain. Something round and silver and large -- wider than my grandpa's house -- was floating slowly toward the ground.

"When it was about as high as a telephone pole it stopped in the air and started spinning. There was a grinding sound, and some brown material shot out from the bottom in a puff, and then the big round silver thing started to rise. After a minute, it moved very fast, faster than anything I'd ever seen, and it disappeared into the clouds."

A moment. Chris said, "Wow . . . and that was it?"

"That's not *enough*?" Lucy smiled.

"What did your dad say?" Chris said.

"My dad stood still, looking up into the sky for a long time. Finally he took his pipe out of his coat pocket and began packing it with tobacco. He told me that what we had just seen then, it was real but it wasn't. He said it would be our secret, and no one else's . . . Then he picked me up and held me tight, and he didn't put me down until we'd closed up the house and were back in the car."

Chris saw that Lucy had her face in her left hand.

“You felt safe,” he said. “With your dad.”

She nodded, and Chris figured what the heck and he went to her and and leaned down and embraced the woman, and she responded, and it felt nice -- on his end for sure, and hopefully on hers as well.

Until there was some noise, the screen door rattling, and Chris broke off the embrace, and said to McBride and Gertrude, “Not what you think.”

“Yeah right,” McBride said, passing out the beverages, “we’ve heard that one before. The oldest line in the book.”

“Really,” Gertrude said.

## Chapter 8

Saturday after breakfast Chris decided to mosey on over to the bank and do his due diligence and check out Reba's art.

Though when breakfast ended he was almost too full to go over there. One more perk of this place -- they'd frequently have guest demonstrations in the rec center, usually involving crafts and home products but sometimes gastronomy-related stuff as well, and this morning you had an executive chef from a supposed high end restaurant in Chandler -- though the guy explained they were also expanding east into Santa Fe next fall -- but the crux being, when the guy finished his demo, you could eat.

And not just bite-sized samples but the real McCoy, paper plates and plastic forks but who cares, and you had a choice of three breakfast entrees so Chris went with the 'waffles' torpedo'.

You got in line and up front there was a long table and the guy himself adjusted the waffles onto Chris's plate, the guy fully decked out in the all-whites and the big chef's hat.

And man that was superb -- narrow, diamond shaped waffles rising high out of the middle of your plate like a tower, secret batter ingredients, syrup drizzled over the works just right -- and in the interior you discovered bits of fresh fruit, and lo and behold, bacon.

Chris had a weakness for bacon, as well as for waffles, though he didn't think you want them wholly together like that -- but this worked. The guy got on the little PA and announced happily that there were limited seconds available, and Chris didn't want to be a pig so he waited . . . but

only a couple folks straggled back up there, so he couldn't let the opportunity go to waste.

Now he was on a bike. A balloon tire one-speed heavy-duty job, something he should have had all along at Manhattan Beach but never quite committed to. The Rancho Villas offered them for free, parked at different stations around the complex, and you punched in your key code and you were off and running.

And he could have walked to the bank, would have typically, it was maybe a mile off the Rancho Villas grounds, but the bike helped you digest better this morning, plus he was a little worried about the bank closing at noon.

Red Valley Savings was on Main Street in Eclipse, the 3-block section that sprung up out of a strip mall in the 80's, anchored by Sorrentino's, the restaurant. And no, the Saturday hours on the glass doors said 9-5 like normal, Chris thinking you saw a lot of that around here didn't you -- not with the retiree crowd at the Ranchos . . . or the slowed down crowd like himself and McBride . . . but among the typical working folk up this way, they put in an honest day's work, gave you the full 6 days, and rarely seemed to complain about it.

More as less as Chris pictured it, there was a center console where customers took care of business, then the wall of teller windows directly in your face, and the managers' desks off to the left.

The art was hanging on the perimeter walls, an impressive output, maybe 25 paintings, most of them in gold frames, with a few fake-distressed wooden ones mixed in.

In the far corner was a laminated card stuck to the wall which Chris figured was an About The Artist type deal, so he started with that, and there was a short bio -- Reba had gotten a graphics art degree at Washington State University . . . which would fit, her pointing out the other night that

she was from the Seattle area, after starting off in Pittsburgh or whatever the story was.

The rest of it was an artist's statement, and Chris started to read it but he couldn't get through it -- those things all seemed the same, the artist explaining how their life experience translates to the emotional balance projected out from their works. Chris had helped Joyce several years ago, up in Petaluma, when she dabbled in studio art and joined the various open studios events, and he tried to re-write her artist statement so that it sounded human -- condensing it into one concrete sentence -- but she said who do you think you are, and he didn't bring it up again.

But now Reba's artwork . . . hmm.

McBride had tactfully put it correctly . . . he'll be curious to see what Chris (Jeff) thinks.

First of all the colors were too strong, solid, nothing muted, and you were wondering if she was skilled in actually mixing paints . . . but you did have famous artists who intentionally employed a limited palette, so you couldn't crucify the woman for that alone.

But the landscape scenes she chose . . . there was no life to them, no focal point -- and worse, no beauty whatsoever.

Again, some famous artists, he supposed, strived for the no-beauty look . . . but not here, highly doubtful that was Reba's intent.

Chris went from painting to painting, giving it his best open-minded shot, and you hated to be cruel or cliched . . . but if these were 5 bucks each, frames included, there'd still be no way.

There was a middle-aged woman filling out a deposit slip at one of the high counters and Chris said, "Hi there. How's the art? In your opinion?"

The woman first looked at Chris, like where did *that* come from out of the blue, but soon enough glanced at the group of paintings closest to the counter. She said, "I try to give all the artists their just do. My friend, this is the worst of the bunch. Hands down."

“Bunch?” Chris said.

“Why yes. Red Valley rotates artists bi-monthly. I try to attend each opening, my husband and I value the arts, believe me . . . but this particular showing lowers the bar substantially.”

“Interesting, thank you for that perspective . . . What’s wrong with it, specifically?”

“*Specifically?* The artist would need to start *over*,” the woman said. “The rudiments. Color, texture, shape . . . space, tone, line . . . not to mention brush technique . . . and of course *composition*, that goes without *saying*.”

“Kind of what *I* was afraid of concluding,” Chris said. “I sort of know the artist, I think. Socially. Somebody warned me.”

“In that case I wholeheartedly apologize for my barebones assessment,” the woman said.

“Nonsense. I’m a *fan* of barebones assessments . . . in fact life in general, we need more of those.”

“You’re kind. And you’re also diplomatic. My husband, he would say you could be on the bomb squad.”

“Excuse me?”

“One of his lines.”

“Ah. Meaning, when he thinks someone could diffuse a situation?”

“Exactly . . . See the third from the end, for example? The tree, directly in the *center*. Why on earth would someone put it *there*?”

Chris studied that one, but it didn’t take long, and he had to cringe and say, “Gee, yeah, I see your point. If you can’t move it, at least stand off to the side more, when you paint the darn thing.”

“I can’t disagree . . . please enjoy the rest of your weekend,” the woman said, and Chris said you as well, and gave the art one more run through, and ambled back outside, and half got on the bicycle, thinking is there anything else I can do downtown, to justify the rare venture off the

Rancho Villas grounds . . . and it wasn't bad, you had a hobby shop which you rarely saw anymore, you had the ubiquitous couple of coffee places, a western wear store, a thrift shop, a gift knick-knack place or two, and whatever else . . . and there was an old guy on a bench with a cane across his lap, and Chris was tempted to join that guy for a minute, you never know what stories he might have in him to spin.

But then . . . *Shit!*

The pickleball lesson he'd booked the other night with Karolina . . . that was for Saturday at 11. Today. *Damn* it!

Now he used the old guy to ask what time it was, and of course the guy sensibly is wearing a regular Timex wrist watch and it says 11:12.

Chris thanks him and jumps on the bike and peddles like a bat out of hell to the end of the downtown stretch and across Sunscape Road, and then the entry drive to the Rancho Villas, where he had to dodge a couple idiots in an out of control golf cart, but Jeez, also a delivery truck pulling out of the place as well, the guy clearly not paying attention, and where'd *he* learn to drive?

When he got to the courts it was more like 11:20, and Karolina was on the bench of the designated teaching court, fiddling with her phone, a couple guys talking to her -- and what else was new, no gold lamee top at the moment but Karolina did still present an impressive picture, including the subtle stuff like how she naturally arched her back just right -- and all manner of doofuses gravitated to her, Chris assumed.

"Hey," he said, pretty darn out of breath, no disguising it. "Please don't say anything. If I told you it's unlike me, you wouldn't believe it anyway."

Karolina gave him the extended demonstrative sneer, though she was smiling pretty quickly, and said, "No one's late for a pickleball lesson. This would be a first, in this complex . . . And you of all people, weren't you whining about your apartment being right on top of the courts?"

Chris said, “A little south of the main ones. But yeah, what I’ve learned now are courts 9 and 10, they stare me right in the face.”

Karolina was wearing a one-piece tennis outfit, and from what Chris could tell without being a total unceremonious ass, there didn’t appear to be a bra involved in today’s attire either.

Not that it was required, the surgical intervention apparently squaring everything away just right, yielding what you couldn’t deny was a splendid angle of protrusion.

The two hangers-on guys left and Chris almost asked, but he caught himself -- but the simple question would have been: how bad *off* were you before you had the work done? Meaning the Estonia liberation bit . . . no one *admired* you back then, the way they do now? He wasn’t trying to judge, he was genuinely curious if everything wasn’t okay *before* too.

Karolina said, “You keep standing there. Maybe you shouldn’t have booked the lesson for today, if your thoughts are elsewhere. Meanwhile the clock continues to tick.”

“Good point,” Chris said. “What do we got? 15 minutes or so?”

“13.”

“Right,” he said, picking up one of the loaner paddles and getting loose. “Tell you what. No instruction, how bout. Just run my rear end all over the place, the time we got left.” Which unfortunately was down to 12 minutes and counting at this point.

Karolina didn’t argue, and dang, the gal was a pretty strong player, crushing balls when she felt like it, especially on the forehand, and jerking him all over the court.

He hadn’t factored that in before, that likely she’d played herself some college varsity tennis somewhere along the line, before she gravitated to this sort of non-sport. Though Chris conceded pickleball had its place, just look at Lucy and Gertrude running around for example.



At any rate, Chris was trying hard, and the abbreviated 12 minute lesson turned into the best workout he'd had in quite a while . . . especially combined with the bike sprint just to get here, he forgot about that for a second too.

After one particularly long rally, where she'd drawn him in to the net a couple times with drop shots, and then sent him back deep, he had to stick his paddle vertical on the ground and lean on it for a moment to recover.

A little bell sounded, signifying the end of the lesson. Chris said, "Man, you throw out the casual appearance, anything goes, but then you're cold-blooded on the time."

"We can go longer," she said, "you're my last student of the morning session."

"I'm pulling your leg. I'm revved up at the moment, but once I sit down and everything tightens up, I'll need a couple hot tubs, rest of the day."

"You don't recover properly," she said. "There's a good chance then, that your electrolyte levels are unbalanced."

"You offer any treatment for that?" Chris said, slightly giddy from the workout, having a little fun.

"I do not," she said, "but my husband does. He incorporates mind-body into his training regimens. You met him, have you not? Victor?"

Hmm. More weird stuff being introduced, the husband, la-did-da, like they were the prototypical all-American couple, straight out of the old TV show Ozzie and Harriet. Chris said, "Let's take a seat for minute. Awkward discussing recovery procedures over the net."

Karolina produced a cold 32 ounce Gatorade, and dang, yeah, that looked awful good, and Chris drained half of it right off the bat, and the rest didn't last long either, and he said, "You'all do your thing then?"

Independent? You and Vic? . . . and then you crawl into bed together and watch Jimmy Fallon?”

“It’s Victor,” she said. “And we prefer Jimmy Kimmell these days. He goes toe to toe with Trump.”

“Oh please,” Chris said. “No politics. That’s part of why I like it here . . . Did you know, I was reading a book by a guy, can’t remember his name . . . but the 4 hour work week?”

“Yes I’ve heard of it.”

“Not his main point, but it supports his other approaches -- the guy hasn’t read a paper in 15 years.”

“That’s actually what Victor says too. If it’s *really* important, you’ll hear about it anyway.”

“Right. And since I’ve been down here, a new leaf in the mornings with the newspaper, I try to eliminate knowledge of anything but sports, with a little entertainment news spiced in there.”

“I see . . . I’m guessing in the 4 hour workweek’s case, he’s using the unwasted time and energy to build multi-million-dollar businesses . . . You?”

“Kind of an abrupt question, directed my way. You were making sense there, about the *guy*.”

Karolina said, “Did you now that Mac was once on that path? I doubt I’m telling you anything, you two seem to have become tight.”

Chris said, “I did hear that. It’s an interesting story. The kind that builds character, for sure.”

“Including a bit of prison time,” she said. And Chris watched her carefully, was she leading up to something here, and he couldn’t tell.

He said, “One thing, not reading the *main* part of the newspaper -- not online either -- someone said there’s a scandal going on, back where I was living, USC. Stanford too. Other prominent institutions . . . underhanded shit.”

“What do you mean?” Karolina said.

Oh boy. Was she playing it coy? Or was Reba feeding him a line of manure? Or . . . maybe Karolina had simply encountered a glitch, in that regard, but took care of it.

Chris said, “Good then. You’re not involved . . . That way I can check off the erroneous information that was floating around -- that I probably mis-interpreted anyway -- and get on with my positive lifestyle around here . . . I was even thinking of breaking down and springing for a serious of personal training sessions, the machines at the rec center. You have any thoughts on that?”

“All right,” Karolina said. “When I asked what you meant -- okay now I think I understand it.” And now she too, with the face in the hands . . . and what was going on around here with these people . . . was it something in the water?

Unlike with Lucy out on McBride’s mini-deck last night, you weren’t going to make physical contact now with Karolina . . . were you? That would be awkward for a number of reasons. So Chris said, “Can I get you a Gatorade or something? Out of your kiosk deal?”

He was referring to the hut behind the bleachers, likely one of those sheds from Home Depot that they display in the parking lots sometimes, where a racquets pro could store equipment, and apparently plug in a little cooler.

Karolina brought out some Kleenex and waved him off. She said, “I only mentioned this to a few people. One of them was Reba. Did you fuck each other?”

“Ho-ly To-le-do,” Chris said.

“Well? Is that such a *bizarre* question, Jeffrey? The others I’ve mentioned it to -- and not even my husband -- they don’t live around here.”

Chris said, “No, we didn’t, since you want to be nosy.”

“And I didn’t realize she had such a big mouth.”

“Hold on. We had a respectable evening. We’re sort of on the same page, some ways. She’s *worried* about you, is all.”

“Uhh . . . and she told you my private business, *because?*”

“No idea. But did it ever occur to you, you lay something heavy on someone, *they* may be uncomfortable and want to pass it off on someone *else?* That they didn’t seek it out?”

Karolina thought about it. “You could have a point . . . I tend to think only of myself, I really do, don’t I? . . . You’re absolutely right.” She started with the face in the palm again, and Chris wasn’t sure if she was being sarcastic this time, and putting on an act . . . but one thing for sure, this was a roller coaster ride he didn’t need either, just like what he said about Reba not needing it on *her* plate.

Chris said, “Do me a favor. Let’s don’t worry about who shouldn’t have said what, and which of us may have personality defects -- and I put myself right in there too -- but the other thing she said, was I might have an idea.”

“You just *said*, you didn’t know why she told you.”

“God dang it. I just *thought* of it, replaying the conversation. We were in a restaurant for Gosh sakes, I was enjoying myself, distracted.” He realized it might not have been there, it was more likely back in the apartment, after they’d enjoyed a round of high school-style making out . . . but same difference. Either way, Reba had told him he struck her as a fixer of sorts, and that jarred him, more now actually, that it was registering -- like, am I acting a certain way to give off that impression? And could Dale the cop for example, pick up some crazy vibe I’m emitting?

“Okay I’m sorry,” Karolina said. “*Do* you? Have an idea?”

“Not yet. I mean, if ever. But I’d need more information . . . to offer an opinion. Or a recommendation.”

“Fine then . . . In a nutshell, my daughter Sabrina . . . she’s currently a freshman at UCLA.”

“Good. Great institution. One of the best public schools in the country, along with Cal.”

“What’s Cal?”

“Berkeley. Keep going. She’s a freshman out there . . . *how*.”

“She’s a good kid. We sent her to Brookfield, all four years.”

“Is that, like a prep school then?”

“Not technically, there’s not the residential element. But it’s in that league scholastically. All-girls. In Scottsdale.”

“Ah.”

Meanwhile -- shifting gears momentarily to the other business -- there were questions you weren’t going to ask her, and they didn’t belong being asked . . . but Chris couldn’t help wonder how it worked -- the swinging lifestyle, when you’re a parent for Gosh sakes . . . and the husband, identified now as Victor . . . what the heck was his story, did he have his own thing going too?

But with it all, they apparently produce a ‘good kid’ as Karolina puts it, who’s on a solid track, beginning at UCLA.

Maybe.

“So . . . what can I say,” she said, “my daughter -- studies-wise -- she was an average student at best . . . Yes, many colleges place weight on the quality of a student’s high school itself . . . but suffice it to say, Sabrina was junior college material.”

“Gee,” Chris said. “Not even Northern Arizona? Flagstaff? When I was looking myself -- this was years ago -- but that place sounded appealing. And it was a no-brainer to get in, they almost rolled out the red carpet.”

“Times have changed. UNA has become a popular destination . . . But more significantly, I wanted better for Sabrina.”

“So . . . let’s get down *to* it. You’re not going to tell me you consulted with the guy in the paper?” And Chris had done a bit of reading last night after Reba left, the LA Times with quite a series of articles on it actually, the

service in Orange County offering college perks for cash. And things went south from there.

“I haven’t,” she said. “But there was a gentleman in Tucson.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.”

“And? Bottom-*line* me. You paid him something.”

“28 thousand dollars.”

“28? That’s a funny number.”

“There was a list of services. I picked *some* . . . You think this is funny, keep being an asshole.”

“I don’t. Sorry about that . . . So the service -- you’re going to tell me they helped your daughter get into UCLA.”

“Actually we had a choice, we were told, the way it shook out. Which included Wake Forest, the University of Texas, one or two others besides UCLA. Not USC, which would have been our first pick.”

“She’s better off at UCLA,” Chris said. “People don’t think of it, they get caught up watching the Trojan marching band on the TV football games, launching into their signature piece: ‘Conquest’ -- but the fact is, SC’s in a tough neighborhood. I wouldn’t want my daughter driving in and out of there.”

“That’s your uneducated opinion.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Chris said.

“Mind you, I didn’t ask a lot of questions. What I do feel likely happened . . . well there were two main areas. The gentleman claimed connections at the schools, and my money ostensibly was earmarked as a donation . . . the other area, the service claimed to have someone who could correct Sabrina’s SAT’s.”

“*Better*, you mean.”

“I’m sorry?”

Chris said, "Correct the *tests* better. Than if a normal corrector was correcting them."

"Correct. Jesus, we keep repeating ourselves, but right . . . The normal corrector typically being, in my understanding, a computer."

"Don't they have essay questions now too though?"

"Jeffrey, do you have to nitpick here? Computer, no computer, *partial* computer -- the service . . . indirectly . . . offered the ability to fudge her scores. Is that plain enough?"

"What'd she get?"

"She got a 1490. That apparently counterbalanced her GPA, which was barely a 3.0."

"Hmm. That wouldn't have done it alone, I don't think," Chris said. "My neighbor's kid? When I was in Petaluma? He said you needed at least a 4.0 for the UC system these days, regardless of your SAT scores."

"Fine . . . that further demonstrates the value of the service, does it not?"

Chris said, "Dang, I can't say that it doesn't . . . even myself -- I'm getting off track here, but I had a friend I was trying to get accepted there, under special circumstances -- and in hindsight I guess it was a pipe dream -- but I had a guy helping, influential alum, connected up the wazoo -- not just at UCLA but other places -- and that didn't work."

This was Rosie of course, and Chandler the one trying to help out, though admittedly Chandler told Chris in the beginning that it wouldn't work, unless Chris possibly went through a service that was helping some people over the hurdle, the way Chandler understood it, and that he couldn't recommend the service pro or con, didn't know enough about it, but suspected there was some risk involved . . . and son of a gun, this would have been right in the middle of the Orange County scandal when it was still quiet, before the indictments came . . . and man, that's all Chris would have needed.

He said, "What I'm hearing, you forked over cash in good *faith*, to a legitimate enterprise . . . You didn't bribe anybody . . . You didn't enlist anybody to score your daughter's exams . . . It's not your business, how the enterprise handled it from there."

Karolina said, "That was my thought. All along. What's the basketball expression -- no harm, no done?"

"No harm, no *foul*. I get the idea."

"And," she said, "as you've been seeing for yourself, in the news, that's not good enough."

Chris knew she was right of course, and no doubt if he racked his brain he could think of cases he'd heard of, or maybe even knew someone involved in -- where ignorance doesn't count for *jack*, defense-wise.

He said, "But whether it *should* have been your business or not, this place is in southern California, right? The one in *question*, that's all over the news?"

"Yes. So again, I'm flying under the radar at the *moment* . . . And I don't expect you to be able to relate this. But have you ever tried sleeping at night, fearful that it's only a matter of *time* before the law puts two and two together and closes in on you?"

*Ouch*. You got *that* right lady. If you only knew the *half* of it. But Chris said, "No. When you put it that way, I can't imagine what you're going through."

"Thank you Jeff. Can you help me?"

"Whoa. Just like that?"

"You already told me, Reba considers you an idea person."

"Yeah, well. I appreciate you running it by me. I guess. I mean, that at least demonstrates a connection beyond the pickleball world."

It wasn't much of a joke, and either way she didn't get it. "The worst thing?" she said. "What one might term, your ultimate irony?"

"Oh boy. What?"



“Sabrina doesn’t even like it there.”

“Umm.”

