

JUSTICE REDUX

by REX BOLT



Chris Seely
Vigilante Justice Book 7

Author's Note:

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

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

BACKGROUND SYNOPSIS:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 1

“See now this is exactly what I was afraid of,” Chris said to the guy.
“Take it easy, no one’s trying to pull a fast one here.”

They were sitting at a cement picnic table in Anthem, Arizona, outside the community center on the grounds of Del Webb’s Parkside Village.

The set-up was similar to *Chris’s* planned community, up the road in Eclipse, and that would have been more convenient, except Chris didn’t want this guy to know where he lived.

He was still dealing with the dang ring--and this was two weeks after he’d picked it up on what turned out to be an ill-fated walk with Pat, who worked in the sales office at Chris’s condo complex, the Rancho Villas.

In fact Pat rented him his apartment and also helped him get a couple odd jobs--which didn’t exactly rake in the dough but at least you had something on the schedule, some semblance of an organized lifestyle.

Which you needed bad down here . . . to kill time.

But that walk with Pat where he spotted the thing partially exposed in the dirt blew up in his face for a couple reasons--first, because it helped kick things off between them that never fit right, and second, because he’d been having a heck of a time returning the ring to its rightful owner.

Yesterday had been an awfully good day though . . . as long as you kept your fingers crossed.

Chris had received a favorable word from Chandler, though a confirmation from Ned Mancuso on top of it would have been nice--but still--that for now the coast was clear . . .

Of course the framework for all of that was the Harrison doofus--not exactly the *guy* anymore, but the *body* at least--being discovered in the lion pit.

That would have been Christmas Eve, and what did we have now. . . the 31st of January . . . a Wednesday . . . 2018.

And it wasn't a slam dunk, and he'd be for sure looking over his shoulder . . .

But the bottom line was he was going home. For now. To Manhattan Beach.

Forget *all that* though at the moment . . . the *current* bump-in-the-road, sitting here at the picnic table in Anthem discussing ring ownership with this guy--is that the guy just pulled out a switchblade.

Not to stick you with it or anything--yet--but to *show* it to you.

But still.

So there you were, and this reinforced why picking up the ring and listing it in the **North Phoenix Lost & Found** section of Craigslist had been a terrible idea.

There had been multiple responders to his little ad by now, at least a dozen, and Chris dismissed a few as internet scammers.

The main problem was none of the ones remaining in contention had described the ring accurately. In fact only three of them described it at all.

This current guy who introduced himself as Dale was one of the non-describers, and he didn't say where he or his theoretical lady friend might have lost the ring (it was a woman's ring with three diamonds inset).

So a normal person in Chris's shoes trying to return it to its rightful owner would blow this guy off as the *least* likely owner--but of course Chris didn't do that, he