“A lady friend? Who I play in a 5.0 tennis league with, over in Anthem?”

“Yeah?”

“Her daughter is friendly with Sabrina. She told her mom, Sabrina pulls no punches, on social media, that it’s not her cup of tea.”

“Give her time, probably,” Chris said. “Where are we here . . . coming up on the end of her first year?”

“You *say* that,” Karolina said. “*You’re* not the one’s gonna need to put a gun to her head, get her to go back.”

“Don’t anticipate. You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

“My friend’s daughter, she said Sabrina posts videos from her dorm room. Complaining . . . The nerve. It’s not enough to whine, she has to show the world, as well? . . . You can see the furniture in the background, even the poster on the wall that I gave her as good luck, when we moved her in.”

“What is it?”

“What difference does it make? It’s an old black and white photo, skyscraper construction in New York City.”

“Wait -- the guys on the open beam? Taking a break? Sitting there smoking and yakking away like they’re on a picnic? Except they’re 60-some stories up?”

“Yes, that one . . . So we confronted her over spring break, Victor and I. All she tells us, she has this boyfriend, off campus, he’s an intern in the movie business, in Culver City. Her mission -- should she decide to accept it -- is move in with the clown, and veg out.”

“Now *you’re* joking around. The line from Mission Impossible . . . I’m older than you, by a long shot, but when I was a kid, the tail end, did you know that guy also played on the Saturday morning western show Fury?”

“I thought I read that was his brother.”

“Wrong. The brother was on Gunsmoke . . . what you’re saying though, your daughter, they go through that. The grass is greener somewhere else. And you know what? It might *be*, for now. Why not let her figure it out?”

Karolina said, “Why *not*, you ask? How about, because I’m going to jail either way? -- and I might as well get my *money’s* worth? Does that work?”

Chris said, “As an answer? Not really. Because you need to calm down and think clearly. You’re not going anywhere. You’re not under the radar, you’re *off* it . . . if you even remotely should have been *on* it. Which is dubious.”

He put his index finger under her chin, and gently guided her to look him in the eye. “Okay?” he said.

“Do you promise?” she said softly, kind of breaking your heart now actually, like a little girl talking, being tucked in by a parent, reassured that there was no boogey-man in the closet.

Chris said, “Now you’re putting me on the spot.”

“Speaking of spots,” Karolina said, “we’re meeting this evening. You know, the extended group. In case you’re interested. Spa No 4. To ease the joints and so forth.”

“Same time, same channel?” Chris said.

“That’s the plan,” Karolina said.

## Chapter 9

Chris went back and showered and took a deep nap and when he woke up he was real stiff, no getting around it, and he did end up in a couple hot tubs that afternoon, the main one by the diving pool and later No 3 behind the rec center, which offered a nice view of the 8th fairway of the golf course . . . if you used your imagination and considered any of that natural.

The bottom line being, he wasn't going to join the crew for the apparent liaison tonight that you'd assume was being kicked off again by the warm up act Karolina mentioned in Spa No 4.

That shit was just too weird, honestly. Even though everyone looked fine, a relatively friendly and wholesome bunch, at least on the surface.

Chris remembered picking up a hitchhiker one time near Klamath Falls, and it wasn't a long trip, the guy was more or less local, and Chris dropped him within an hour, but the guy was a talker and by the time they got there Chris had the guy's life story, and the guy's girlfriend's too, whether he wanted it or not. There were a few people out front on a porch when Chris said so-long to the guy, and the women were not unattractive, and Chris put it together that it was some kind of communal situation, like an extension of the free love movement out of the 60's.

Which may or may not have qualified as *swinging*, the Klamath Falls people's particular lifestyle, but it was certainly creative.

Chris hadn't thought about picking up that hitchhiker in years, but then a reality show came on, an ordinary looking suburban neighborhood in Cincinnati, regular-enough humans populating it -- but then there were a

couple of designated houses where some of them congregated from time to time, and the lifestyle flourished.

The show didn't quite go R-rated on you, it mostly chronicled the build up -- the before and after, Chris supposed, the couples' normal lives in between -- but then there was something in the news that the show got pulled because of complaints from normal neighbors who didn't participate in any of that and weren't fans of the new characterization of the neighborhood.

And who knows, the whole thing may have been staged anyway, there was a bit of an improbable element to it, wasn't there.

After the first episode -- not the TV one, but the hot tub one the other night right here in the Rancho Villages Spa Number 4, the appetizer part of them heading back to Waylon's -- out of curiosity Chris looked up the *subject* of swinging -- who wouldn't at that point?

It was semi-interesting. As he suspected the practice stemmed from a free love revolution in the heyday of the '60s.

As you might expect, the movement justified itself in a few ways that seemed shaky. One was some couples saw swinging as a healthy outlet, a means to strengthen their relationship.

Chris started thinking what the current hot-tubbers were doing may not be technically 'swinging' after all, since none of them were apparently in relationships with each *other*. In fact to make it 'swinging', you'd assume for example Karolina would bring Victor, and then of course pass him around.

But whatever.

Another interesting theory was that swinging got going among Air Force pilots and their wives during World War 2. The thought being -- the mortality rate of those pilots was high, and therefore tight bonds developed between pilot families, with the unwritten understanding that the male

pilots would take care of the other wives -- emotionally and sexually -- if they were to lose their husbands.

Chris was thinking, with all due respect to the military, this sounds a bit crackpot, like a sneaky way for a guy to get his hands on another guy's wife. But who knows.

A recent study was cited as well, where 60 percent of the time swinging improved the relationship -- and Chris figured how could *that* be -- but he did wonder if he was taking too prudish a view of the real world.

There was also a *movie* 'Swingers', a semi-comedy out of the '90s which Chris never saw, but hey, you might take a look sometime.

The rub there was: you had a guy who gets dumped in New York, moves to LA, is badly depressed and misses the *dumper* . . . so his friends coax him into an impromptu trip to Las Vegas, where he succeeds in picking up two waitresses. But his obsession with the dumper gets in the way.

He finally connects with someone on 'swing night' at a Hollywood night club, and when the dumper calls him out of the blue, he finds he doesn't miss her anymore.

Hmm . . . after reading the little blurb, Chris was thinking they should let *me* help 'em with these scripts, that fine, maybe the movie made money, but Jeez, where's the *punch* line here?

Though he couldn't resist, he took a peek at Netflix just in case, and no, 'Swingers' wasn't listed . . . and he did find it on YouTube but they wanted \$4.99 from you, so Chris said forget it, and decided -- what was going on at the Ranchos, notwithstanding -- that he'd learned more about swinging by now than he needed to know.

\*\*\*

There was of course another reality show Chris enjoyed a few years ago, this one good, wholesome G-rated material.

What it was, you had one specific family struggling with the changing economy -- which Chris was guessing was around 2010? -- but the point being, that one *did* feel real, every moment of every episode. Or at least Chris wanted it to be real. He got swept up in the emotions of the characters, the dad especially, and he cried once or twice along with the guy when a scene undeniably did call for it.

That family drama -- Chris supposed that's why he was here right now. The family lived nearby, allegedly, north of Phoenix, different suburb but the set-up was the same, a similar planned community with pools and golf and the other amenities -- though the difference was the family was renting now because they'd gotten foreclosed on their booming property up in the hills someplace, and likely on their vacation house too.

You had to give the dad his due, he'd been a high-end builder and the bottom dropped out of the market almost overnight . . . and the guy was reduced to walking around the neighborhood knocking on doors and asking people if they needed any handyman services.

At one point the transmission goes in the family vehicle, and there's the guy out in the garage in the middle of the night laying on his back underneath it, trying to figure out how to install a new one.

So yeah, Chris admired these people, and the lifestyle out here made an impression on him too, so not a huge surprise out of the whole 50 states that he ended up here back when Ned stopped by that first time and suggested they lay low for a while. Chris knew it was a long shot, but *that* time out here he hoped to somehow run *into* the reality show dad, but apparently the family had moved by then to Texas, the home-building economy in better shape down there and the dad apparently making a comeback.

All that aside . . . bottom line tonight, despite the generous offer from Karolina of Spa 4 and undoubtedly someone's condo to follow . . . Chris went back after his double hot tub treatment and stretched out with a little

Netflix . . . and sure, part of you missed being around the action on a Saturday night, but the flip side, Eclipse was also teaching you that doing *nothing* was okay too -- if you didn't *compare* it to anything.

\*\*\*

Sunday morning Chris almost forgot that he had to work today, the golf course gig. But worse, they were having a charity event, and you'd have to figure it was on account of Waylon.

Chris's boss, nice enough guy otherwise named Gibbs, who admittedly did a fine job maintaining the golf situation -- but he was one of those guys who was enamored with celebrities, no matter how slight their status.

There'd been a guy and his wife renting here for a couple weeks last December, and Gibbs found out the guy once briefly played keyboards for Bruce Springsteen on the road in the late 70's when the main guy couldn't make it -- and that main guy might be Danny Federici, who Chris *had* heard of.

At any rate, Gibbs rolled out the red carpet for the guy, and it sounded over the top and the guy was apparently embarrassed by it. After all he just wanted a little R and R. But Gibbs first of all gave him free golf and food and beverages for the whole stay, and he got a Phoenix TV station involved, and then there was an autograph session and a luncheon with a bunch of local dignitaries -- and when it was over the keyboard guy was probably never so relieved to get out of Arizona.

So today, yep, you had an NFL charity golf event, that anyone could enter for a hundred bucks, and there were handicaps and a complicated format, but the gist was you could also opt to pay relatively *big* bucks to be in a foursome with one of the ex-NFL stars.

And you would use the term *stars* loosely, like with Waylon, who fine, lasted the 8 years in the league, but was a career backup.

Today Chris was reading the event brochure on his way over there, and you had Carlton Webb, a defensive back/kick returner who played with Kansas City in the 90's. You had Mal Bolton, a wide receiver with the Saints maybe 15 years ago, who, okay, Chris did remember making a big catch in a playoff game that Chris had a little money riding on. But again, that may have been the highlight of the guy's career, you never heard much about him before or after that play. Frank Fritsckie, a nose tackle with the Lions in the 90's, pretty obscure. And Joaquin Washington, a running back with the Bears in the early 2000's.

Washington was the first guy Chris spotted when he got to work, and the guy did look pretty dang good, like he could still play. He was horsing around with Bolton and Waylon in front of the rental table that Chris typically manned, and the guy moved with an easy grace like he was floating and could change direction on a dime -- which was ironic because this guy of all of them could have been a true star but suffered a devastating knee injury on Monday Night Football and tried to come back but was never the same.

And of course right there front and center was Chris's boss Gibbs, running around like a chicken with his head cut off, nervous and excited and looking foolish, rolled into one.

And Gee . . . quite a turnout when you looked around, and plenty of folks were still filtering in -- and there was little podium set up and there were some pre-tee announcements . . . and Holy Toledo, some guy had put up 10 grand to play 18 holes with Joaquin Washington.

That was hard to wrap your head around, but Chris supposed more humans than just Gibbs were awed by celebrities, especially sports ones . . . and the other numbers were announced -- \$2500 each for Bolton, Fritsckie and Webb, and someone forked over 500 bucks to play with Waylon. You did feel a little bad for the guy in that context.



Chris's big first task, relayed by Gibbs' assistant Ardith, was to golf-cart beverages to the celebrity players on various holes. Not something Chris would have selected, not a role he was used to playing . . . but what the hay, it was part of the job, and the charity was hopefully for a good cause, though no one quite told you where exactly the money -- plus the raffle scratch and other associated fundraising -- was going.

Bolton and Webb and Washington were black dudes, and they were reasonably polite when Chris caught up to them with his cart stocked with refreshments, which included some hard liquor mixed in. Webb asked how his day was going, Bolton said please and thank you . . . and Chris figured he could bring up the catch on Monday Night Football, why not . . . and Bolton pretended to downplay it but you tell he was happy to be remembered. Washington was joking around with his entourage and didn't really acknowledge Chris but didn't talk down to him either.

Fritsckie was another story. Chris caught up with Fritsckie on 13, and you could tell right away the guy was irritated at his \$2500 patron who was standing there with him, because the guy talked the whole time and could barely play.

Instead of asking Chris what was available in the beverages department, he took charge himself and poked around fairly recklessly in the back of Chris's golf cart.

After a minute he frowned at Chris and said, "Bud. Y'all got club soda up the ass, but I'm requiring me some tonic water. Hows about we giddy-up on back to your piss-poor faggoty kitchen set up, and bring me some?"

Chris took a moment to digest this.

"*We?*" he said to Fritsckie.

Now it was Fritsckie taking a moment. He was smiling.

"Well ain't *you* got a mouth on you . . . Boy, I was you, I'd best not be *back*-talking."

"Is that right," Chris said. "Though the *Boy*, I'll take, I guess."

The patron who paid the money was trying to intervene, talking fast about cooler heads prevailing, and adding, “Mr. Frank, why don’t we hit our second shots?”

Fritschkie regarded that comment now like he had been doing with Chris. He said to the guy, “Well seeing as how you’re so peachy *keen*, how about *you* retrieve the tonic water for me then, Sweetie.”

Not really asking.

And son of a gun, the guy did as he was told. Or started to . . . meaning started to get in Chris’s cart and drive back to the refreshment zone at the first tee . . . and then he realized what he was doing and got back *off* the cart.

“Be my guest,” Chris said. “I appreciate it. Just tell the gal with short hair and glasses -- that’d be Ardith -- what you need. For Mr. Frenchie, here.”

“That’d be Fritschkie,” Frank said.

“Right,” Chris said.

Meanwhile the patron guy nodded like a bobblehead and sped away on the cart.

“That’s more like it,” Frank said. “Them jigaboos, you might find more agreement there. Y’all er dealing with *me* now.”

Chris assumed by ‘them jigaboos’ Frank was referring to the three black-guy former NFLers.

Chris said, “How about Waylon? Same thing there?”

“No,” Frank said, “Way’s good *people*.”

“I know him from the hot tub,” Chris said, leaving it at that . . . and Frank pulled out his cell phone, and talked for a minute to someone, yukking it up . . . pointing out that the ‘help’ around here, this charity golf deal, they needed a little *learnin’* in the manners division, not to mention respect.

Frank was looking off toward the 12th green, the red rock hills silhouetted behind it, and he was pointing that way as he was talking, though Chris couldn't figure out any connection.

Meanwhile, Chris reached down into Frank's golf bag, pulled out a 7 iron, took a moment to get a good grip . . . and when Frank ended his call Chris swung it all his might into Frank's ribs.

He'd hoped for a bit of cracking sound, but there didn't seem to be one. It was more like you hit something that was pretty dang hard on the outside, and inflated on the inside, and there was a thump -- closer to a big marching bass drum being pounded than a guy's ribs getting broken.

Either way, the effect was decent. Frank doubled over, looking back over his shoulder at Chris with a maniacal expression, kind of a grin though, which was semi-alarming.

Chris backed off a few steps but still wondered if he'd have to outrun the son of a bitch.

Frank probably weighed in these days at 275-plus. Which of course is probably the ballpark of his NFL playing weight, except fat had pretty clearly replaced muscle.

But the *neck* on the son of a gun . . . if Chris thought The Tank was a rough customer in that regard, ol' Frank's neck was double the size, at least, and it did make you cringe to imagine having to similarly loop a wire around *that* thing and see it through to conclusion.

The other point being . . . even though you could diminish Frank and other 4 as not being superstar NFL players . . . there was something worrisome about dealing with *any* guy -- as you were with Frank now, who had luckily sat down on the grass -- who made it that far. Meaning professional football, period. The show.

Chris thought of the time he was playing tennis in Golden Gate Park, and there was a local tournament going on, on the main courts, and the word spread that Jack Malkin's daughter was playing.

Malkin played left tackle for the 49ers back in the 80's. Chris was born in 1976, so he was a kid when Malkin was there, and the guy was an ordinary player, workman-like, basically blended in. Chris did remember having the guy's football card, though he had the whole team's back then.

In any case, they mentioned that Malkin's daughter had just taken up tennis, and the Golden Gate Park pro talked her into trying the tournament.

So Chris saw her warming up, a reasonable crowd in the stands, and he went over there too -- and the opponent was much better, more skilled and experienced, and Chris didn't stick around very long -- but wouldn't you know, the very first point of the match, the Malkin daughter kept the ball in play for over a hundred and fifty shots.

So . . . there was unique genetic material in these people, and they obviously passed it to their offspring . . . and yeah, Chris did wonder if he *could* outrun the guy if it came to that, the adrenaline and fury and of course genes kicking in.

But Frank didn't look too good, or too threatening down there.

So Chris said, "You okay?"

"We're good," Frank said, and it was horse and dry, but definitive enough . . . and Chris figured you had to give the racist redneck a-hole a modicum of respect . . . he was tough, and he got what he deserved (arguably), and he acknowledged that fact . . . hopefully.

Frank still could file a report when his 18-hole charity deal was over -- if he made it that far -- but what was he going to say, really.

One thing you knew, guy like that, you could drive a truck over him before he'd want to show weakness -- and it likely wouldn't look great to the other NFL dudes--Waylon included -- for big tough Frankie to be filing a claim or calling the cops on a wimpy course attendant who supposedly took him down with a golf club.

The patron-guy was coming back down the fairway now in the cart, full speed ahead, and he produced a quart bottle of tonic water and was a

bit startled to see Frank sitting there, his legs wrapped over each other almost yoga-style now, in the middle of the manicured grass . . . but the guy didn't question it and asked Frank how he'd like his drink mixed.

And Frank took a minute, rolling his right arm around, convincing himself apparently that he could still play . . . and he told the guy to give him his hand and help him up, so they could get this son of a bitch show back on the road, and that the 18th green couldn't come soon enough.

Chris stuck around a minute longer -- maintaining his distance -- to make sure Frank *could* still play golf -- and the sucker's first shot after the incident, he must he have driven it a hundred yards . . . and Chris got back in the golf cart and decided that was enough for now -- that the other NFLers could adjust their own beverages the rest of the way -- and he drove the thing straight to his condo, put on a swimsuit, and plunged into the pool.

## Chapter 10

The thing Chris remembered, while working on his freestyle in the slow lane of the lap pool, was unfortunately there was a barbeque event attached to the NFL charity thing, once everyone finished the golf.

He was trying to master breathing on both sides. Some old guy in the pool a few weeks back had it down pat, had probably been swimming that way for 60 years, and he gave Chris some pointers.

Chris was once on a competitive swim team when he was a kid in San Francisco, 4 days a week at the USF pool, but he didn't last long enough to get the double-breathing down. The concept was you breathed to the right like normal, then another stroke down the middle with no breathing, then the third stroke to the left, the tricky one.

It made sense, and he wouldn't say he had the hang of it but he was making progress . . . but if you were supposed to be working the barbeque and you missed that, you'd probably get fired . . . not the worst thing, but why let it happen . . . and Chris hopped out and went back to work.

By the time he got there the participants were all milling around the patio outside the golf pro shop, and there were about 8 grills fired up, and Chris's boss Gibbs came racing by carrying a high waiter's tray, and he gave Chris some instructions -- so at least that part was good, Gibbs didn't seem to notice he'd been missing.

Chris made himself busy, not the stacking plates business that Gibbs asked him to do, but he opened and closed the barbeques, moved the meat around a bit with the tongs, and closed them up.

Joaquin Washington was watching with amusement. “So you a chef,” he said. “You got the touch today with the metal, man.”

Chris figured Washington was being sarcastic -- but something else occurred to him, that bit about the *metal*. Chris said, “Oh yeah? And what kind of touch would that be?”

The guy laughed. “You proving to be a source of entertainment. More ways than one.”

And that was over the top. Chris didn’t anticipate it, but this guy must have heard about the incident with Fritsckie.

What could you do?

So Chris said to Washington, “Big tough guys, stud ballplayers . . . I’d take a flying guess that none of you lasted the full 18.”

“Naw *man*, you got that right. Whad’ya expect?” Still laughing, having a good time, not really at Chris’s expense, so you couldn’t blame the guy.

McBride came over, and then Waylon showed up, and Waylon opened the grill, fiddled around with the tongs same as Chris, and stuck the top back on and said, “Frankie’s not feeling too good. We was just giving him our condolences.”

“Indirectly,” Washington said.

“The nose tackle guy?” McBride said. “What happened to him?”

“He fell on his club,” Waylon said, deadpan. Eyeballing Chris.

The three of them had cocktails in their hands, so Chris figured why not, and went behind the little bar and fixed himself a double scotch on the rocks, and came back. “That’s too bad,” he said. “Leading up to that, evidently, the man required some tonic water which I wasn’t carrying. I went to retrieve him some -- I return -- the poor guy’s stretched out in the fairway.”

“That bad, huh?” McBride said, picking up on it, that it didn’t go down exactly that way. “I mean the *thirst*.”

Washington shook his head. “A man’s got to have what a man needs,” he said. “Lookee here, at the end result.”

They all looked around, but nothing to see in the way of Frank, Washington was apparently speaking figuratively with the *lookee here*.

‘Well,’ Chris said, “before he placed his order with me, Frank was saying how harmonious it was in the NFL, the racial divide business . . . and how everyone’s open-mindedness continues to this *day* . . . in that regard.”

“That’s refreshing to hear,” Washington said, still smiling easy and loose, but the sarcasm thick enough to cut.

Chris glanced to the left and there was Reba now, looking pretty decked out for a barbeque, holding Waylon’s arm, who was introducing her to Washington . . . and the other NFL guys too, Webb and Bolton . . . and Man, people kept showing up out of the blue . . . and Chris thought for a second should he do any real work, but nah, this was more interesting.

The men were pointing toward the first tee and laughing about something, hopefully nothing to do with Fritsckie this time, and Chris saw there was some drunk guy out there trying to carry a fairly stout woman on his shoulders, and every step was a little rough and unpredictable.

Reba was by herself for the moment, and Chris said quietly, “So. You gonna bang the *NFL* guys now? . . . I mean not currently, but, you know.”

“*Eventually*, you mean?” she said.

“Something like that,” Chris said.

“We’ll have to see,” she said. Matter of fact.

“Well,” Chris said, “I have to hand it to you. You don’t duck the tough questions . . . even if you’re not sure of the answer.”

“*Thank* you. I think.”

“Listen, by the way, I took a look at the art you told me about.”

“Oh.”

“*Oh?* That didn’t sound too *good* . . . What it was, I was prepared to lie to you just now, and remark how much I enjoyed it.”



“It’s dumb,” she said, “my work’s a joke.”

“Ah,” Chris said. No point disagreeing with her.

“However,” she said, “a possible new lease on *life*, as they say.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. I will have you know that I sold one painting. Yesterday. You can probably detect a bounce in my step.”

Chris gave it a little thought, ran the collection through his memory as best he could. He couldn’t come up with one that would appeal to a buyer, honestly -- but hey.

“You’re cringing,” she said. “It’s okay, you can tell me what you’re thinking.”

“You can handle it?” he said. “Man to man?”

“Of course.”

“Well . . . only that, there’s no accounting for taste, I guess.”

“Fair enough,” she said, “though perhaps you didn’t need to be that *blunt*.” She’s raised her voice a tad, but not enough to distract the NFLers and McBride, still getting a kick out of the guy hoisting the big gal.

“Hmm,” Chris said.

“So yes. I tried something different. I changed it up. One painting.”

“And you say, *yesterday*?” Which was when Chris was in the bank checking them out.

“Correct. Around 2 o’clock I bring in the new one, hang it up, the wall across from the teller with the glasses on the chain, the older woman.” Chris remembered her.

“So *after* my time then,” he said. “I screwed up in there, I forgot a lesson with Karolina. But that’s another story.”

“Whatever. At 4:30 the manager, Mr. Knowles, he calls and says a regular customer wishes to purchase the painting, and should they take it *now*, or leave it up until the end of the show.”

“Jeez. Great then.”

“Yes. The first great part being, Mr. Knowles referred to it as a *show*. He’d never done that before.”

“Can’t beat *that*,” Chris said.

“No,” Reba said. “That, in conjunction with the sale . . . I’d have to say that’s the first time I’ve felt like a real artist.”

“Twenty-four hours then.”

“Jeffery, why do you insist on putting me down?”

“Sorry, I don’t mean to be.”

“Well you’re not exactly, but I feel you’re sticking in the knife, or something pointy.”

“The *needle*, maybe,” Chris said. “But meanwhile . . . congratulations of your sale. I mean it. That sounds like a world record, too, a couple hours.”

“Well as I said, I was fairly floored . . . The painting was different of course, than the rest of my work in the bank.”

“Different how?”

“You know . . . more colorful, vibrant. I wasn’t trying to do too *much*, but that which I *did* do, I excelled apparently.”

“You need to speak English, babe.”

“Fine . . . I faked the painting.”

Chris’s eyes got big. He couldn’t help it.

Reba was nodding. Staring right at him. Biting her lower lip slightly, a determined focus to the woman all around. Chris had a vision for a moment that if she was riding him -- if the other night back in his apartment had proceed further, for instance -- this would be her expression. He found himself second-*guessing* the other night, the cutting things short. But you couldn’t worry about it now.

He said, “That’s interesting. How do you fake a painting?”

“You copy it off the internet,” she said.

“Oh,” Chris said.

“So,” she said, “you caught me at a good time. In fact that’s what I’ll be doing later tonight, pulling an all-nighter. Producing more work.”

“Hmm . . . Same artist and everything then? Or different ones.”

“Same one. Someone who paints in obscurity, out around Pebble Beach. Below Carmel.”

“Wow. So you . . . reproduce them exact? . . . Or not quite?”

“Of course not,” Reba said, “what do you think I am? You make alterations. The one I sold yesterday for instance -- the artist had a sky full of puffy clouds. I shifted them to the right, got rid of one entirely, let the sun filter through that spot.”

“You’re saying,” Chris said, trying not deadpan it too much, “you make them your own.”

“That goes without saying,” Reba said. “It’s done every day in the art world.”

“Unh-huh. And the all-nighter? The art one? . . . That’ll be post the NFL proceedings? If those develop?”

“You know something,” Reba said, “you got a one track mind Jeff.”

And she headed over to the hors d'oeuvres table . . . and meanwhile the attraction on the first tee had apparently subsided, and there was Waylon again now, the idiot, opening one of the barbeque grills back up and pretending to be messing more with the meat . . . and one thing Chris knew about grilling, you basically left that shit alone and let the smoke and heat do its thing.

It was then that he felt the hands on him from behind, making contact around waist-level and sliding up quick and strong into his armpits.

Next thing, Chris was being combination carried-dragged *toward* the open grill the Waylon was tending, and from the breathing and grunting alone, he discerned that Fritsckie was the one doing the dragging-carrying.

And this guy may be 20 years over the hill with bad knees and arthritis and asthma and who knows, even a heart condition . . . but it

wouldn't matter, there was no more way you were going to fight him off than if you were battling a neanderthal whose cave you happened to be trying to break into.

It was all proceeding pretty rapidly, and it went from Chris thinking this is a little joke, right, a measure of friendly payback, the other NFL guys getting a big kick out of it . . . to the thing escalating to where Chris started to worry about getting his eyebrows singed if they carried it out too far and worked him too close to the grill . . . to where he was worried about remaining *alive*.

Part of the reason for that, the last concern, was the animal-like nature of Frank as he continued the dragging, relishing it -- you had the impression -- plus there was a creeping but real concern about how much the guy had to drink by now -- which went for Waylon as well . . . goofy, maniacal grin on *that* guy's face *too* as he held the barbeque top off to the side and welcomed Frankie directing Chris down the middle, not unlike a full-of-himself bullfighter flaunting the cape activity.

Chris waited -- and then more like *prayed* -- for one of the NFL guys to call them off, but no one did . . . and Chris was aware of it getting awful silent period suddenly, this supposedly festive back patio full of golf charity patrons who'd been whooping it up all afternoon until now.

Finally, Chris's face about 8 feet from the grill, Reba let out a scream that would scare off a family of Alaskan Grizzlies -- under normal circumstances.

Except Frank hesitated for a moment, and then continued his work.

At about the 4 foot mark a gunshot went off.

Chris wasn't seeing much out of one eye but he caught a glimpse of Dale, the cop, standing there in plaid slacks and a golf shirt, and Chris's first thought was Jeez, I didn't see the guy all day, I didn't realize he was part of this.

Unfortunately, despite the gunshot -- which was one of those straight up in the air jobs like you see in the movies, to warn someone off -- Frankie kept at it like nothing happened.

Dale took a big step forward and pointed the gun at Waylon's face.

Waylon dropped the grill top, put up his hands, and then started waving them and yelling at Fritsckie to 'hold it up now, *dog!*'.

Whether Frank got the idea or not, the NFL guys were tackling him finally, and Waylon joined in too . . . and dang, the guy was a difficult customer, but they got him on the ground on his stomach and somewhat under control, though Frank swung an arm backward and caught Bolton -- not in the face, more like the chest, but it couldn't have been pleasant -- and for the first time today Washington stopped smiling and reached down there and delivered a pretty fair roundhouse right hand to Frank's jaw region . . . and that slowed him down sufficiently for Dale to get the handcuffs on the son of a bitch.

\*\*\*

An hour later Chris said to McBride, "Pretty good chicken, you know it? I'm not usually a fan of poultry, in a barbeque situation I'm saying. *Thanksgiving* of course, fine."

"Me neither," McBride said. "I want the grease. The flavor's in the fat. But yeah, not bad. The sauce saves it."

There was Waylon now, showing back up, helping himself to a plate of food, and about to sit down at an empty table, when McBride called him over.

Waylon kept standing, he wasn't about to dignify the situation by sitting with Chris and McBride. "What do you need," Waylon said.

"Just an update is all," McBride said. "Everything pan out?"

"Depends on your interpretation," Waylon said. "Dale *worked* it, if that's where you pricks are going." And then he did sit down at another table, other side of the patio this time, furthest away he could be.

Chris said, "That mean . . . do you think . . . ol' Frank got hauled in? . . . Or let go?"

"Let *go*," McBride said.

"You say that with conviction."

"I know Dale by now . . . You know how sometimes you get a certain doctor -- even though they're trained in all the protocols -- they still try to avoid prescribing medicine?"

"No," Chris said.

"I'm not talking about a guy *convulsing*, but someone with a cold, and they want antibiotics, and the MD says try gargling with some warm salt water."

"I got you. You're saying Dale takes that approach. First do no harm, or whatever the lingo is."

"Yep. That would fit. So my guess is he spoke to the butt-hole for a few minutes, uncuffed him, shook hands and told him no harm no foul . . . as long as he hit the road and didn't come back."

"Good plan," Chris said. "An act of diplomacy -- that typically comes back to reward you."

McBride cleared his throat. "As opposed to the way you handled it, whatever fairway that *was*?"

Chris didn't answer that one, but he said, "The dead body though still. The poor gal. You think there's any way in hell Waylon could have had something to do with that?"

"Probably not," McBride said, "but I wouldn't mind it being pinned on him."

"Not at all," Chris said.

## Chapter 11

Monday morning Chris rode his big clunker one-speed bike over to the Eclipse library to see if he could find anything on the Lucy business from the other night.

There were a couple of points here. First, the UFO experience she claimed to have had with her dad when she was four, where the flying object sounded like it might have been struggling a bit mechanically until it released that discharge over the silver mine in her grandpa's old deserted home town. Hillsdale, New Mexico, Chris was pretty sure she said.

Chris wasn't a believer -- or a disbeliever either -- in UFOs. He was open-minded, and would admit to being a sucker for much of the heavy stream of UFO presentations on YouTube. Most of them were poor, shaky, illogical, after you'd let it run a couple minutes . . . but a few were well-done, had solid sources being interviewed, such as airline pilots and ex-astronauts and military people -- that you came away thinking -- could be.

It was a bit like trying to solve a serial killer case from the cheap seats -- meaning the internet serial killer amateur sleuth chat boards -- where even a case like the Zodiac (not the best example, since Chris and Ken may have *solved* that one . . . though maybe not) . . . but the point being, you want to be open to every possibility, until it is ruled out.

Same here, with Lucy. You give her some room. And she had described it pretty cool and calm and collected the other night, hadn't she, out on McBride's little back deck. She wasn't trying to convince you of anything, force an agenda on you . . . and she didn't seem senile or off her

rocker either, far from it . . . so you chalk it up as interesting -- and you give the sweet gal the benefit of the doubt.

But fine. Leaving the UFO aside -- the second takeaway from the other night, the potentially *alarming* one, was obviously the referenced mope who'd been contacting her about her dad.

What did Lucy and Gertrude say again? . . . This was the grandson of a guy who got murdered -- an innocent bank patron -- in the robbery that Lucy's dad committed?

And now the guy wanted something from her?

At first, according to her story, it was more like the guy was reaching out. He'd found her on Facebook, and Lucy didn't shy away, she befriended him (Facebook-wise at least) and maybe initially the guy was just after some closure.

Chris could understand that. Again, you never really knew your grandpa because things got tragically cut short -- and on some level maybe you even sympathize with the other party (Lucy), since *she* lost her dad as well not long after, and certainly as a result of the same incident.

And maybe you even cut her -- and her dad both -- some slack . . . since hadn't Lucy said this person's grandpa (Alan was the grandson's name, Chris remembered -- or at least the fake one he used on Facebook) was actually shot and killed by an accidental bullet from an off-duty security guard who happened to be in the bank making an ordinary deposit and found himself in the middle of a robbery and tried to take matters into his own hands?

All that.

And all that could very well be true.

Except of course, now he wants money.

Never the greatest concept.



So . . . Chris figured, get a little background at least, absorb a few things . . . maybe you can educate yourself enough to at least make a recommendation to Lucy.

To at the *minimum* -- get the hell off Facebook and don't go back.

As Chris had learned this last year-plus though . . . they rarely played out that simple.

But here you were.

It took a few minutes, but Chris located a headline for an article from June 30th, 1961. The Oklahoma City Press. It read:

### **One Killed in State Street Bank Hold-up, Suspects at Large**

The problem now being you had to read the darn thing on microfilm, since it was too old to qualify for the internet archives. This was never great, having to involve a librarian, but Chris went for it and fortunately the woman simply set him up at a microfiche machine, and then pointed to a case full of newspaper archives . . . so it was largely self-service, you'd didn't have to blurt out specifically what you were looking for.

The article itself read:

**Dateline June 29th-- Three masked robbers held up a Union Pacific branch late Tuesday afternoon and escaped with \$16,212, while leaving one man dead, police said.**

**Oklahoma City residents are advised to be on the lookout for the trio, who are considered armed and dangerous.**

**Police spokesman Wallabee Walker said reports indicated the robbers fled in a brown pickup, make and model undetermined.**

**The men were last seen travelling east on Cherokee Avenue, Walker said, and possibly headed toward Route 62 in the direction of Blanchard.**

**A bank customer was pronounced dead at the scene.**

**He has since been identified as Alan P. Hittenger, 44, of 1898 Bing Tree Way.**

**Walker said, that pending ballistics tests, it remains to be determined how Hittenger was killed. Walker said there is speculation that an off-duty Brinks driver may have opened fire at the suspects, possibly striking Hittenger.**

**This was the third armed bank robbery in town this year. In February one man struck a Mercy Street bank, also a Union Pacific branch, and in April a man and a woman robbed the Telluride Savings and Loan on 3rd Street.**

**All three suspects in the two earlier robberies have been apprehended. In the Telluride Savings incident, the robbers allegedly argued outside the bank, whether they should 'give it back', and meanwhile an arriving squad car rode up on the sidewalk and crashed into both of them, not fatally, but doing the job.**

Hmm. Welp . . . the account more or less lined up with Lucy's . . . and Chris supposed, with the *kid* who's been harassing her. (Chris was using the kid term loosely, figuring -- lining up the dates -- 1961, the dad maybe a teenager when the grandpa dies, so . . . you put the math together . . . you might place the grandson (Lucy's Facebook 'friend') at around 30 years old currently.

In other words, the Alan person.

Interesting that that's his Facebook name, same as the late grandpa's.

But you can't judge it, the dad may have named his own son after the grandpa . . . possibly.

So . . . no mention this early of Lucy's dad -- Henry Pitts being the name she gave him -- or of any of his associates being arrested -- though Chris figured no doubt if he spent enough time roaming around in follow-up articles it would all be there, including the dad Henry eventually being sentenced to the 12 years at the state penitentiary in McAlester, Oklahoma . . . where Lucy said she and her mom visited him most Sundays, until the time they got there and were told he'd died overnight, which Lucy the rest of her life chalked up to a broken heart.

Taking a step back for a second, the part with Lucy's dad, you could certainly empathize with a daughter thinking the world of her dad and missing him every day forward . . . even though at the same time she conceded that he did a terrible thing and contributed -- not intentionally but indirectly -- to the 'Alan' person's grief. *Alleged* grief.

Meaning Lucy was in a tough spot the rest of her life -- aside from losing her dad, she no doubt wrestled with the morals involved, and you couldn't blame her for befriending 'Alan'. There may *have* been some closure there, that she'd been seeking all these years on *her* end too.

But still . . . Chris was thinking nah, you can't sympathize with her dad, unfortunately.

Again, the Zodiac killer discussion forums -- someone was trying to make a case the other day that the taunting letters that everyone assumed were written by the killer may not have been -- that a non-criminal may have been playing a prank and pretending to be the killer in the letters.

But someone else in the discussion forum then pointed out that if you obstruct an investigation in a death penalty case -- and that's what the Zodiac crimes were -- that you then (the letter writer) could be facing the death penalty yourself.

That's how you had to objectively view Lucy's deal. Sure, the dad may very well have been desperate and down and out and in no way intending to shoot anyone that day -- it was all about getting a few bucks -- but the fact is, if he *didn't* participate, there might not have been the chain of events set in motion where 'Alan's' *grand-dad* perished.

That aside . . . Chris went back to the computer and googled **Alan P. Hittenger, 44, of 1898 Bing Tree Way, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.**

Not much. Too obscure probably, and too far back in years. Only one little thing in fact, but it may take you somewhere.

Except nah. The spelling was off.

Jeez. Some Alan B. guy, not P, and worse, the last name was spelled with two E's and no I. The address didn't line up either, so you had the trifecta.

Chris took a moment to reflect, and once more concluded he was getting way too *old* for this stuff.

But. You were here, so you go back to the microfilm. Clunky as that whole setup was.

There were some false starts there too, but eventually in the 1961 Oklahoma City Press archives he found the paid obituary section, and the one for Mr. Hittenger.

Except there was little there, other than the standard death notice. The man had passed away on June 29th, and ascended to the acknowledged better place.

Chris was getting ready to give up, but he noticed another paper archived from only 1959-1963, the OC Examiner, and it was pretty clear from the size of each day's output that this was a small operation, probably trying to compete with the main paper, the Press, and then running out of steam.

But they reported the same bank robbery, though not until a couple days later, and it was a brief article but they added the one detail, that the victim Alan Hittenger was employed by Nash-Dalton Certified.

Whatever that was. So Chris got on the desktop once more, found out they were a food processing plant, specialized in tomato products, but were pretty substantial all around in the southwest back then.

Chris never heard the brand name, didn't remember ever squirting Nash-Dalton catsup on a burger, but that would be logical, if the operation was regional.

In any case, there was stuff you could read about Nash-Dalton, the company lasted a long time, treated the employees well according to various accounts, and finally had to file bankruptcy in 1989 after a half century run.

If you dug a little more, a few of the links, there was a roster of all-time employees -- and man, you had to give it up for whoever compiled this -- and you could click on your employee and see what you might find.

Though half of them had nothing added, other than the years the person worked at Nash-Dalton. A few had a photo attached.

When he found Hittenger half way down and clicked on him, you had the same date business, no photo, but an extra few words, fairly clinical:

**Deceased 1961. Wife Mary and 2 daughters.**

Wow . . . Chris assumed that meant he *left* a wife Mary and 2 daughters? What else would it mean?

A separate thought, they couldn't even get that part into the obituary for the poor guy? Who he leaves behind? Not one thing personal?

So you leave it to a decent company, Chris supposed, to at least chronicle that much.

But forgetting that . . . where was the son then?

Didn't 'Alan' make the case to Lucy that he heard about his grandpa, in stories that his 'dad' told him -- stories from his 'dad' growing up with the guy?

And this 'grandson' now of course wants 10 grand for his trouble.  
What a surprise.

Chris thought about it, the ways it could line up, and okay fine, it's possible the wife was pregnant with a third child, a boy, meaning Alan's dad, at the time the grandpa was shot.

That'd be a bit of a reach, but you didn't dismiss it out of hand.

Except, if there was eventually a son, it sure seemed like the pretty dang efficient-seeming Nash-Dalton directory would have picked that up.

Or . . . the grandpa could have fathered a child out of wedlock ('Alan's' dad again), and that might explain it.

Maybe.

Likely not.

Chris had read about something not too long ago called Occam's Razor. The principle went back centuries, and Chris was surprised to learn that it underlies much of scientific modeling and theory building.

What Occam's Razor states, in a nutshell is: Don't make any more assumptions than the minimum needed.

This made sense. And in this particular case -- Lucy's Facebook friend claiming his grandpa -- on his dad's side -- was the one cut down during Lucy's dad's crime . . . nope.

The Nash-Dalton company archive laid it out nice and simple and logical for you.

That 'Alan' may have indeed had a grandpa on his dad's *side* -- but this wasn't the guy. Because this guy was unlikely *anyone's* grandpa on *anyone's* dad's side.

At least until proven otherwise.

Meaning . . . Lucy was most likely being scammed, not just by a legitimate family member who was mad and wanted some restitution -- that would be bad enough -- but by someone out there with no connection whatsoever, and who could easily be as unpredictable as the rest of the dark side of the internet.

## Chapter 12

Chris headed from the library to the work, and it was a quiet Monday on the golf course, which Chris wasn't complaining about, and maybe it was even quieter with everyone a bit jaded and on edge and burnt out following the NFL charity thing with the ensuing fireworks at the barbeque -- and wow, he hadn't really isolated it in review, but that *was* something else with Dale having to fire the pistol into the air.

After work Chris figured what the hey, you needed to move around, and he wandered on over to the pickleball courts. Dale was warming up on Court 4 and saw Chris and motioned (speaking of the devil) and you could see the issue was the guy on the other side was waiting on a partner which might not transpire, so Chris grabbed a paddle.

They played a couple sets, switched teams around, and the level was decent. Chris felt like the worst one out there, and his first partner, the guy who needed one in the beginning, started giving Chris tips between games.

Stuff like: "We gotta get up to the line faster. We gotta serve 'em deeper in the deuce court! We gotta play the tall guy more in the dink game, he doesn't get down as well as the *short* guy." And when none of that worked, a few games later, the guy more directly told Chris: "My friend, you need to listen to me, or this ain't gonna work."

Chris tried to smile it off and said to the partner, "It's not going to work *anyway*. I'm the weak link tonight . . . You ever try to square up a horseshoe . . . into a sealed container?"

"I'm sorry . . . *what?*" the guy said.



“What you do,” Chris said, “take all my balls. Play it like I’m not on the court. What’s there to lose?”

The guy said that wasn’t a bad *idea*, and thank you for extending that liberty -- and the guy did essentially take over, as though Dale and his partner were playing 2 against 1 -- and that was an *unmitigated* disaster, Chris pretty sure he and the wannabee dominator-partner won quite a few less points that way than when they were both actually playing.

Whatever. When it ended the partner was miffed and got out of there right away, no small talk or niceties, and Dale’s partner said good night . . . and Chris and Dale sat for a few minutes on the courtside bench.

Chris said, “I won’t bring up the activities yesterday, because I’m sure you’ve gotten plenty of that today.”

“You can,” Dale said. “No biggie.”

“All in a day’s work, you’re saying?”

“A colorful day’s work. Every cop needs a few of those. Break up the monotony.”

“Well, understandable then,” Chris said. “Though something I’ve wondered watching it on TV, also reading in a crime thriller where a cop does it.”

“Firing into the air?” Dale said, having fun with it.

“Yeah. And you interrupted me. Old westerns, that’s where they *really* did it.”

“Oh always, back then. That’s why *I* wanted to do it. I’ve been saving it up.”

Chris said, “Dang. Never before then? The NFL fuck, he took the cake?”

Dale nodded. “Seemed like a good time to initiate one. By the way, you hit him with the club?”

Ooh boy. Chris said, “Well . . . will full disclosure work against me?”

“It could. Except I feel good, winning those three sets handily. I think my topspin backhand’s getting better. You think?”

Chris didn’t want to tell him that no, that stroke didn’t look *any* better, and to forget it, that’s the toughest shot in the game for hackers. That was drummed into him ad infinitum by Chandler . . . What *was* working better for Dale is he wasn’t trying to hit as many winners, so by playing it safer and keeping the ball in the actual *court*, he was playing better. But no point getting into it.

Chris said, “In that case I’ll risk it. I did make a little contact with the guy down that fairway. Uh-huh.”

“Uh-*huh*.”

“And you said did I hit him with *the* club -- not sure what you mean, it was actually *a* club. Since golfers carry a bunch of them.”

“A 9-iron, I was told,” Dale said.

“Try a 7. But who’s counting?” Chris said.

“Well,” Dale said, scratching an ear, “I admire your diplomacy.”

“Now we got it reversed,” Chris said. “That’s what I was going to tell *you* . . . But before I really put my foot in my mouth here . . . and you decide to arrest me . . . or you receive some random text that upsets you, undoes the high of the pickleball performance, and you change your mind for that reason . . . let’s switch it to the dead body.”

“Fair enough,” Dale said.

That was abrupt, and it caught Chris off guard slightly. He said, “So yeah . . . not sure what I was going to ask you, specifically, except are we anywhere on that? . . . *they*, I mean, not me as part of the we.”

“Naw, you’re entitled,” Dale said. “We’re all community members here. I won’t get maudlin and call us a big, happy family -- but you’re as much a part of expecting and deserving good police work as any other individual.”

Chris said, “That bad, then, eh? The status?”

“Oh yeah, going nowhere fast with these idiots . . . We have a joke, across a bunch of jurisdictions, pretty timely at the moment . . . how you qualify to end up on the force in Eclipse. I won’t repeat it, it’s pretty unforgiving.”

Chris had been going back and forth for a few minutes, since the pickleball ended, should he open a can of worms by asking about DNA. He decided screw it, and said to Dale, “I get you, you have zero confidence in their forensics . . . But is there *anything* testable? Far as you know?”

“Blood,” Dale said. “The victim fought back, the perp spilled a few drops. Does that work?” Still with a goofy smile, but you had to like the guy okay.

In fact Chris tried to think of any other cops where he could be sitting here, sun going down over the high desert hills, and be having this kind of loose casual conversation with.

And he couldn’t really come up with one. And that applied to before his diagnosis -- when he was theoretically a solid citizen -- as well as to after it.

Chris said, “So, what’d they do with the blood?”

Dale turned a little more toward him, though he had to visor his face with his hand, the sun was really doing its thing now . . . not like up north or out west, really blazing here. He said, “What would you expect them to do with it?”

“I don’t know . . . test it? See if matches anyone in the system?”

“Not bad,” Dale said. “And that they did do. And they came up with their dick in their hand. Meaning . . . for all points and purposes, that’ll end the search for justice in this case. Since now that they have to go to Plan B -- old fashioned detective work . . . meaning interviews, analysis, and gathering of circumstantial evidence . . . that ain’t going nowhere.”

Chris said, “The suspect blood they picked up, they tested it against which database?”

Dale let out a little chuckle. “Whadda we got here? An amateur sleuth? Or you been watching early re-runs of Law and Order . . . The New York ones by the way, I always thought they were more realistic, than wherever they fanned out to later.”

“Baltimore.”

“Oh that’s right. I take it back, some of those *were* compelling.”

“So *which* database?” Chris said.

“CODIS. Which I’m guessing you’re familiar with?”

Chris was, in the sense that this was old-fashioned DNA police work. CODIS was the database of known felons, whose DNA was already in the system. If one of them committed a new crime, and the lab handled it right, you could have a match and solve the case. “Oh,” he said. “So within those limitations -- the killer is a first-time offender then.”

“Probably,” Dale said.

“May I ask which lab?” Chris said.

“Man, you *are* a fanatic. Which I’m not holding against you. But what, you go on the serial killer forums on Reddit and shit, try to solve 40 year old cold cases?”

Actually 50 would be the answer if you included the Zodiac spree, which began officially in December of 1968. The assault on the poor high kids in the pullout off Lake Herman Road in Benicia. But the details of the online forums weren’t important.

Chris said, “All’s I know, which any law abiding citizen could at this point, from simply reading the papers . . . is police crime labs typically aren’t set up with the newest testing methods.”

“Whoa,” Dale said, smiling fine, going along with it, “you have inside information then. Well, the *city* lab does the testing for all the jurisdictions around here.”

“City?”

“Yeah, Phoenix PD. Maricopa County has a crime lab too, but it’s slower.”

Now it was Chris rubbing his ear, and wondering should he go any further. But you had to at least suggest something. Maybe someone was already on it, but you couldn’t leave it on the table in case.

He said, “You wouldn’t . . . by any chance . . . have an extra sample. Would you?”

Now Dale did laugh, but it was bit hard-edged, and he narrowed his eyes slightly. “You mean,” he said, “do I *have* one -- like in the top drawer of my desk at work?”

Chris cleared his throat and lowered his voice, even though there was no need to. “Have is the wrong choice of words. The right one, it’d be more like *get*.”

“Ah. That’s different. Can I get one? Steal one, you mean.”

“Yeah,” Chris said, “that’d be good. We can run a different test, maybe.”

“Such as?”

“Well . . . you been following the way they caught the Golden State Killer, correct? Joseph Deangelo?”

“Somewhat,” Dale said. “Family matching, which I don’t entirely get yet. Speaking of which though, they got us scheduled for a workshop on the subject of updated cold case principles. Which I’m assuming includes what you’re talking about. Weekend after July 4th in fact, which pisses me off, because that’s the normal weekend a bunch of buddies and me, we rent a houseboat at Lake Havasu.”

“That rings a bell,” Chris said. “Isn’t that where the spring break college kids go?”

“Sure. You don’t get any of that in the summer though. We play cards all night, sleep half the day, dive in whenever we feel like cooling off. You

come back re-charged . . . I'd even invite you to come, but like I say it's looking like it won't work out this year."

"I appreciate the thought," Chris said. "Like I say, they caught this guy by running DNA from the crime scene -- oh, and first, you need a better lab, the latest testing equipment and techniques -- so the DNA profile is more complex . . . Anyhow, they ran the DNA under the new improved method, matched to a 4th cousin. Once you do that, you can take it to the bank -- something like a billion to one odds -- that the killer is in that guy's family tree."

Dale got up and went into Karolina's little pro shed -- her not being here tonight, and him apparently having free run of the place -- and got a couple cokes. He didn't say anything for a little while.

"If I'm reading you right," Dale said, "you know more about this shit than I do. I'm not ashamed to admit it . . . That'll change. We haven't broken out the cold cases yet . . . Plus you can probably figure out, petty department politics and all, we're typically behind the curve of cutting-edge civilian science . . . However -- what makes you so smart, beyond your piddly internet groups? You don't mind my asking."

This particular question felt penetrating, for the first time. Hopefully Chris was imagining it, and hadn't gone too far. You better back it up though. He said, "Long story. I got some issues in my family, different relatives not getting along great . . . There's been a concern that won't go away, a bunch of them claiming there's a half-brother uncle in the mix, the others claiming there was a foster situation . . . It's stupid. I could care less, but then they started running their spit tests through Ancestry.com. Which wasn't the right way to go about it."

"So you took over the investigation," Dale said, and at least he was back to grinning.

“I read up on it,” Chris said. “Cutting to the chase, we linked to a distant cousin in Detroit. Nice enough guy, and lo and behold, part of the authentic family tree. So yeah, I solved it for ‘em.”

“Interesting . . . Which you’re proposing to do here, on behalf of the elite men and women of the Eclipse, Arizona, police force.”

“Get me a little sample,” Chris said. “We’ll find a lab, give it a shot together. You never know.”

Dale considered it. “You’re asking me to steal evidence in a capital case,” he said, “which, technically, is a felony.” The guy still smiling though.

Chris said, “Can you . . . I don’t know, classify it as a *borrow*?”

“I may be able to figure something out,” Dale said.

\*\*\*

Three in the morning there was a bunch of commotion. Chris had been sleeping beautifully in the recliner, where he tended to stay most of the night lately.

In the past he’d let the thing put him to sleep and then shift to the bed, but now, apparently because of the darn pickleball, his old pinched nerve from 5 or 6 years ago -- that stint teaching high school history up in Terra Linda, where he stood and paced all day for emphasis -- and only later discovered he was wearing the wrong shoes for that kind of work -- was acting up again.

You weren’t going to *blame* the pickleball. It was still kind of a dumb game, but you felt good after, and again, it kept you off the torturously monotonous exercise machines at the rec center. Plus, admittedly, you had the social element.

But it was what it was, the pinched nerve and the sleeping situation . . . and now Chris staggered to his feet and opened the front door of the condo to take a look.

There was quite a bit of yelling, a ground floor unit off to the right, about 20 away from Chris’s . . . which translated to maybe 50 yards. And he

thought he heard a familiar voice in the middle of it . . . and you couldn't see that well in the dark, and part of your view was obscured by a block of units extending horizontal . . . but it sure sounded like McBride.

Chris debated giving it a closer inspection, or -- the much more sensible approach -- let whatever the heck it was play out . . . the *what will be will be* philosophy . . . but the darn voices seemed to be getting louder, which included some female ones as well . . . so Chris reluctantly threw on some sweats and hustled over there.

You had a weird scene unfolding.

Waylon and McBride were currently out front of condo section F of the Rancho Villas -- and Chris wasn't sure whose apartment that would make it, since he'd been to Waylon's and McBride's -- but you'd assume it belonged to one of the other 'players' in the little after-hours thing they had going.

In fact standing nearby, their hands up covering their faces as though terrified or horrified, were Reba, Karolina -- and Gee, not Amy this time but the thin, rangy gal, who he remembered from pickleball but hadn't previously associated with this brand of activity.

No Dale, apparently. Which likely would have prevented the altercation from getting this far out of hand.

Waylon and McBride were both in their boxer shorts, no shoes, no t-shirts. They were angling west of the condo unit, right now were crossing one of the pebbly-walking paths -- and maybe 25 yards further was a fake duck pond about 2 inches deep that residents sat around.

The crux of the matter though, the two of them were locked in an embrace. It was a fight, clearly, but you could have mistaken it for a dance. It reminded Chris of that Greco-Roman wrestling you saw in the Olympics, where you couldn't grab the guy's legs.

McBride and Waylon actually had their heads on each other's shoulders as they continued grappling for leverage and position. It would



have been comical, almost, but Chris knew why you did that -- to avoid exposing your face to where the guy had enough distance to clock you with a major fist and end your evening with authority.

Chris hated to insert himself, but since no one else was doing anything about it, he said, trying to fake his *own* amount of authority: "Okay fellas, let's take it back inside . . . *Come on*. Break it up now."

He could feel them both sideways glancing at him out of their clinch but that was about it, and if anything, his little injection *upped* the intensity level of the altercation.

You hated to call the police -- especially the Eclipse folks -- and likely Karolina and Reba were having similar thoughts, since they wouldn't particularly relish being questioned about what was going on here -- the whole picture, that precipitated this?

There were a couple other lights that had gone in people's units, though no one else came outside, but someone must have called Rancho's house security, because here was a guy rolling up to the action on a three-wheeler job, like the meter maids use.

Unfortunately he was an old guy, and Chris was pretty sure he recognized him from dealing with the trash and recycling containers in back of the restaurant -- and Gee, maybe the guy was a dishwasher who moonlighted overnight working security.

No gun on the guy -- thank God, because something could have gone way south there. He did have a short night-stick, attached to his belt.

"What do we got?" the guy said to Chris.

Chris said, "Just the usual, I'm guessing. Couple idiots who think they're tough guys."

"Do you know these folks?" the security guy said.

"Sure, they're harmless . . . Nothing on middle of the night TV would be my guess, so they take it outside for a little extra. No doubt propelled by a little booze. Boys will by boys. It'll run its course."

Meanwhile, Waylon suddenly got the upper hand. He slid out of the embrace, forced McBride down to his knees on the pebbly walking path, and Jeeminy Christmas, slapped what sure looked in MMA fights like a rear-naked-chokehold on the guy.

McBride of course had done exactly the wrong thing. What they tell you, the commentators on those bouts, is never give your back to the opponent -- meaning specifically the back of your neck. There were of course a variety of front-chokes too, but the one you take to the bank, once the opponent locked it in with the other arm, was this one currently being applied to McBride.

A separate thought was you did have to give McBride a modicum of credit for standing up to this jerkell -- not just in spirit but in reality. The guy had gone toe to toe with Waylon for at least a solid few minutes, before unfortunately being submitted -- which was now playing out in full, no doubt about it, Waylon with the right arm just so -- and not choking off the guy's air passage, which is how Chris understood it, but squeezing the life out of the carotid artery -- which shuts the brain down momentarily, and the guy doing the applying wins the bout.

So yeah . . . you *did* wonder about McBride. He'd mentioned the hot water he'd landed in, the late night real estate stuff where he admitted to duping folks with the fake lifetime e-mail consultation . . . so you had a bit of mystery to the guy already . . . but having the guts to take on -- and holding your own (for a while) -- against a cocky redneck NFL guy who'd no doubt been around the block . . . Chris decided that showed some character, for sure, and you were curious what other aspects of McBride's life story might have been similarly colorful.

All that aside -- the guy didn't look too great right now.

Waylon had reduced McBride from his knees to flat on his stomach, and Waylon was continuing the with the neck-lock full speed ahead, a

crazed grin dancing on and off of his face, which Chris figured corresponded to his level of exertion.

It occurred to Chris that McBride was likely out cold by now, and that should do it, conclude matters for tonight -- except Waylon wasn't showing any signs of buying into the program. *Whoa.*

Chris shouted, "You *got* him! Let him up!"

Which wasn't the right choice of words, exactly, since McBride wouldn't be getting up for a *while*, even if Waylon *let* him.

But at least you got Waylon's attention. Though the response wasn't what you hoped for. "Whyn't you help *yourself* then, faggot," Waylon said, plenty of enthusiasm behind it.

This was a challenge obviously, no different than a third grader bully in a schoolyard saying 'make me' to the kid who's telling him to release a different kid who's crying and screaming to be let out of the headlock that the bully's got him in.

The old security guy was thinking the same thing as Chris apparently -- that the boys will be boys portion was now over, and we could be looking at a more acute situation here. If it continued unabated . . .

So the old guy showed some fortitude as well, and pulled the night stick off his belt and started waving it at Waylon, ordering him to put his hands up. Or trying to . . .

This only inspired Waylon, and you could see him theatrically adjusting things under McBride's throat, and then re-aligning the grip and cranking it up yet another notch -- really sweeping the right arm in there for effect. And maybe that's all it was . . . but damn, this was started to get scary now.

So the security guy did the logical thing, taking it to the next level, and he came up behind Waylon and swung the night stick downwards, and caught Waylon between his *own* neck and right shoulder blade.

The problem being, there wasn't enough force behind it . . . and Waylon laughed it off . . . and meanwhile went into another theatrical ratcheting up of the rear-naked-choke.

The guard had had enough, and this time struck Waylon on the side of the head, and the stick slid out of the old guy's hand and landed next to Waylon and McBride.

There'd been a little sound from the impact on the Waylon head, but not enough, nothing like when you hit a ping pong ball for instance, much less a pickleball. . . but Waylon at least broke his grip on McBride, and he reached up and felt behind his ear and then looked at his hand, the way guys check for blood . . . and then, a dang smooth motion, quite athletic Chris had to admit, he grabbed the stick and fired it overhand at the old guy, and it hit him right in the mouth . . . and the old guy was down and pretty quickly there was blood all over the place.

Waylon then resumed his position over McBride, who hadn't moved a muscle during the brief interval where Waylon released him. Chris hated to make the connection, but it reminded him of a big cat in the African wild methodically caving in the neck of the prey to make the kill, but taking its time, before-during-and after, no urgency to move on.

At this point Karolina and Reba and the skinny gal -- plus a few other residents on the scene now -- started screaming, and rushing to the fallen security guy.

Chris couldn't help thinking -- sure, that makes sense, but you couldn't open your mouths when Waylon was in the middle of possibly expiring McBride?

Chris checked the security guy too, and the blood was disconcerting, but at least he had his eyes open and was trying to say something -- though shock could certainly set in pretty quick, especially with an old guy, and at least there was the scrambling of someone calling an ambulance, and another running for a blanket and some first aid stuff.

The guy was on his back and the night stick that Waylon had flung was curiously laying directly verticle, off the guy's right hip, pretty much right where he could have been carrying it . . . under better circumstances.

Chris debated it for about half a second and picked it up. Waylon (and of course McBride) were 15 yards away. Chris slid the stick around in his hand slightly, to get a feel for it, and he headed toward Waylon.

Waylon saw him coming, and the on-and-off maniacal smile was on again, and bigger.

Waylon said, "Well ain't you a piss-poor excuse for a real man. I've heard of sloppy seconds, but you's taking it to a new level."

Waylon laughed, and it sounded like an old-fashioned car horn, the ones with the hee-haw effect.

"Let him go," Chris said.

You could sense Waylon evaluating the situation.

Maybe it was adrenaline, maybe it was booze, maybe it was macho pride . . . or maybe it was evil.

But Waylon -- after this type of challenge especially -- was not going to relinquish his hold on McBride.

Chris was digging deep himself, wondering -- even if this guy didn't *kill* McBride, there'd be a point where, you deprive the brain -- or even part of it -- of oxygen long enough . . . doesn't brain damage set in?

Chris didn't know, and it wasn't something you could guess at . . . but your instincts sure suggested enough time had gone *by* -- even with the possible re-start when Waylon freed McBride in order to deal with the security guy -- that he needed to get the fuck off him.

Chris started to raise the stick, and Waylon said 'hold on' and Chris hesitated.

You hoped this meant a compromise was in order.

Except not with Waylon. He said, “Make’s you a deal, bud. You try to hit me with that thing, fine. Your prerogative . . . It don’t do the job however . . . then I’ll kill you . . . We got a deal?”

Chris absorbed this, and had no doubt that Waylon wasn’t playing.

That he shakes off your attempt, releases McBride for real, and comes after you big time. And once again you’re going by instinct, but Chris’s told him Waylon likely would *indeed* kill him.

And one other problem being, a rather significant one, on Chris’s end -- the darn night stick didn’t have a lot of substance to it, did it . . . and you had to wonder if it was mostly for show.

And this fact was no doubt not lost on Waylon.

Waylon was clever in his own way. He could justify the altercation with McBride (probably) because they were having a mutual disagreement which escalated on both parts. Waylon might be able to explain that if he *didn’t* choke out McBride, McBride would have choked out *him*.

Then Chris coming along, taking his shot, Waylon could explain that the reason he killed Chris (Jeff Masters) was because he feared his life was in danger after Chris tried to kill him with the billy-club.

All lined up. Perhaps. Whether the cops would buy any of it is a different story, but that didn’t matter right now, did it . . . all that mattered was Waylon’s immediate viewpoint . . . and state of mind.

Chris had a vision, for whatever reason, of a perfect swing he produced one time in junior high school baseball.

It was Mr. Gullickson, in fact, who was the coach . . . who Chris and Gloria had gone to see recently out in Walnut Creek, and things didn’t work out well.

Gullickson had been riding Chris hard, about his batting stance, that he wasn’t planting his front foot at the moment of impact . . . and before the next game Gullickson took Chris aside and grabbed a bat and reiterated what he meant.

Gullickson knew his stuff, even though the players feared and hated him, and that day Gullickson's little demonstration clicked.

So Chris comes up late in the game, big spot, guys on base, and the count goes to 3 and 0.

Chris swings at the next pitch, and his vision of Gullickson's demonstration plays out perfectly -- looking back in later years it was probably the closest thing to a Zen experience that Chris ever had -- and he crushed the ball on a line over the center fielder's head.

The problem with the whole thing, what ruined the day, was Gullickson had given Chris the *take* sign on 3 and 0 -- which meant he wasn't supposed to swing at the next pitch.

Gullickson grabbed Chris by the bill of the cap when he came back to the dugout, and spit in his face, and told him never, ever, under any *circumstances*, defy me again.

Chris hadn't intended to defy *anybody*. He was unfortunately concentrating so hard on keeping that front leg straight at impact . . . that even though he looked at Gullickson before the pitch -- and saw Gullickson *giving* him the sign -- it didn't register.

That story, it was neither here nor there. At the moment.

Except Chris couldn't shake the image of connecting with that pitch that day, every part of the swing perfection, the ball and the bat and field all one . . . everything synched up and unified . . .

And he carried that image forward as he cocked back the night stick, sized up Waylon's head right where the junior high school pitch was hurling toward him, and Chris let his hands do the work, and the forearms pronated perfectly and right before impact there was his front leg straightening out just so . . . and the contact with Waylon's skull was so loud that all the activity around the fallen security guy went dead silent, and Chris was quite convinced, for better or worse with Waylon, that he'd expired the motherfucker.

## Chapter 13

For an off-duty cop, Dale was definitely dependable. He showed up bright and early Wednesday morning, a knock on the door, and without any real expression attached, he hands Chris a small box.

It was the type of box that a department store might wrap up a watch in, or a piece of jewelry, after you purchased it. There was padding on the bottom, and resting on that was a rectangular thin piece of glass, similar to what Chris remembered them making you do stuff with in high school science classes.

Centered on the glass was a small piece of fabric, the size of a thumbnail, and slightly off-center on that was what looked like a drop of blood.

“Sheesh,” Chris said, “I didn’t know you had it *in* you.”

“You’re welcome,” Dale said, “I’m surprised you underestimated me. What -- you thought I was joking?”

Chris felt bad, since *he* was trying to joke, and it sort of backfired.

Dale handed him some latex gloves and told him if found himself having to handle the specimen, which he wouldn’t recommend, to use them.

“Well okey-doke,” Chris said. “Man . . . So what’s our next step?”

“You’re asking *me*? After all the build up, your heavy duty science background?”

“Not background. I read the papers, keep abreast of the latest developments . . . what can I tell you.”



“So you said,” Dale said. And that wasn’t great, a little edge to it, meaning Chris’s extra story from the other day, about having to help confirm a long lost relative being real or foster, to settle a family argument, may not have settled 100 percent down Dale’s hatch.

Whatever. Chris wasn’t worried about Dale getting to the next the level, figuring out the reason Chris knew so much about it was because he was running his *own* as a test, to stay one step ahead of law enforcement.

That’d be a stretch, for sure. Dale didn’t fully understand how the new system even worked -- which he’d admitted to Chris -- so highly improbable he, or anyone for that matter, would be on to Chris’s little angle.

And even then -- wasn’t a citizen allowed to run their own DNA?

But back to this. Chris said, “The next step, I guess, is to find a lab. A cutting edge one that does these every day . . . We come out of there with a profile -- that’s like a text file that you upload to your computer -- then you go ahead and run it through Gedmatch. Or we do it together, or whatever you like.”

“We’ll do it together,” Dale said. “You got a computer?”

Chris didn’t like that idea, simply out of general principle, sitting down with a cop to roam around your personal computer . . . but he realized the one in the apartment, it wasn’t his Manhattan Beach one, there was no noteworthy history on the thing, since he’d picked it up new at Best Buy when he moved down here and barely used it.

“Works for me,” Chris said, “though . . . you don’t want to be running it from the one in your squadroom, or something?”

“Let’s keep it quiet,” Dale said, and Chris put together of course the two minor facts: that Dale stole the evidence and this wasn’t his department’s case. So you weren’t going to argue with the man there.

Chris said in that case he’d find a lab ASAP, and keep him posted . . . and thanks.

Dale said, "Yeah, let's see what happens," and nice guy that he was he told Chris to bill him for the lab test, and Chris said he *had* this, it was non-negotiable.

"If you insist," Dale said. "Meanwhile . . . how you holding up?"

This, he'd be applying to the other night, the business with Waylon and McBride. There'd been a day in between. Chris said, "Physically I'm good . . . Though you know when you grip something real tight, and you got the adrenaline working?"

"Yeah?"

"Like one time this friend railroaded me into trying Laguna Grand Prix Driving. That's the name, not the real place. It was a chain of go kart deals in California. But the karts were souped up, they looked like mini Indy 500 ones, and you had to wear a helmet and sign a bunch of releases."

"I *remember* those. We had one in Fort Worth."

"Gee, didn't know you were from there. I don't hear any accent . . . Point I'm making, I pay for one session, ends up being like 3 or 4 laps, my hands are locked up after for days."

"So you're saying," Dale said, "Waylon's skull had the same effect."

"I guess," Chris said, and Dale wasn't dancing around the concept, because that's exactly what did *happen*, it turned out . . . Chris fractured Waylon's skull.

"How about mentally?" Dale said.

"Well, I think I've turned the corner there too . . . My first thought, after I followed through on the stroke, I'm gonna need a defense lawyer. And . . . you know the drill . . . should I remain silent when you guys show up. All that racing around in me up top."

"But, thankfully -- it didn't pan out that way," Dale said.

"No. I guess me being out there in my slippers and robe didn't hurt. And plenty of witnesses."

Dale said, "Unh-huh. Karolina's always valuable in that regard."

“She is. When the cop showed up, and she cornered him, allegedly giving him the rundown -- I started to ease up on needing to find that defense attorney.”

Which was true. Karolina got him off the hook nice and clean and logical. She at the time -- 4 in the morning or so when the cop arrived -- wasn't wearing a whole lot herself, at least up above, essentially a fairly transparent and tight turquoise t-shirt, and that was about it.

The interesting part was it was the same cop who showed up a week ago, questioning Chris during his golf rental gig about the overnight homicide. This was the guy with the cowboy hat and big gut hanging over the belt, who Chris concluded asked a lot of questions but didn't seem to be putting anything together, and Dale had confirmed that unequivocally, in his general evaluation of Eclipse PD.

But let's face it, thank God Waylon hadn't died, since then all bets would be off, and sure, Chris should ultimately be okay, but it could be a mess for a while, and his real name would surface, and plenty else that could be royal pain.

So you'd confined Waylon for the foreseeable future to a double room, Chris learned, in the Lady of Grace Medical Center in Phoenix. And it was what it was.

McBride meanwhile, was fine, if you could believe it. Chris saw him yesterday at the pool, no more than 12 hours after the near death experience, and the guy was cracking jokes like nothing happened -- though there was some serious markage and indentation around his neck region.

They'd shot the breeze a bit, nothing heavy, and Chris said he'd buy him dinner tonight, why not.

Dale told Chris he'd catch him later and said, “Either way, good the guy didn't die on us.”

Chris was thinking, didn't I just go over this? He told Dale thanks for pointing that out, and to have good day.

\*\*\*

“So how’s yours man?” Chris said to McBride. “Any kick to it?”

“None at all,” McBride said, “just how I like it.”

There was a Chinese restaurant Chris hadn’t noticed before, in the strip mall across from Denny’s, and he’d insisted on buying that dinner for McBride tonight, catching up a bit, and McBride suggested the place.

“Only reason I ask,” Chris said, “I’m getting ready to call the forest fire service.”

“Why them?”

“Come on, figure of speech. I mean I can handle hot *stuff*, but these noodles -- someone back in the kitchen must have got distracted.”

“Not sure what the issue is,” McBride said. “Alls you do, you check the menu before you order. If they have the chili pepper dealie next to the item, you move on.”

“You’re preaching to the converted,” Chris said. “Typically -- in fact almost never, when us white folks are the main clientele -- does that little logo mean diddlysquat.”

“Then why’s it there?” McBride said.

You weren’t getting anywhere here. Chris signaled for some more water please, and did his best with the House Special Peking Noodles -- which really did have a thick and extremely bright red sauce covering them, and shouldn’t the sauce have been at least a tad lighter in color?

He said, “So. The other business. I didn’t press you on it . . . but you blank out? Or no.”

“The second time, yeah, I’m pretty sure,” McBride said. “Because Reba told me I was asking the questions you might expect . . . how did this happen, how did I get here, what time is Johnny Carson -- all those.”

Chris said, “Johnny *Carson*? I loved that guy, what I remember of him. He was your friend on the screen . . . it was like you were an insider, and he was speaking directly *to* you. There was a warmer vibe than you get

with the late night acts today . . . what you're saying though, the Johnny Carson reference highlighted your confusion."

"Right," McBride said, "in fact yesterday out of curiosity I looked him up. Johnny retired in 1992. In the spring."

"Dang . . . maybe *that's* why I appreciate the guy so much. I never put it together, but that was my senior year in high school. In fact right then, the spring, all the fun stuff was going on, the prom, picnic, other BS -- as they ushered you out the door."

"Into greener pastures. I'm a couple years ahead of you, but same ballpark deal."

Chris said, "We had a guy, a teacher -- you know how the class votes on who they want to give the motivational speech, at the graduation?"

"I don't remember us doing anything like that," McBride said.

"At any rate, they pick this guy -- a science teacher, I never had him -- but the son of a gun, standing out there on the football field, middle of the ceremony -- delivers one of the most inspiring speeches I've ever heard. And as he tried to end it, the guy got choked up, could barely finish it off."

"He meant it then."

"He did. No canned script for this guy. He *wanted* us to go forward, and conquer shit . . . and also, on some level, he was sorry to see us go . . . I should have said something to the guy, but I never did."

"It's never too late," McBride said. "I've converted on a few of those. You feel good."

"I saw the guy downtown in Macy's one year at Christmas. But I didn't go up to him. I fizzled out. A couple years later, I see in the alumni bulletin that the guy died during a summer vacation, in a fishing accident in Alaska."

McBride nodded and gave Chris a moment. Chris decided sometimes you could tell who the sensitive people were who you ran across, by when they simply kept their mouth shut -- and this McBride was okay.

Chris said, “So what I’m thinking, next couple days, that I might head down to Tuscon . . . You have any interest in tagging along?”

McBride kept chewing but he was processing this one, and Chris was pretty sure he wouldn’t have to spell it out.

“So the college business,” McBride said.

“*Allegedly*,” Chris said.

“It didn’t add up, is all . . . that you were . . . prepared to shoulder the burden. As it were.”

Chris said, “I may not be . . . It just logical . . . or that may be going too far, let’s just say -- it didn’t seem *illogical* -- to at least get a word with Karolina’s benefactor in the thing.”

“A meeting of the minds,” McBride said.

“Hey, something like that. Sure, why not.”

“What else we got going . . . you’re saying, that precludes us from making a little excursion down that way?”

“You know something? I’m starting to appreciate the way you put stuff . . . When I get back to my other life, I’ll have to remember to mirror some of your shit.”

McBride said, “That’s a new one. The going back to another life reference.”

“Yeah, well,” Chris said, “with Waylon, you know, back on the loose soon enough, and all . . .”

McBride said, “That’s the thing, isn’t it. Him not being charged, can’t quite wrap my head around that one.”

It didn’t make sense to Chris either, when you had the little quirky situation the other night of one human trying extinguish another via an extended chokehold, and not making any bones about it.

But Dale had explained it -- sort of -- that that part was a fight with two willing participants, and that the old security guy was the real key to Waylon being arrested and charged, but the old guy -- from his *own*

hospital bed -- said forget it, he didn't want it to be a big deal, with word getting around.

Even then Eclipse could have charged Waylon, couldn't they? But Dale said his impression was the fat cop *knew* the old guy, deferred to his wishes, and therefore left it alone.

McBride said, "A lot of *stuff* lately, apparently being chalked up to self defense." And Chris figured that included *him* kind of lucking out as well, not that different than Waylon in the end.

Chris said, "So yeah. For those reasons . . . and a few others . . . I thought sooner rather than later. The Karolina activity."

McBride had been trying to use the chop sticks, had switched to the fork, put that down now and wiped his mouth with the napkin and took a deep breath. "Well, what are you doing tomorrow?" he said.

## Chapter 14

The lab business Thursday morning wasn't routine it turned out, there was another layer that made it trickier to engineer.

The rub was the standard labs that profiled your DNA had you spit in a paper cup, or a technician swabbed you in the inner cheek -- and Chris hadn't thought of this one being different -- meaning walking in there with a drop of dry blood soaked into a piece of fabric.

So he Phoenix lab that looked good -- and quick -- turned him away, and he wasted time investigating a couple more, until one of the phone receptionists told him in no certain terms that he needed the one out in Gold Canyon, and she hung up . . . and wouldn't you know there were three out there, but he figured it out, the correct place being located almost to the national forest they had out that way . . . and it worked out, they accepted the sample no problem, and the place did seem efficient and quick, though dang, it was costing him triple what the Gardena lab ran.

Eclipse to Tuscon was closer than he thought, under 3 hours tops, and Chris and McBride were going to leave at noon, get down there mid-afternoon and see what developed . . . so on the way back from the lab first, well . . . you may as well check out Reba's 'new and improved' art show at the bank.

Right away the entire circumstance was transformed. The tired, thin, amateur-hour stuff had been replaced -- completely it seemed -- by big, bold, colorful, vibrant new work. The settings of the paintings looked similar to Reba's previous poor efforts -- and for all Chris knew they could have been depicting exactly the same scenes -- but where Reba's old ones



depressed you, frankly . . . these new efforts *lifted* you, they added a jump-start to your day.

Yes, Chris wouldn't have spent 5 bucks for one of her old ones if it were on a bargain table -- but Gee, forking over the *real* bucks for one of *these* -- and bringing it home and hanging it up in Manhattan Beach over the couch -- you'd actually mull that over.

There was a woman at one of the side desks, an assistant manger type, and Chris said, "An elevation in here, is what I'm discerning. Do I have it wrong?"

"Oh no, *sir*," she said, "you put your finger right on it. We love the artist's new work. In fact we're sad whenever one *sells*. Which has been happening quite a lot, as you might imagine."

"I see," Chris said, surprised himself, not that the staff loves the work, but the apparent extent to which the paintings have been flying off the walls.

"Are you by chance interested in one," the assistant manger said. "The only reason I ask, if you are, I'd recommend putting a bid in."

"A *bid*," Chris said.

"Yes. The artist has had multiple offers on some. We decided that's the best way to handle it."

"Wait . . . so someone can't just walk in, spot the price on the little tag, decide that *works*, and than pull out a *check*? Isn't that how they do it in galleries?"

"Certainly, that *would* be typical. Here we've encountered a few issues though, long-time customers wishing to take a day to decide between the artist's works . . . and therefore we implemented the bidding process."

Chris thought Holy Smokes. He couldn't help thinking back, by comparison, poor Joyce not much of an artist either, and Chris trying to help her market *her* stuff . . . and the whole thing felt more or less like you were wading in quicksand.

He said, "You've used the expression now a few times, *the artist* . . . Does this person have a name?"

"Oh most certainly. It's difficult to pronounce. Magdalena Moussourschian . . . Are you familiar?"

Hmm.

"Okay, I think I follow you," he said. "Wasn't the artist -- even last Saturday, if I have my days straight, when I stopped in for a look -- a *Reba* something?"

"She most certainly was. Sir you have excellent recall . . . Reba, she decided to retire her show prematurely. We hated to see her go, but we were sympathetic."

"Ah. So the . . . replacement one . . ."

"Uh-huh. Magdalena?"

"She, like, came in in person then? Hung her work?"

"No, actually, the way it proceeded -- and I should have pointed out, we found Magdalena through Reba, I'm sure you can understand how the art community works."

"Sure," Chris said, "tight."

"Indeed. The two are colleagues. Reba suggested she could procure a sufficient number of Magdalena's paintings, and represent her while Magdalena is touring in Europe."

"But of *course*," Chris said. "Why not?"

"And needless to say," the manager said, "we're delighted with the end result . . . Please let me know if you have any questions. I find myself developing a bit of expertise. I really love it."

"Great art," Chris said, "can absolutely have that effect . . . Did you ever watch the Sopranos?"

The gal frowned slightly for the first time. She apologized, and said she did not.

“It doesn’t matter,” Chris said. “The main guy’s wife, at one point she makes a trip to the major museums in Italy. When she’s finally in the presence of the great works, she is overwhelmed. Becomes kind of catatonic actually -- which I thought may have been overdoing it a bit . . . but it was TV of course, you went along with it.”

“Unh-huh,” the gal said. “Well, please enjoy the rest of your viewing experience.”

Chris said thank you, he would, and he may even look into the artist further, he was so impressed.

\*\*\*

“Something I neglected to ask,” McBride said. He was doing the driving, nice comfy Acura SUV, barrelling down I-10. “Karolina know you’re representing her?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Chris said.

“What I figured. You . . . finessed her, for the information? Without her putting it together?”

“Didn’t need to. There’s only one outfit in Tuscon that offers this stuff . . . Technically there’s four of ‘em, but two, when you dig a little on the websites, they disclaimer you to death. My instinct is no way they’d have the balls to get mixed up in something like this.”

“What about the third one?”

“That guy, or that place -- I guess he had an uncle working with him, and the aunt was the secretary -- he got arrested, end of last year. So he’s out of business.”

“That’ll tend to do it,” McBride said. “However . . . that’s not our man?”

“Nah, he owned a strip club as well, and there was some weird stuff, I can’t remember what. Bottom line, he was a two-bit player. Not big-league enough to put anything past the big schools, like Karolina’s guy.”

“Process of elimination then,” McBride said.

“We hope.”

McBride said, “Even that, some *big*-league guy seducing the big schools, being awful hard to believe.”

“I know,” Chris said. “Why would these established coaches for instance -- they got some of the best sports jobs in the country, everything going for ‘em -- why would they accept a bribe to fudge an applicant’s resume?”

They were referring of course to the Orange County operation that had been in the news, these kind of details spilling out.

McBride said, “There was a crew guy for one, right? Didn’t he even go so far as to photoshop some documents, that showed his admissions office that the applicant was one of the best junior rowers in the country? When the kid never picked up an oar?”

“Stuff like that, yep. You got the exit?”

McBride had it under control. The place was on E Broadway Boulevard, near the Reid Park Zoo.

“Speaking of colleges,” Chris said as they parked and got out, “not saying we’ll have time, but I wouldn’t mind looking around the University of Arizona. If I could do it all over again, that might be where I’d try to go.”

“You ever lived down here?” McBride said.

“Why?”

“No reason. That’s a fair question. C’mon Jeff, don’t be turning things into World War 3.”

Chris was thinking was I *doing* that? Meanwhile he was picturing McBride and Waylon again in their little dance, before things got real heated . . . and he never did get the low down on what started it . . . though you probably didn’t really need to know.

Karolina’s place (hopefully) was up a flight of stairs, a slightly shabby two-story commercial building, a mortgage company downstairs alongside a shop that sold local rocks and gems.

Chris thought it was interesting -- he'd seen it a lot -- where someone making big money, likely dancing rings around the other nearby businesses -- looked from general appearances like it was doing the worst of the bunch.

Karolina's company (so to speak) was called Advanced Intercollegiate Solutions. It looked like a one-room set-up, and starting up the stairs Chris was hoping it was a one-man *set-up* too -- just one crooked guy sitting there at a computer studying the stock market pork bellies quotes, or similar.

In between rooking people.

And maybe you can't even say that -- after all the guy did get Karolina's kid -- supposedly -- into UCLA.

So . . . you modified your assessment to . . . rooking the family that *didn't* get in because she *did*? Rooking the schools who you bribed?

Whatever.

The rookage frankly wasn't as concerning as the potential *jailage*, meaning as it applied to Karolina.

McBride stopped him a few stairs up, and they went back outside.

"I'm not sure we have a plan here," he said. "Do we?"

Chris said, "You may have a point. I was thinking simply, we walk in, get the lay of the land, express an interest in the future of our two high school seniors . . . No?"

"Then what?"

"Beats me. I haven't done this kind of thing before, as you can probably tell . . . You have."

"Threatened people, you mean?" McBride said.

"Well, okay," Chris said, "if we're *going* there, discussion-wise, I'm guessing you *have*."

"You're giving me way too much credit," McBride said. "What would you think if we *called* them first?"

"I'm game. If that's the way you want to work it."

“You’re looking at me though,” McBride said. “You’re wondering what the point would be.”

“Unh-huh. I mean the whole shebang sounds like a crapshoot, what the heck we’re even doing here. But I tend to favor direct contact.”

“So you *have* been mixed up in a situation like this. I sorta figured.”

“No. Now you’re give *me* the too much credit . . . Only one I’m remembering, reason why, I had a bad tenant. I tried the phone and the email bullshit, and when I bit the bullet and went face to face it wasn’t as unpleasant and I’d been fearing. We came to a meeting of the minds, and that was pretty much that.”

“What’d you do to the guy?” McBride said, smiling now, want to hear this one.

“You’re putting words in my mouth,” Chris said. “Guy invited me in, poured some corn chips in a bowl, gave me a cold ginger ale, we reviewed the rent he’d been holding back, in conjunction with the repairs on the apartment that he required. It was a win-win situation.”

Not what happened of course, but McBride bringing it up . . . it did give Chris the idea of dangling the *college guy* out a window . . . You only had one story of elevation to work with as far as the fear factor, but you might be able to impress the person.

They knocked on the door. Pretty much like Chris pictured it unfortunately, you had a secretary or receptionist or general helper sitting at a big desk up front -- plump middle-aged woman -- and the apparent doofus boss across the room.

Smaller desk for that guy, but he was slick -- stylish baby blue blazer, shiny cufflinks, starched light pink shirt that you’d guess was custom made, hair puffed just right on top and around the ears, indicative of a weekly coiffe.

The woman said hello, quite pleasant, but the guy was paying attention too, and when McBride said they were shopping the college thing

and didn't quite know where to start, the guy stood up and stepped forward and introduced himself, effectively by-passing the assistant.

The guy pulled out a couple folding chairs and they sat down at his desk, and Chris asked for a brochure or paperwork they could study, and the guy said there wasn't any, but, "We're good at what we do."

"Well whoopee then," Chris said.

"What he means," McBride said, "is . . . what *did* you mean, anyway?"  
Looking at Chris.

"I don't know," Chris said, "don't blame it on me. You're the one that wanted to come down here. You're whining that Jenny's not applying herself sufficiently to her curriculum."

"That part is true," McBride said. "She don't got diddly squat options."

"And you decided that was fine. She graduates, she can go to work at 7-11. Teach her about the real world."

"Yeah but I *thought* about it obviously -- otherwise why would we be sitting here at the moment, taking up this patient gentleman's time."

"You're losing me," Chris said. To the slick guy he said, "But, I'm a fan of not screwing around. What'll it run us?"

"I'm sorry?" the guy said, and for a moment Chris thought this is all screwed up, this guy may not even be *crooked*, much less be *Karolina's* guy.

"Fuck this shit," McBride said, and he theatrically stood up and started for the door, and Chris followed him.

The guy let a couple beats go by, and then called across the room, "Let's take it easy now fellas. If we're speaking the same language here . . . I'm sure we can formulate some options for you to discuss."

"Fair enough," McBride said, and kept going out the door, and Chris was wondering why he'd be doing *that* now, but went with him.

Outside McBride said, "That guy was getting on my nerves. First of all, did you notice the cologne?"

Chris said, “No. The gal though, she reminded me of a parent, a mother of a kid I used to teach.”

“You keep getting so far off topic it’s ridiculous. But you obviously need to *tell* me . . . so *what?*”

“Nothing. Other than she told me I didn’t know what I was doing, and should be ashamed of myself being part of the profession.”

“Did you?”

“Nah, she was right. They had me teaching english and history, but I subbed one week in health and rec. I was in unfamiliar territory. I told the kids, best way to handle this, go out and run for 20 minutes to start the class, then your brains’ll work smoother when we *do* get around to discussing health.”

McBride said, “In other words, why *talk* about health -- when you can do it instead.”

“Exactly. So this gal’s daughter gets hit by a car. Not right away, the first two days went fine, but the third one she cuts a corner a little tight -- and I could picture it, I know the intersection, and a guy making a right turn just nicks her.”

“Not good then.”

“She didn’t need a hospital or anything -- actually they *take* her to one, but she was back in school later that day . . . anyhow the mom called the cops on me and so forth.”

“Anything happen?”

“Naw. Then she threatened a lawsuit but my guess is she couldn’t find someone to take the case. So it went away. Except I saw her, the mom, once at a restaurant, a Mary’s Pizza Shack. She was taking out, so I discreetly took care of it with the cash register person.”

“Paid for her order. She say anything?”



“Yeah. She said ‘if you think you can buy my ass off, you got another thing coming’ And that I needed to watch my back *worse* now, if I think this is over.”

“Those words? The buy my ass off?”

“Yeah.”

“So what else did happen?”

“Nothing. That I know of. And it’s been several years . . . But the back of my mind, every once in a while I’m wondering if she’s still got something up her sleeve. That there’ll be a big surprise.”

“Not out of the question,” McBride said. “She sounded nuts enough, that you *might* have to worry about something.”

“Jeez,” Chris said, “I didn’t expect you to take her side. You’re supposed to say forget it, if you had something to worry about it would have already come to pass.”

“Well we’d like to think that way. Past experience of my own, nothing’s certain, along those lines.”

“I just wasted five minutes,” Chris said, “when the secretary gal really didn’t resemble the school mom that close.”

“What time you got?” McBride said.

“Little after 3:30 . . . we’re gonna have to wait this one out.”

“Let’s grab a bite,” McBride said. They were on the same page. Bottom line, you wanted to deal with the blue blazer smart guy by himself, when (you hoped) the gal would be gone for the day. You’d have to time it . . . but he and McBride between them, they weren’t total greenhorns, were they?

The food was tasty in Tuscon, the sauce and spices a little different in the enchiladas than how they work it up north . . . and Phoenix too, being different than southern California style, but Tuscon fare was proving unique and Chris reminded himself to look it up sometime, the historic migrations from Mexico into the different regions . . . but this was once again getting off topic.

At 10 to 5 McBride called Advanced Intercollegiate Solutions, and the woman answered and McBride buttered her up a bit, and said would it be okay if we stopped back in now, that we might be ready to conduct a little business.

She excused herself and put him on hold, and came back and said certainly, that Mr. Saulterk can see you presently.

McBride said great and hung up, and he and Chris gave each other the palms up, like maybe this'll work . . . and they waited until a couple minutes after 5 and went back up there.

It wasn't what they hoped, at first, as the receptionist was sitting at her desk typing something like she didn't have to be anywhere.

Their little plot, maybe not so ingenious after all, was you time it so that she'd gone for the day, but the doofus is still around. The hours on the door did say 10-5, Monday thru Friday, so the plan didn't seem unreasonable.

They sat down again with the guy -- you had to now -- and then fortunately Beagle -- the was her name oddly, or else a nickname, because that's what the guy used, to say he'd see her in the morning -- picked up her stuff, switched shoes for whatever reason, and left for the night.

They small talked the guy for a couple minute until they were convinced Beagle didn't forget something and would re-appear . . . and Chris said, "Reason we're here, should have started at the beginning. We got a referral from our friend Karolina."

Letting the one stay out there a second.

The guy was a cool customer, he'd been around he block clearly . . . but there'd been a tip of the iceberg reaction off him when Chris said the name.

McBride had picked up on it as well.

McBride said, "In fact -- we *call* her a friend, but we don't even know her last name, which is kind of crazy. Do we Dave?"

Chris said, "Joe, that was your job, the last name." Looking back at the guy. "I believe you'd know who we're talking about though . . . Major financial assets . . . so to speak."

They watched to see how that resonated, and it was even a bit more clear this time that they were sitting currently with the correct Karolina shyster.

"Speaking of that though, her last name," Chris said to the guy, "we're gonna need you to look her up."

"I have no idea what you fellas are talking about," the guy said, though there wasn't as much oomph to it.

There were different ways you could play it of course. Slow and steady and polite was one, converting the guy eventually on a civilized note.

Right now though that enchilada sauce from an hour ago, the different type than Chris was used to . . . it was starting to kick in a little funny.

That . . . combined with the aggravation of the excursion itself -- which let's face it, didn't exactly qualify on Chris's list of items to try to deal with for the betterment of society -- or whatever the heck.

The point being, slow and steady wasn't an attractive option right now . . . and Chris stood up and grabbed Mr. Saulterk by the collar region of the snazzy blue blazer, and started marching him toward the far window.

"Dave, you sure?" McBride called, and Chris detected a touch of genuine panic in McBride's voice, though the guy at least had maintained enough poise to call him Dave instead of Jeff, though did that really matter.

"Yeah I'm sure Joe," Chris said, "except it's gonna require two people."

Saulterk wasn't very likely a *physical* crook, or a *street* one, thank God, not like Chip, for instance, way back when in the office in Hermosa, Chris still living up in the city then, the place on Broderick -- but with Chip you did fear a guttural, primitive, survival instinct kicking in -- and you had to be very careful and a little lucky too.

This guy wasn't going to give you that kind of trouble. At least while you were *here*.

That was the problem, though, he could cause problems once you departed . . . so you better give it your best shot right now, and instill your point.

McBride opened the window and it was an effective location. It hovered over a back area where employees from the building could take a break, run their phones, smoke a cigarette . . . but now it being close to 5:30 no one was doing that . . . and if you were going to point a guy out a window this was a decent option, certainly compared to the street side behind Saulterk's desk.

As Chris was shoving Saulterk's head and then upper torso out there it occurred to him that McBride, even though he opened the window, might be wondering how far this was going to go -- and Chris wasn't sure himself.

So he said calmly to the guy's upside-down region, "We'll just need her records. Karolina's. Then we'll be on our way."

The guy mumbled something and Chris flipped him back up, so he was sitting on the window ledge facing into the office. Chris asked for a clearer rendition.

"All my clients," the guy kind of gasped, "they're on the computer."

"Paper records, though?" McBride said.

"Absolutely not," the guy gasped again. There was a determination to it where Chris sort of believed him. After all if you were running a scam at least leave it all in cyber space . . . correct?

Chris dangled the guy back out the window, and McBride got busy, the nonsense you had to go through unplugging the guy's computer tower . . . and then doing the same for the secretary's.

McBride stood there a moment like *what now*, and Chris said why not pack up, that we're good here . . . meaning him, and Saulterk continuing

to reverse dangle, and Chris did have to respect the guy for not throwing up or exercising any other abnormal bodily function.

So McBride put the computer stuff in the trunk and they both helped Saulterk back in now, who was admittedly a little shaky with his equilibrium.

“You got any booze in here?” Chris said. “Like guys who might end up under indictment are pouring themselves off of these days?”

The guy shook his head. McBride said, “Looking at it like *that*, we’re doing you a favor. Aren’t we?”

The guy wasn’t in the mood, or the temperament to do much conversing, but McBride had a point, that who knows, a pre-emptive purging of the records *might* help, when the Feds got around to knocking on the door.

Chris said, “Okey-doke then, Mr. Saulterk. Are we good?”

“We’ve achieved the proverbial meeting of the minds?” McBride said, and Chris wasn’t crazy about McBride borrowing that line from his own earlier reference to the frisky tenant.

The guy nodded his head.

“So just to clarify,” McBride said. “You ever get *asked* about her -- our friend Karolina . . .”

The guy waved his hand, a little more recovered and animated now. He said, “Karolina *who*? Excuse me, I’m not familiar with anyone by that name.”

“Good to hear,” Chris said, “and it goes without saying . . . your receptionist’s recollection on the subject, that’ll be in line with yours?”

“Oh *hell* yes,” the guy said, perking up even more now, maybe a bit too much in fact.

Obviously you couldn’t cover all avenues. Maybe there *was* paperwork somewhere that documented Karolina’s case. Maybe the mope

mentioned her to a wife or girlfriend or bowling buddies. Or had a connected laptop at home.

But you did your best, and moved on, and McBride was thinking the same thing . . . except Chris couldn't help wondering: did I *really* make my point?

He told McBride he'd be right back, and halfway to the vehicle he realized he didn't have the Malibu and that *McBride* drove . . . and what he was going to get was his basic tool kit that he kept under the front seat.

Since he was out there anyway, and McBride had left the car unlocked -- Chris thinking this being Tuscon I guess -- he popped the trunk and roamed around in there and came up with something similar to his, the gray plastic compact tool case job from Costco.

He went back upstairs and asked McBride to blast the air conditioning, and there was a portable radio that you could turn all the way up that helped a bit too . . . and Saulterk was getting awful nervous, to where McBride had to pin him down and sit on him.

Chris pulled a thin Philips screwdriver and hammer out of the tool case, got the guy's shoe and sock off, picked a middle toe nail, but then nah, the big one would be best . . . lined up the screwdriver verticle, and commenced the couple of hammer taps which did the job.

Then they did get out of there.

"Felt conflicted about that," Chris said, when they were headed back toward the interstate. "The last part."

"The final nail in the coffin, you're saying," McBride said.

"He'll be okay, though, I mean once the initial business passes. Right?"

"Oh yeah, no big deal. Good not to be on hand though I guess, when the guy applies the peroxide or alcohol."

"Or nothing," Chris said. "*Nothing* will remind him for a while as well, I suppose."

McBride said, “It should . . . if you’re worried about having to watch your back -- *our* back -- as in your long-winded deal with the school parent you’re still afraid of -- I suspect it’s a non-issue.”

“Oh.”

“Meanwhile,” McBride said, “you hungry at all?”

And Jeez, come to think of it, yeah, and McBride had gotten on I-10 and they both started watching the exit eating-possibilities . . . and Chris decided he’d finally met his match in that department.

## Chapter 15

Chris couldn't help it. As much as he liked it here in Eclipse and felt he was cultivating a few real friends, he was worried about Waylon getting out of the hospital.

And that unfortunately kind of trumped the other aspects.

There was no predictable or comfortable way that the Waylons of the world being re-inflicted on the law-abiding public would play out.

Chris figured if he himself was really rooted here -- meaning he owned his own condo and was locked into a career and so on -- that you deal with the uncertainty, you figure it out somehow. Maybe you purchase a legal firearm and start taking lessons at a firing range. Or some alternative approach.

It wouldn't be your optimum choice in life though, having some maniac on the loose with a score to settle in your direction.

So you were going to have to wrap up the fun and games, and make a move. After all, Ned had suggested a vacation -- recharging the batteries for a while was how he put it -- and life threw curve balls at you and you had to adjust.

Not that Chris was thrilled about necessarily showing his face front and center in Manhattan Beach in the near future *either* . . . following the Tank business in Buck's County . . . but you had to show your face *somewhere* . . . and you couldn't live in a glass house, or whatever the dumb expression was.

So.



And man, June 1st already . . . not that you'd celebrate that fact, but May did seem to fly by. Today was Friday, the Tuscon toenail guy was yesterday, though by now that felt pretty substantially in the rear view mirror.

What you had to do this morning, first thing out of the chute, was head back down to the lab and pick up your result -- being the golf course *murder suspect's* one -- and re-connect with Dale.

In other words get the show moving on the road, quick as you could, on a few different issues that required tying up.

And man, there was a fair amount of traffic driving down to Gold Canyon, the middle of morning rush hour which Chris hadn't considered, and it was real-life situations like this that amplified just how isolated you were (not meant as a negative, necessarily) when you limited yourself to the Rancho Villas day-to-day experience.

And yeah, the lab did cost an arm and a leg relatively speaking, \$1242 dollars -- but you couldn't beat the turn-around time -- especially when you found yourself under some newly-imposed time pressure -- and Chris walked out of there with a different type disc than the one in Gardena, a bigger thing with a cord attached, but the attendant assured him it contained the text file DNA profile that he required, and wished him a blessed day. Chris wasn't a big fan of religion but you appreciated the sincerity.

Dale was off work today and in fact on the pickleball courts when Chris called him. Frankly it seemed like the guy was *always* off work, but obviously there *were* stretches where you didn't see him around, and didn't think about it, so you figured he worked the unusual schedule that cops seemed to.

Might as well ask him though, so Chris lied, "I looked it up by the way. It says most police officers work five 8-hour shifts a week, with 2 days off."

“Hey, good for them,” Dale said. “My gig, we work rotating 12’s. What do you need though? We’re at 3-all here, third set.”

Chris mentioned the lab work, and Dale said he’d stop by at 11, and what’s his unit number.

Chris gave it to him, kind of absentmindedly, and then thought ooh boy -- you gotta be kidding me.

Even though they’d discussed it before, Chris trying to direct Dale to using his department computer and Dale saying he’d rather not -- and Chris supposing he had to side with the guy there, since Dale’s actions in this case were going against the grain not to mention behind the back of Elipse PD -- still, all that noted, now that it was happening it made you nervous.

Chris actually tried to clean up the place a bit, put on a little jazz in the background -- and pretty importantly he realized, shut down all his Chris Seely-related gmail accounts and make sure you needed a password to re-sign in. In fact, scratching his head -- is there any *other* sign of me in here that shouts Chris Seely, or throws off an associated vibe?

He looked around a bit, was reasonably convinced he was good -- though there was a paperback novel in the bathroom that Chris had been reading in the tub . . . and son of a gun, like he was *worried* about, there was a written inscription on the inside cover

**Chris-Boss: Thanks for my being partner in crime solving.  
Best wishes, Ken**

And what this was, Kenny had given him a book, and of all things a James Ganderson thriller about a *serial killer*, and it wasn’t badly written, though a little testy with the credibility in parts -- but this was after he and Ken spent those couple days chasing clues in the Bay Area and tracked down that old Mel guy to Modesto, as the suspected Zodiac killer from the 1960’s -- and the verdict was out on whether that was actually the guy, but

Ken enjoyed the chase, and was good at it, and gave the book to Chris when they got back to LA.

Thinking about it, and Kenny . . . it made you miss the guy . . . they'd had some fun, and it was too bad it ended weird. Maybe down the line you could straighten it back out to a degree, but maybe not.

Meanwhile the *solving* word in the inscription was a bit blurred from apparently getting some water on it, so a person (or cop like Dale who had to use the bathroom) at a glance would see Chris's name followed by **my partner in crime** . . . and that couldn't happen, so Chris scooped up the book and threw it into a suitcase in the closet.

Dale was showered and changed when he walked in but was all business. "So what do got?"

"Our big theory?" Chris said.

"Your big theory," Dale said, "but I'm here, so let's get to it."

Chris considered this. "You sounded better on the phone an hour ago," he said. "Anything happen in between?"

Dale said, "Ah, you'll probably hear about it anyway . . . I had a major falling out with the guy Stan. Court 5."

"The guy that takes all the lessons," Chris said, "but never plays with anyone?"

"*Him*, yeah. Long story, not worth wasting time. Ended up in our game though circumstance. He hit me with the ball twice."

"Tough *sport*," Chris said, thinking he would have been ticked off if that happened to him, but at the same time amused that it happened to Dale.

"Are you being facetious?" Dale said. "If so, we can postpone this little dealiehicke."

"I'm just saying, if the guy hits you once you're too close to the net. Don't make the mistake again, unless you've prefaced it with a good deep approach shot."

“What bothered me,” Dale said, “was the guy not signalling anything.”

“Oh. You mean when the guy sticks up the hand -- after he nails you on purpose -- implying sorry about that, I didn’t mean it?”

“Yeah, he didn’t *do* that,” Dale said, and he started to continue and then seemed to realize it was going nowhere and he was being petty -- and Chris figured the main part must have been he got his ass kicked on the scoreboard once that new guy stepped into the game as well, and Chris could identify with that, it did leave you in a bad mood.

“Welp,” Chris said, “here goes nothing.” And he plugged the cord of the lab piece into his USB, and he signed into Gedmatch under the fake name he’d set up . . . and you could see Dale coming alive a bit, when the screen loaded and brightened up and all the possibilities were presented.

“Looks complex,” Chris said. “I don’t know what half this shit does, but all’s we need is right here.” And pointed the mouse to the simple heading **Upload Your DNA Files**, and it was a crude interface, a definite low-budget feel to it -- but under that you had an option of *Generic Uploads* or *Upload if generic upload fails* -- and Chris went with the first, where you simply found your USB device on your computer, just as if you had a camera plugged in, and there were a couple clicks to perform -- and boom Jerrod Williamshtein was loaded. That being the fake name of course that Chris gave the suspect DNA from the blood droplet.

“Now the moment of truth,” Chris said to Dale. “And stop me if you see me screwing something up. Your expertise from here on out is as good as mine.”

“Keep going,” Dale said.

So Chris hit **SEARCH**.

And it took a minute, and then a little graph bar appeared at the bottom that would theoretically be filled in until it reached 100 percent, and there was a message thanking you for your submission and reminding you that family genome searches could take up to 24 hours to complete.

“You got something to drink?” Dale said. “Then I guess we leave off, you inform me tomorrow, when the job is complete.”

“I will,” Chris said, not taking a specific drink request but pouring Dale a shot of an off-brand Irish whiskey that he’d picked up at Walmart -- since the guy was likely still worked up from the pickleball incident.

“In fact,” Chris said, after Dale had poured it down, “you didn’t go into detail on the falling out. Something happened *after* he nailed you the two times?”

“Ah that wasn’t much. In hindsight. There was a situation, he was picking up a ball in the net, I reached across it and grabbed him by the shirt was all. Told him if I got hit a third time . . . like I said, it was stupid.”

“Not stupid at all,” Chris said, enjoying it. “You raise your voice in the process, or anything?”

“Maybe somewhat.”

“Hmm. So . . . like, they had to stop the match?”

“*Karolina* did. Yeah. I’m ashamed to say. She banned me from the facility until Monday.”

“Holy Smokes,” Chris said. “Didn’t know she had it in her.”

“Me neither. I couldn’t tell, is she doing it for show, and it won’t really apply? But then I’m thinking, she *is* the hired pro, she has her standards to maintain.”

“Sounds accurate. So you can’t set foot on a court this weekend . . . That is pretty funny . . . The woman obviously knows how to separate business from pleasure, then.”

“Fuck you,” Dale said.

Meanwhile Chris took a look at the computer, figuring based on all the hoopla of how long it might take, that the bar graph would be filled in no more than 1 percent by now -- but surprisingly it showed you 56 percent.

“Or,” Chris said, “stick around a little longer, you never know, we might get bite.”

Dale took a look and pointed out that these things, they could to 98 percent on you and fool you, that the last 2 percent could be a couple hours. But he took off his shoes and put his feet up on the coffee table and actually fell asleep, Chris thinking man, that pickleball is proving to be a strenuous activity -- or maybe there was previous different activity last night as well -- and by now Chris had stopped trying to figure out the swinging thing, if that's what it was -- because they all seemed reasonably normal when the so-called switch went back off.

The computer dallied a bit on 90 percent, but then up pretty steadily like a thermometer and boom -- you were there.

Chris alerted Dale who woke up with a start and momentarily didn't know where he was. Chris said, "You wouldn't have been the right guy, say in a college dorm roommate situation, to be in the upper bunk. Doubtful you'd last the semester without something happening."

"My brother and I had those," Dale said, "but I made him sleep up top. Where are we here?"

There was a decent list of names, maybe 15 or 20, though in thinking about it that may have been mild compared to your normal high-powered searches.

What it meant -- unless this new advance in DNA was a complete bust -- was the suspect was in the family tree with those people.

Chris said it out loud, and Dale said, "I'm with you. When you take a step back . . . it's pretty downright unbelievable."

They stared at the names, and here's where it got confusing . . . and Chris wondered if it'd be wise, but decided to call Mark.

"I got a software guy," he said to Dale, "might save us some aggravation. You mind if I try him?"

"Be my guest," Dale said.

"Yo my brother," Mark said. "What is *shaking*? How you been, dog?"

“Good, Richard,” Chris said. “Listen, my buddy and I, we’re fooling around with Gedmatch . . . you know, the family tree site? . . . No big deal, but before we waste several hours, would you have any tips?”

“Ah then,” Mark said, “are you in?”

“Appears to be affirmative,” Chris said.

“Speak English. You got results?”

“Yep. Maybe 25.”

“All right then. There’s a code. Under each name . . . This is all spelled out, did you read the manual?”

“A code you say . . . *then* what?”

“Okay you have a key to the code. On the lead-in page to the results page. It’s small print. But all’s you do, you eliminate 4th cousins and worse. Then you hone *in* on that baby.”

“Okay sounds good,” Chris said, “thanks for taking an educated guess, we’ll do our best.” And he hung up. “Guy didn’t know much,” he said to Dale. “But these tech geeks, they can give you some angles to try.”

“So what’re we *doing*,” Dale said. “The suspense is killing me here.”

Chris went back to that other screen and studied it. “We’re looking c-3 and better, I’m thinking.”

Dale put on his reading glasses and got up close. “That include a and b?”

“Yeah let’s do that . . . what do you have?”

“I got four,” Dale said.

“That’s what *I* got,” Chris said. “How old?”

“Jesus, you’re making me work here.” Dale grabbed the mouse and started clicking on the names, and subscreens popped up with family tree data -- more than you needed, but there were dates of birth, and Chris brought out a calculator.

“What I’m seeing, I *think*,” Chris said, “is *Layla Abernathy* being the one. Is that what your’re getting.”

Dale said, “Yeah . . . and I’m registering something else now too . . . For better or worse.”

“What?”

“Just keep going. We’ve pared her down as a cousin to the DNA right?”

“The *suspect* sample. Yeah.” Chris kept clicking around, more trial and error, and there was a *cluster* of Abernathys -- not DNA donors but still in front of you, in the family tree -- and Chris couldn’t deliver a lecture on how this shit worked, that’s for sure, but he knew you kept going regardless of who or who didn’t submit their actual DNA sample.

At least he was getting the hang of navigating the thing, and he got to where you could pare down the individual Abernathys, by both age and place of birth -- and Dale said to leave the current screen up, he wanted to check on something.

“JP,” he said on the phone. “The Anthem-Mesa corridor, the 1041s . . . we got an *Abernathy* in that group?”

There was a pause where J.P. would likely be running something.

“Was my hunch,” Dale said when the guy was back. “You got a first name?” Dale was writing it down, *Madelaine*. “What’s the name again on the DOA? Eclipse’s?” More J.P. looking something up, and Dale thanking the guy, and not writing anything down this time.

“What a mess,” he said to Chris. “*Un*-believable.”

“Huh?”

“First of all,” Dale said, “we ain’t *got* no suspect DNA. This belongs to the goddamn victim . . . may she rest in piece.”

“Oh.”

“Yep. Good old Eclipse. They couldn’t sleuth their way out of a no-flush toilet . . . Sons of bitches couldn’t even sort the evidence. The suspect bled at the scene -- they *tell* us -- but meanwhile the bozos give us the fabric, with the *victim*’s blood on it.”



Chris didn't want to mention that they didn't exactly *give* this evidence to Dale, that he *stole* it . . . but same difference, if the ones working the case can't keep the blood straight -- if there even *was* any suspect blood collected, which was doubtful now.

"So Abernathy . . .?" Chris said.

"Yeah. That's screw-up part two. They identified the wrong *victim*. They had *Veronica* somebody . . . which we've indirectly corrected to being Madelaine Abernathy . . . Thanks for *nothing*, I was fired up there when the search first went through."

"I was too," Chris said. "Gee. Talk about a deflating reversal."

"Yeah, well. And I didn't *mean* thanks for nothing, you're a good citizen. You gave it the old college try."

"Better luck next time I guess."

"Always," Dale said, and he was up and out of there.

\*\*\*

Well that was a waste.

It *was* interesting to witness how the Gedmatch thing actually worked. Chris wasn't sure if that was good or bad, as pertained to own situation -- that it seemed to work pretty flawlessly. You'd think it was a bad sign . . . but maybe an efficient system was more easily hackable, as well.

One positive thought was Mark didn't seem bent out of shape this time when he called. You weren't going to ask him, in front of Dale, but that would once again be a heck of a relief if Mark resolved those couple kinks from last time, after Chris's *first* measure of relief proved premature.

A final thought on the identification business -- Dale didn't get into it, but you'd assume IDing a poor woman like this wasn't a slam dunk -- since she was obviously down and out to start with, and may not have had a next of kin . . . or anyone caring enough to make the ID. Still . . . it seemed like quite an injustice to mix up the victim's name.

You'd assume they could have gone down to that Holiday Inn Express clone place, what was it again, the Haliday Jay? Where the known escort action was, on the I-10 corridor, and where coincidentally Chris had picked up Monica that time in the lobby . . . and at least *shown* the poor gal's photo and asked questions. It was sad all around . . .

Now though, you needed to track down Lucy.

No sign of her at home, so he checked Gertrude's as well, then the pickleball courts, then the pools, then the exercise room, then the library in the rec center. Zippo.

This was frustrating. You didn't *normally* need to track down the Lucys around here, and all those times you *didn't*, she'd no doubt be *around* -- now the one time you needed to find her she disappears on you.

There was a stack of brochures on the high check-in desk which Chris never paid attention to, but it did seem to list various optional activity that encompassed the Rancho Villas, as well as a few similar complexes in the north Phoenix area.

He asked the desk guy, "Anything going on today? Where we can get on a bus and sit back and take in the scenery? Or you know what I mean."

"Yes sir, absolutely," the guy said. "Today's excursion to Montezuma Castle has departed already of course, this morning . . . Let's see, the next one, that'd be the *7th*, next Thursday, the *Meteor Crater* -- happy to place an advance reservation for you?"

"There's a castle around here?" Chris said.

"Oh no sir, that's just the name. It's a national monument."

The meteor crater business did sound interesting, and Chris thought maybe he should have been getting out and away from the Rancho Villas more after all -- but that was a different subject.

"Okay thanks man," he said. "You know Lucy? Or Gertrude? Not sure of their last names." He did remember Lucy's but that didn't matter.

“I do not, I’m sorry, I’ve only been on the job this week.” And that made sense, since Chris’s little golf gig technically fell under the same employment umbrella and this did, and the guy wasn’t familiar.

Anyhow he thanked him, and walked around a bit, since they did have an advertised 4.2 miles of trails when you combined every darn path on the face of the complex, and Chris didn’t take enough advantage of those either.

The point was though, use the walking to *think* a bit . . . and Chris hadn’t registered it much, but you did now and then see the old folks dipping down when they got back to their apartment and reaching for a key under the mat. Which made sense, the place was pretty dang secure, and why screw around with your keys every time you want to take a dip in the pool for example. Plus the key under the mat was likely a safeguard for the again, sometimes forgetful population crowd down here.

So you had to commit to *something* . . . so Chris first of all took the assumption that Lucy was *on* that weekly excursion . . . and secondly that she might have the same key-under-the-mat going on . . . and thirdly that he wouldn’t be arrested for spending a few minutes in her apartment.

And sometimes you just went for it -- and yep, there was a spare key *laying* there, and he opened the door carefully and called inside . . . and even when you’d done a few of these type things before, they never got easy, and he took a gulp and stepped in and closed the door behind him . . . and while he was at it, he pulled the front shade.

No need to roam around the place thankfully, like a burglar, since the computer was sitting right in the living room against the wall by the TV console. And of course a simple desktop, the monitor on top of a flat computer box, a mouse on a traditional pad and connected by a cord, the whole setup from at least 10 years ago.

And naturally you’d have to turn the thing on and wait . . . and that was a bit aggravating but what could you do . . . and finally you had workable activity and Chris went immediately to Facebook . . . and there

was your make-or-break -- the *login* stuff -- and thankfully when you clicked in the open space, boom, it did fill it all in for you . . . and you hit **Enter**, still not convinced until there was your main page in your face -- or specifically *Lucy's* -- cute little photo of her in the small avatar in the top left corner.

Now . . . hopefully the a-hole communicating with Lucy had been doing as she described, nothing more complicated than Facebook messaging . . . and Chris hit *that* icon . . . and man, there were a ton.

Maybe not hundreds, as he scrolled to the bottom, but 25 plus . . . and a few that at a quick glance looked like old friends finding Lucy or vice-versa -- but the rest were all from a *Grady Melindoo*.

No surprise though that when you started open to up the messages they were continually signed off by this guy Alan.

So . . . not worth figuring it out, whether Grady Melindoo was even a real name . . . and it didn't matter, did it? In the big picture?

You had some sleazebag trying to blackmail the woman -- weren't those kind of details irrelevant?

When Chris scrolled all the way to the bottom, the first few messages -- from around two years ago, just as Lucy had estimated -- the guy did add *Hettinger* to his sign-off . . . so *Alan Hettinger* . . . the same name as the claimed grandpa who perished in the robbery.

Then scrolling up through the oldest messages one by one Chris hit a little paydirt. The guy, in the third or fourth message, had left an email *address* . . . casually telling Lucy that that may be the easiest form of communication going forward.

It seemed that Lucy never took that bait, and limited all contact with this guy to the messaging . . . though separately, Chris would have to agree with the guy here . . . he hated Facebook messaging, you could barely even see what you were typing.

Either way . . . you had *GradyMelindoo* followed by a few numbers at *gmail.com*.

Chris weighed snooping a little more in the account, but the downside of hanging around any longer than necessary didn't seem worth it. You established that the fucker was all over Lucy asking for money . . . you already had it clear from the newspaper research that the poor unlucky guy in the bank that day back in 1961 didn't have a son . . . and Chris had seen enough in these messages where Alan talked about his grandpa *being* his dad's dad . . . reaffirming what Lucy had said.

And obviously -- if you *were* the guy, and you carried the grandpa's last name in real life -- why do you need to fake-name it both on Facebook and gmail?

So Chris shut off the computer, not before writing down the guy's email address, and he opened the shade again and peeked outside before making his move -- and Gee, there was a chance wasn't there, he hadn't considered, that Lucy and Gertrude had only made a trip to Target, and he was more relieved than he expected when he closed the door and headed back to his place.

## Chapter 16

Chris was out on his little terrace with the laptop, the sounds of pickleballs connecting with paddles booming all over the place, and he figured that really *would* be a problem if you put down permanent stakes here, you'd need a unit clear on the other side of the complex, that otherwise, you could start to go slightly nuts.

But he was dealing with it for now, and he was deciding which fake email address of his own to use to contact the fake grandson idiot -- and the latest one seemed to be fine, the one he'd used to set up the fake Gedmatch account, in the ill-fated attempt to solve the golf course murder.

As such he composed the email to Grady Melindoo -- portraying himself as Lucy's son-in-law, and opening with:

**Dear Sir:**

**On behalf of the Lucy Pitts family, we wish to resolve this matter equitably and fairly for all parties.**

**As you may know, Ms. Pitts suffered a health crisis recently, a stroke, and although she survived it and is expected to make a semi-full recovery, common sense would dictate that she face no more outside stress in her Golden Years than absolutely necessary.**

**That said, you have indicated 10 thousand dollars as fair compensation for the unfortunate events of 1961, and we agree.**

**And furthermore to solidify the transaction, so that all parties are fully satisfied moving forward -- with no "unfinished**

**business” -- still on the table -- now, or in the future -- we are prepared to up the compensation to an even 20 thousand dollars, in cash currency.**

**This payout however, is contingent upon your physically taking receipt of, and signing off on the compensation, within 5 calendar days -- with the clock running, beginning immediately.**

**Thereby the acceptance deadline for this agreement is set at midnight, Thursday June 6th 2018 -- after which any un-executed agreement will expire and will thereafter be null and void.**

**Additionally, please confine all subsequent contact to the currently employed email address. Any deviation thereof will also result in the above-referenced contractual agreement being declared null and void.**

**Sincerely**

**John P.K. Worthington  
on behalf of Lucy Pitts and family**

Chris reviewed the croc of BS, adjusted a couple typos, figured it would be a bit of a crapshoot, that first of all the guy’s email address might not even *work* -- and even if it does, he might be thinking I’m scamming *him*.

But you were doing what you could, and right as he was zoning in on the *Send* button, his phone rings.

Which alone was unusual, and possibly disturbing, since no one around here he could think of had his number . . . meaning there might be some unfortunately timely news from California -- which could stem from

multiple sources at this point -- and Chris checked the number and it was blocked and he stiffened a bit and said hello.

It was Reba, and it took a moment to remember that he *had* given his number to *her*, that night when they semi got together. Not sure why she needed it, both of them living right here, but he did fork it over.

“Hey,” she said, and a little out of breath was Chris’s impression, “Jeff, can you help me, do you think?”

“Are you playing pickleball -- running -- biking, swimming, hiking, what?”

“Is there a reason why you have to be a jerk?”

This did sound a bit serious, and Chris said fine, what do you need help *with*?

Reba said, “Can you just . . . get over here? *Please?*”

“Oh . . . kay,” he said. “A mystery woman then.”

“Something like that. Please . . . thank you.”

Chris hated to actually *run* on someone’s behalf, meaning physically move his rear end at above-average speed . . . but this seemed unusual, and maybe you should.

With Waylon and McBride going at it the other night, he sauntered over there casually, whereas maybe hustling it a little more and getting there earlier could have deflected some of the outcome . . . though he doubted it.

So against his will now he did scramble a bit to get there, and Eclipse was full-blown into the late afternoon business characteristic of early summer where the ground heated up and continued cooking and retaining heat until about 2 in the morning.

Chris was sweating and thinking he was dressed too heavy, and meanwhile you could hear voices in Reba’s apartment and he rang the bell.



“Thank God,” Reba said, trying to limit her response confidentially to Chris. He could see a man and a woman inside, standing up, neither of them looking pleased.

Chris followed Reba into the open kitchen area and the man said, “Who are *you*, now?”

Pretty good edge to this guy, and Chris frankly couldn’t deal with anything *more* like this right now, especially trying to do an innocent (and as yet undisclosed) favor for the woman -- either way Chris was leaning toward turning around and taking a hike if this guy proved any more difficult.

Reba was nervous, no doubt about *that*. She said, “Okay people please. Can we reach a harmonious accord? . . . For all of us? Can we *try*?”

Chris was dragging, and it felt natural to sit down, so he did and soon the others did too without thinking too hard.

“The problem around here,” Chris was saying to the guy, “you’ve got to pick your spots, for exercising. Otherwise there’s no distinction between *intentional* exercise, and walking around normal but still sweating like a piece of work.” He knew he was babbling but the guy seemed to calm down a bit.

“Okay the thing of it is,” Reba said, and you at least admired the woman for getting right to it, “is *Elba* here, she’s upset about the artwork.”

“How so?” Chris said.

“She feels . . . I’ve taken some liberties with her style.”

“*Bitch*,” Elba said, “what part of the concept of *plagiarism* is not penetrating your numb *skull*?”

“Babe, go a little softer,” the guy said, who Chris thought someone had called Jacks.

“Where you folks *from*?” Chris said, like everything was good.

“Whyn’t you put a lid on it there Bud,” the guy Jacks said. Not asking, but telling . . . and again, Chris thought I need this like a hole in the head.

Reba said, "Folks I'll admit to miscalculating. I'm very sorry."

"Bull-*shit*," Elba said. "You couldn't give a *hoot* about miscalculating. You just didn't think you'd get *caught*, was all."

"Okay," Chris said, "I gotta get going. But the issue is *what?* The *bank* stuff?"

Jacks nodded. "It's not even the money she's been raking in over there, as much as it's the dilution of Elba's *brand* . . . Artists *sue* over copyright infringement, it strikes at the core of the *profession*, and this is a classic case."

"You're saying," Chris said, "the new batch of paintings hanging *up* over there . . . what, she copied 'em? What *are* you saying?"

"Correct," Elba said. "Found my website and copied my work stroke for frigging stroke."

"Right down Broadway," Jacks said.

"I have to admit," Chris said, "*second* time I stopped over there, the manager's all fired up, she indicates paintings have been flying out off the walls -- all of a *sudden*."

"Well yes," Reba said, "I re-evaluated, gave myself a jump start. And fine . . . under Elba's *influence*."

"*You're* a pig," Elba said.

"I did ask you, I believe," Chris said to Reba, "isn't there some sort of violation here -- when you announced you shifted gears and sold that first painting . . . and how?"

"What did she say to *that?*" Jacks said.

"If I remember right," Chris said, "she said you make some changes to keep it your own. Like you alter the cloud formation, cut the foreground scene short on the left edge -- *that* type of thing."

"I said all that?" Reba said.

"You did," Chris said. "You said artists take those kind of liberties every day, that it's all kosher."

“*That*,” Elba said, “is so funny I forgot to *laugh*.”

Reba cleared her throat. “Folks,” she said, “I brought Jeffery *here*, because maybe an outsider with common sense, not too *close* to the situation -- can help us mediate it.”

“Nothing to *mediate*,” Jacks said. “And the *worst* part? You’ve shown us no respect.”

Chris said to Reba, “I was the first *choice*? As an outside mediator?”

Reba hesitated a moment and Chris assumed he had the answer, that no . . . Waylon’s in the hospital, Dale must be working tonight, and she must not have been able to reach McBride.

So Chris figured he was the *fourth* choice.

And not at all sure *how* you’d mediate something like this, even if he *was* skilled in that field, which he definitely was not.

But if Reba simply took the paintings down and destroyed them . . . and paid Elba whatever she made off the ones that sold . . . that wouldn’t do the trick?

From the tone of it, that might not. This Elba and Jacks couple seemed pretty dang hot under the collar. And Chris couldn’t blame them. He thought back again to Joyce trying to make a go of it with Sonoma County landscape art -- and it was pretty brutal, and you didn’t need someone copying your stuff on *top* of that fact, that’s for sure.

Chris wondered how they found out, but that probably wasn’t rocket science, since artists seemed to spend plenty of time on Facebook and Instagram -- probably more time than they actually spent painting -- and all it takes is one person to mention that *hey*, a show in the lobby of a bank in the Phoenix suburbs sure looks a *lot* like someone *else’s* stuff too.

But separately, Chris was getting real hungry. *That* he understood.

“Tell you guys what,” he said, “I got some ribeyes in the fridge. Actually just two, but we can whip up some cavatelli, throw some pesto,

garlic and onions over the top . . . So being just a bit *forward*, come on over to *my* place. Nothing resolves a little human to human hostility like food.”

The other three seemed caught off guard. After a moment Elba said, “Why that’s very considerate of you Jeffrey. Are you *certain*?”

“Without a doubt,” Chris said. “We can even finish it off with some Dutch Uncle butter-brickle ice cream -- which if I’m out of, I’ll run to the store and get more.”

“I *love* that flavor,” Reba said. “If I knew we had so much in common, I would have asked you to counsel me sooner . . . you know, the errors of my *ways* . . . and we wouldn’t have ended up here like this.”

It was a weak attempt at some levity, but it sort of worked, tempers did seem to dissipate, and they followed Chris over there.

And the food, if he did say so himself, came out pretty dang good.

“Your mixed menu, it sounded interesting,” Jacks said, “though the onions as part of the pesto ingredients, I wasn’t sure.”

“Me neither,” Elba said, “but it works beautifully.” And man, they were both wolfing down seconds, Chris chalking it up to the aggravation, plus who knows how far they drove. You didn’t want to re-ignite anything by asking about *that*.

So things were going smooth, until desert unfortunately, Chris ladeling the carmel sauce onto everyone’s bowl of Dutch Oven ice cream -- which was some local north Phoenix outfit that really hit the spot with their products -- when Reba -- for whatever reason -- had to clinically and unfortunately shift it back to the art fraud.

“I’m so glad we could break this bread together,” she said. “What I *thought* then, the way to proceed . . . I will calculate my sales to this point and reimburse you . . . and then I’ll leave the works up another month -- since the bank themself requested the extension -- and on subsequent sales during that period, I’ll forward you half the proceeds.”

Jeeminy friggen criminy.

“Or,” Chris said, hoping for a last-second truce before World War 3 resumed, “you pay ‘em what you earned off their work -- Elba’s -- and you rip down the others ASAP, like tomorrow morning, and destroy ‘em . . . Then you go back to your original style . . . here on out.”

Reba listened but reacted with the pouty face you’d see on a little kid when his Play-Dough got taken away. She said, “Isn’t that over-doing it slightly? Do you *think*?”

“Not really,” Jacks said.

“Nope,” Elba said, and when she pushed her half-eaten ice cream aside and sat up rigid and folded her arms, this wasn’t going to be good.

Chris tried to offer everyone coffee, an Italian roast he wanted to try, a last ditch effort . . .

But whatever goodwill may have developed the last hour . . . or whatever *ill-will* was put on hold -- take your pick -- this was going to get ugly . . . and Chris apologized that he had to get up real early tomorrow -- and no one questioned it -- and he maneuvered the three of them out the door.

## Chapter 17

Chris was pretty tired even though he *didn't* have to get up particularly early on Saturday, but before he hit the sack he checked his email.

The mope hadn't wasted time getting back to him.

**Hi John.**

**Hey Dude, I really appreciate you working with me on this. My grandpa meant the world to me, as no doubt Lucy has told you. I miss him every day, and so does my Dad still.**

**When I got your message my first thought was ME TOO, I want to put this thorny mess to rest TOO.**

**I'm thrilled that you upped the offer to 20 Thou.**

**I mean, I did kind of expect a figure like that, in the end. I mean wouldn't YOU?**

**Therefore I started off low, with my 10 Thou.**

**But we should be good now.**

**Where can I meet up with you, to shake hands and put this baby to rest ONCE AND FOR ALL.**

**Yours Truly**

**Alan**

Now, unfortunately, Chris felt his adrenaline on the rise.

Like so many situations -- which he never learned his lesson from -- he should have simply trusted his instincts, which in this case was crawl into a nice comfy bed and sleep for 9 hours.

Now all bets were off, in that department.

If the grandpa died in 1961, it was sure interesting that this guy *missed him every day* . . . seeing as how if the guy was old enough to *know* the grandpa, he'd be over 60 years old now. This guy, calling him *Dude* and the other lingo, didn't sound like a 60 year old.

All that aside of course, the poor guy who perished in the bank that day, the *real* Alan P. Hittenger, didn't *have* any sons. Not when he left this world that day, not a year later when the company he'd worked for acknowledged him in a written remembrance.

So . . . you could dink around with this shit, analyze it to death, getting every move just right . . . and it typically didn't matter.

Chris typed:

**Alan--sounds good. I'll see you tomorrow in Tonopah, Nevada.**

**Please meet me in front of the Clown Motel at 4pm.**

**I'll see you there.**

**Wishing you safe travels.**

**John P.K. Worthington  
on behalf of Lucy Pitts and family**

It took a moment to register why he picked Tonopah out of thin air, but it was on account of the various southern Nevada YouTube videos he was hooked on.

He'd known about a Tonopah Range for a while, and that was a restricted military installation where they tested stuff -- some of it maybe top-secret -- and the Range was in the vicinity of Area 51, so the whole shebang tied together.

Then not too long ago one of the YouTubers visits the actual *town* of Tonopah, which Chris wasn't aware of -- and the guy gives you your money's worth, a nice tour, points out the couple landmarks they have, and you learn that Tonopah is an old mining town and not exactly thriving these days but still hanging in there.

There was a main hotel in the center of it, probably 150 years old, supposedly haunted, and Chris wanted to meet the idiot *there* but couldn't remember the name and didn't want to waste time looking it up, but he did remember the Clown Motel, a low-rise deal, more modern, and it did have a convenient good-sized parking lot right off the main drag, which if Chris had it straight, was old US two-lane 95, which in a roundabout way took you from Vegas to Reno, give or take a hundred miles.

The return message came back quick.

**John. Again, I appreciate you moving on this. My Grandpa always told me to handle your business promptly. Which I see YOU are doing on YOUR end. As for me I'm in Denver (not exactly, but in the region) and I can't get there that soon. I'm good for Sunday though. - Alan**

Chris flipped channels for a while, and Jeez, still in the 80's out there at the moment and you had the dumb finals of the Stanley Cup Hockey going on. Though you couldn't be a jerk about it, plenty parts of the country, not to mention Canada, were still chilly in early June. He settled on the women's college softball World Series, and it was a game you could get into, a pitching and defensive battle, every at-bat meaning something,



and man, the two pitchers were big *gals*. The *shoulders* on them alone were imposingly scary, if you were stepping into the batter's box.

Florida State against Washington. The Huskies carried a 2-1 lead into the 6th, and Chris got back on the computer and typed:

**Fine Alan. I will be waiting for you Sunday, the day after tomorrow, June 3rd.**

**Time and location unchanged.**

**I'd advise bringing an empty briefcase or similar.**

**Kind Regards,**

**John P.K. Worthington**

After which he shut off the ballgame, and as he expected had trouble falling asleep, or *staying* there when he *did*, and the late-night radio talk shows were useful on nights like this, but they could only help you so much.

\*\*\*

Chris knocked on McBride's door Saturday around noon, and Jeez, McBride seemed a bit caught off guard . . . and Chris could see through the open slit in the door a youngish woman wrapped up in her phone, munching on a piece of toast and dressed in loose fitting sweat clothes with a towel around her head like she just took a shower.

Chris said quietly, "Hmm. Am I supposed to . . . like, know her from *pickleball*? Or that *other* deal you guys are into? . . . If I *am* I don't recognize her."

McBride rubbed an eye and shook his head and said, "Someone else . . . Listen now's not the best time, maybe. What do you need?"

"You have 10 grand I can borrow?" Chris said.

McBride woke up better and gave Chris a long look. "Come back at 3," he said, and he closed the door.

Chris walked away fairly awed by that one. Not so much the 10 grand coming his way -- maybe -- but the fact that McBride first of all had it apparently laying *around*, but secondly seemed to say yeah, no *problem*.

Though Chris knew that was part of *why* he approached the guy -- he figured the guy was just mysterious enough that he *could* have what you needed.

Anyhow . . . the idea today was to wrap shit up around here, the Rancho Villas, and be on the road to Tonopah bright and early in the morning, with google maps showing you 511 miles from Eclipse, which translated to just under 8 hours.

So you meet the mope tomorrow afternoon and take it from there. Chris researched the location a bit more. There were some abandoned mines in the area, up in the hills, and Chris committed some directions to memory . . . and a guy like this, maybe when Chris was younger and more reckless -- meaning 6 months ago -- he might have figured, you push the guy down one of the shafts.

Since they had open mine shafts out there, in fact one guy featured them in his YouTube video excursion.

They weren't the traditional mines that Chris pictured -- where you enter into a tunnel-like situation and gradually go deeper and further underground, until when you look back the light from the opening that you've been seeing all along finally disappears.

Those type of mines often had tracks in them, which Chris supposed you followed, so not to get lost, and when the mines were operational the miners ran carts on the tracks. Or however.

The point being with the Tonopah one he was zeroed in on, *nothing* like that, no tunnels or tracks, just holes in the ground that you had to be

damn careful of . . . since the things appeared to evolve into tubes that you assume sent the unlucky person halfway to the center of the earth.

But no. You bring the guy out there to give him what he wants -- partly -- and to conclusively bring the hassling and threatening of Lucy to a satisfactory halt.

A win-win situation, even if Alan (or Grady Melindoo, his email handle) may not realize it at the time, but eventually he'll see the wisdom of his ways, meaning moving on from Lucy.

Which frankly, in thinking about it, Chris wasn't totally crazy about. Leaving it open-ended like that.

But again . . . you pick your spots these days. No need to *kill* a guy, for example.

Though the reason Chris wasn't *totally* crazy about Alan moving on from *Lucy*, is there likely were *other* unsuspecting seniors in the hopper.

When you put it together, such as in Lucy's *case* . . . a mope roams around Facebook, reads all her candid posts -- since she knows nothing about Facebook security settings -- latches onto an event, such as her remembering her dad on his birthday.

Then the back-and-forth comments underneath her post, and soon enough the guy learns about her dad's tragic life, and what might have gone down . . . and now the fucker has a few names and is curious and does what *Chris* did -- with an obviously different motivation -- which is checks old news articles online . . . from the comfort of his own home.

And before you know it, one of the unfortunate people he references, he turns into being his *grandpa*, and the guy decides he misses *whoever* it is, and wants money.

That's just *one* victim, Lucy. One con-game.

You cookie-cutter it on Facebook -- the same type searches, the same criteria, the same innocent seniors -- who knows what you can dredge up

and latch onto and politely message the person, that you feel shortchanged, and do they agree?

Ooh boy. There was always something, wasn't there. One more dang layer taking shape when you gave it a chance. That's why Chris was starting to appreciate Raymond Carver short stories. And Hemmingway before him. Because they were pretty much what you *see* is what you *get*. No further complications. At least on the surface.

Chris made the rounds, said so-long to a few people, quit his job, and was able to get back the security deposit on his apartment, and packed the car.

It was bittersweet. He'd become more attached to this place than he would admit.

At three he stopped back at McBride's, and McBride put up a finger, went in the bedroom, and came back with the ten grand rubber-banded-up in a big Target plastic bag.

"You *sure*," Chris said. "Because . . . I mean, I wasn't kidding, exactly . . . but I didn't *expect* it. Just like *that*."

"Don't be a stranger," McBride said. He seemed preoccupied . . . since wouldn't you at the minimum, a situation like this, ask the other guy when he might be returning the money?

"Everything good otherwise?" Chris said.

"I'll snap out of it," McBride said. "Relationship stuff. You know how it goes."

"Yeah well, it looked okay about three hours ago."

"It did . . . but I made a subsequent error in judgment. It went downhill fast."

"Oh. Sorry to hear it," Chris said.

"Nah," McBride said. "What it is, with me . . . I start off a pretty nice guy, normal. Then I can turn on a dime, and convert to an ass. Something I need to work on."

“Well I’d say welcome to the club,” Chris said, “but I think you already knew that.”

## Chapter 18

It was a pleasant but slightly tricky drive from Eclipse to Tonopah, and yeah you had the wide open vistas and the high desert plateaus and the dramatic cloud formations, but there were sections where you really had to pay attention to oncoming traffic and you couldn't relax and take in any of the scenery.

He passed the center of town, and the Mizpah Hotel was the one he couldn't think of the name of when he was emailing the meeting place to the jerkell, and it was just as well because things were a bit more congested there -- by Tonopah standards -- than the Clown Motel further along toward the edge of town, the apparent last stop before you hit another long unbroken stretch of Nevada desert.

The Clown Motel seemed a bit gimmicky -- someone had amassed a collection of thousands of clowns, many of them glassy-eyed, and they were on display in the place -- which Chris decided, okay, that *is* admittedly a bit over the top -- and when you added to it the old abandoned Tonopah cemetery being right next door -- fine, that made things a bit creepy.

He got there at 3:30, made a pass, drove back south and parked for twenty minutes. It was always interesting, a place like this, to put yourself in someone's shoes who lived here and try to imagine a typical day for them. The town and old-time no-frills lifestyle appealed to Chris, but he figured in reality he was too conditioned to modern amenities and would get bored.

What you wanted to do was let the guy show up first. So Chris made a couple *more* passes and at 4:03, nearly right on the nose, a guy pulls into

the Clown lot with Colorado plates and gets out like he's pretty stiff, shaking off a long drive, and starts looking around.

Chris drove alongside and called out the driver window, "Alan, I take it?"

"Right *on* man," the guy said, reaching in and shaking hands. "I *told* you I was good for it. Hit me a little road construction when I got on 6, past Ely, was a little concerned there for a while."

"But you made it up," Chris said. "The deficit." The guy was about 30. Shoulder-length hair and a two-day old beard. Scattered tattoos on both forearms, which included some Kanji lettering. When the 'grandpa' died in 1961 -- the one he allegedly missed so bad -- this guy would have been 25 years away from being born.

"I'm good that way," the guy said. "I meet my obligations."

"I know," Chris said. "Another good *quality* that your grandpa instilled in you."

The guy didn't say anything except, "I'm thirsty, you know it? Can I buy you a beer?" Pointing to the motel, which apparently had a little restaurant attached, and that did sound pretty good right now, but Chris said, "Love to. Any other circumstance . . . I'd like to put this to rest though. Before either of us changes our mind."

The guy said that sounded logical, and Chris didn't waste any time. "One or two cars," he said.

"Excuse me?"

Chris said, "My delivery system is up at the mine. Come with *me*, or drive *yourself*?"

The guy was clearly confused -- except for the delivery part, which tended to trump not understanding the where and why. He said, "All right, then. I'll follow you."

Chris's rudimentary research said you make a left out of the parking lot and keep going north on 95 . . . and he was wrong about the Clown

Motel being on the very edge of the desert and feeling like an oasis for long-last travelers, since ahead of you were a Cisco's, a Comfort Inn and the Tonopah RV park -- but then after all that you *were* back in essentially the middle of nowhere, desert terrain on both sides . . . and 7 miles up the road the left turn that Chris had memorized for State Road C-19.

This took you across the valley floor, due west, and halfway to the hills the road turned awful gritty and it was a mix of dirt and pavement, and a mile further you were driving on strictly a dirt road.

The Chevy Malibu was handling it okay, though Chris slowed down as a precaution. Once again . . . a situation where you could have exercised that option, the used car lot on Sepulveda Boulevard after the Camry got stolen during the visit to that Roland guy in South Central . . . but you had business at hand, the mope following you in the rear view mirror, no 4-wheel drive *himself*, and bouncing around pretty good.

The mine was on top of a bluff -- Chris figured from the map -- but then a couple miles back in, it turned out -- and the ruts got worse and he almost stopped a couple times and said screw it.

But they got there, and you could tell it had been an impressive operation at one time, but the productive ore either dried up or the modern methods bypassed the set-up . . . whatever . . . but the point being you could still throw a guy down one of several holes, it sure looked like.

Someone had tried to cordon off the entrances *to* the mine funnels, probably for insurance purposes, because they didn't do much of a job of it -- there were limp barriers around the perimeters which looked like 1 by 2 slats nailed together, that was about it, and if you leaned on one you'd be taking your chances.

The reason this seemed like a good idea, dragging the guy out here, was you at least *indirectly* imply that you'd deposit him *down* of the them, if Lucy ever heard from him again.



“Well,” the guy said, getting out of his car. “Thanks for the sightseeing tour. A little more than I bargained for, but that’s all right . . . Where’s my fucking *money* now?”

Chris had run over to Goodwill and found a beat-up flat briefcase after McBride loaned him the 10 grand, and there were two latches where you flicked buttons and the thing popped open.

Chris got the case out of the trunk and put it on the roof of Malibu. “20 thousand,” he said. “As per our agreement . . . My instinct was that’s being overly generous, but I got out-voted by the family.”

“Sweet,” the guy said, reaching up and fingering the packets.

“So then,” Chris said. “We’ll simply need a gentleman’s agreement, that, in a nutshell, we’ll never hear from you again.”

The guy was inspecting the cash just a little too long for Chris’s taste. Unfortunately he said, “You’re short, my friend.”

Now you were at a kind of crossroads.

Do you tell him politely but in no uncertain terms that he’s insulting your intelligence? And that he has about 10 more seconds to comply, or the deal’s off?

Probably not. This guy had some experience with cash obviously, how hundred dollar bills lay and how thick the rubber-banded packets need to be to add up to a required total.

The guy said, “Tell you what . . . Since even though you’re cheating my ass blind, I’ll show you what a decent person I am . . . We find us a cash machine, you supplement your initial offering, ballpark it, and we’ll call it a day.”

This guy wasn’t real big and didn’t look particularly like a tough customer -- Chris had encountered worse, and it was hard to know how it would play out, if you *did* grab hold of the idiot and circumvented one of the cheezy barriers and dangled him over a mine pit, such as the one Chris

was eye-balling up the hill to the right -- that ran minimally several hundred feet into the ground.

But you might as well try diplomacy first, and Chris said, "Sorry my man, I counted it and put it together as best I could, and we're going to need to wrap up the show."

The *real* point was, Chris didn't have this one scripted out, meaning he wasn't crazy about the guy driving away with the 10 grand, that's for sure, and planned to kind of ad-lib his way through the situation, and if you *did* have to part with a little cash for the sake of resolution -- then maybe.

The guy reached inside his jacket and across his chest and produced what sure as shit looked like a late-model steel automatic weapon . . . and naturally he pointed it at Chris.

"Uh-oh," Chris said.

"Yeah, well," the guy said, "you forced my hand. Though we'd have gotten to this stage sooner or later, even if you hadn't." The guy belted out a disconcerting laugh that sounded like a cough.

Chris said, "You're angling that thing at me . . . for *what* reason now? I'm kinda mixed up."

"First of all, you got more on you, I can tell. Secondly after I relieve you of *that*, and whatever else you might have stashed in or around that vehicle, we take a nice friendly trip into town, and then if we have to, back down to Vegas, employing whatever credit cards and ATM's might be necessary."

"Make up the difference, you're saying," Chris said.

"Sure. Don't have to be *exact*, won't hold you to the *penny*. But we'd best be in the vicinity . . . for your general health to remain intact."

Chris was projecting ahead, that didn't ATM's typically limit your daily withdrawals?

The guy probably had a point with Las Vegas, that you walk into a casino with a bunch of credit cards, there's usually a way you can max 'em

all out at the cashier's window without the normal banking security safeguards hassle. Then they give it to you in chips, but you figure this Alan is okay with that.

That would admittedly be rough, driving the three-plus hours south to Vegas, this guy in the passenger seat with the weapon, the likely scenario.

Chris took a moment to weigh it all . . .

And he couldn't help thinking of a scene in a James Bond movie, God knows which *one*, where Bond borrows a move from the old Westerns, and tells the guy to put the gun down.

Chris said, "Now you want to keep it *reasonable* son. You're not going to *use* that thing, so let's leave it out of the equation . . . Put it *down*."

Chris took a measured step forward.

The guy laughed, no coughing element to it this time, more viciousness in the delivery, is what Chris was picking up.

Chris took another step forward. "*Or*," Chris said, "if you're more comfortable, just point it toward the ground, and I'll take it off your hands."

No more laughing from the guy, but he looked amused, unfortunately.

Like he was being entertained . . . and wanted Chris to keep it up, to see what would happen.

Chris took another step. They were five feet apart now, and Chris put out his hand to receive the gun -- though the prospects frankly weren't looking the best.

Alan said, "You're a shit-hole excuse for a tough guy. You know that? . . . Which is what I pegged you from the start. The fancy John F. Worthington signature bullshit."

"R," Chris said.

"What?"

"John R. Worthington . . . Give me the gun son, before someone gets hurt."

"And fuck your *mother*," the guy said.

Chris said, "Your Grandpa -- what was his name again -- he'd be embarrassed, hearing you talk like that."

Chris figured you better go half-step increments from this point forward, and he carefully took the first one of *those* . . . and there was a blast and the gun went off and Chris felt himself get shot.

Right in the chest.

Except . . . looking down, feeling around, sizing up the situation . . . he was still on his feet, and there was no blood.

And something had stung big-time, that's for sure . . . but common sense said -- Chris didn't know *what* it said -- and you could see the guy kind of concerned that pulling the trigger hadn't had quite the effect he'd hoped for.

Chris didn't know firearms . . . but rational thinkers would have him dead by now. He said, "Is that, by any chance, a b b gun? Or a pellet deal? Or stun gun? Any one of *those*?"

The guy didn't answer but went into the stance you saw people do at firing ranges, the balanced business with the knees bent slightly and the feet spread and arms extended and both hands on the weapon . . . and this time he pointed it at Chris's face.

And *that* wouldn't be good. If the thing hadn't shot real bullets -- which was becoming more obvious -- one thing you *didn't* want was to get hit in the *eye*. From like three feet away now.

Chris flashed on another scene from one his favorite movies, where this time Paul Newman and Robert Redford are inextricably cornered by the posse -- and their only option is to jump off the cliff into the river that's so far down there it looks like a little trickle . . . and the whole thing hits them at once, and in unison they go, "*Whoa-ohaaa-oaaaaahhhh-ohhhoaaaaaaah!*" And they plunge over the edge.

Chris charged Alan like the same type of man-possessed as Butch and Sundance that day, and he dove at his legs, instinct telling him if the guy

did squeeze off another shot to restrict it to the body, not the face . . . and Alan collapsed with surprisingly little resistance . . . and there went the gun fluttering off to the side and Chris got a good look at it . . . and Jeez, for the life of him he still couldn't determine that it wasn't real -- or real enough to fire actual bullets.

Either way he had Alan on his stomach and was engineering the rear naked chokehold around the motherfucker's neck.

This of course on the heels of Waylon employing it repeatedly on McBride.

And that *had* been part of Chris's loose strategy -- today -- dragging this guy up here -- that if things didn't go cleanly and a hitch developed, you could *use* the rear-naked choke to make your point.

So Chris figured you should at least have it available, and know what you're doing . . . and after the Waylon-McBride episode Chris went online and reviewed some diagrams and watched some videos, to where he'd be comfortable applying it correctly.

Now . . . the idea would be, he supposed, to pass the guy out nice and solid, and when he recovers give him a couple minutes to come back to reality, and then remind him what you just did . . . and then repeat the process.

Chris figured three or four of those cycles, the guy gets the message, walks away with zippo in the cash department, doesn't bother Lucy again -- and for that matter *may* think twice before running his blackmail games on *anyone* again.

The first thing, like Waylon did, was make sure the guy was out cold . . . and Chris didn't enjoy lying on the guy's back but that's what you had to do to apply the hold effectively in this position . . . so he gave it a couple more minutes -- really locking it down on the guy with the right arm, and the left providing the lever effect, and Chris was always impressed how

the physics of these things worked, going back to those drawings of caveman moving a boulder with a couple sticks positioned just right.

Alan had made a wheezing sound initially, followed by a gurgling one, and those had stopped a while back, but you better keep it going a little longer, in case the arm wasn't locked in there just right for part of it.

Finally Chris let loose and stood up and waited for the guy to come around.

But he didn't seem to be, and Chris wondered, didn't they use smelling salts in those UFC fights when this happened, and in boxing still too?

A couple minutes went by.

Hmm.

Not much doing down there, to be honest.

## Chapter 19

“Give me that again?” Mancuso said. “You’re breaking up on me.”

“I *said*,” Chris said, sounding out the words more slowly, “can you give me a hand with something.”

It was Sunday morning and Chris was calling from a little town called Coso Junction.

What you did, from Tonopah, was take Highway 6 west into California, and then drop down on 395 through the Motherlode region, beautiful country actually, but Chris had driven most of it at night -- figuring you might as well hit the road without too much fooling around, following the incident with Alan.

One thing he thought of up there at that abandoned mine -- and he didn’t care much for gadgets and trickery but it seemed like a good idea -- was switching plates.

Mancuso had set him up, when he took off for the supposed rest-and-relaxation and recharging of the batteries in Eclipse, with a set of Virginia license plates -- Chris not wanting to bother with them but Ned saying throw ‘em in anyway, you never know.

So Chris screwed them on up there . . . and then, you didn’t want to do it, but he stuffed Alan in the trunk of the Malibu.

An available option would have been one of the mine funnels, of which Chris was of course well aware in the *live* person department too -- but with Alan’s car being parked there and whatnot, you had to assume there’d be an eventual search -- which still *might* not be an issue . . . but it might.

Chris frankly wasn't sure what the main difference would *be* -- the guy travelling to LA or staying here -- but his instinct said you better bring him along, and figure it out, out *there*.

Which is why he was calling Ned at the moment.

Ned was saying now, "*Today?* Or in general. 'Cause today I'm not at my best."

"What happened?" Chris said, a bit alarmed suddenly, something he hadn't considered lately, another possible East Coast guy showing up in Manhattan Beach on the heels of Ralph . . . Though at least Ned *was* alive and answering his phone.

"No big deal," Ned said.

"Come on. The suspense is killing me."

"Okay," Ned said. "Only that I got talked into going deep sea fishing yesterday. Off Catalina . . . Take it from me, *never* do that. I was throwing up, or trying to, for 6 hours out there. Then I finally limp home, I got the worst sunburn of my life."

Chris took a deep breath. "I'll see you in a couple hours."

"Jesus. Awful pushy for a Sunday morning."

"Yeah, well, what can you do," Chris said.

**THE END**

\*\*\*\*\*

**If you'd like to be notified of new releases in this series:**

**Please join The Rex Bolt Newsletter.**



**The Chris Seely Vigilante Justice Series:**

**Who Needs Justice? (Book 1)**

**Justice On Ice (Book 2)**

**Dirty Justice (Book 3)**

**Justice Squared (Book 4)**

**Justice Wrap (Book 5)**

**Justice Blank (Book 6)**

**Justice Redux (Book 7)**

**Justice Spiked (Book 8)**

**Justice Dig (Book 9)**

**Justice Edge (Book 10)**

**Justice Rain (Book 11)**

**Contact: [RexBoltAuthor@gmail.com](mailto:RexBoltAuthor@gmail.com)**

**Copyright © 2019 Rex Bolt**

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, organizations, events or locales, or to any other works of fiction, is entirely coincidental.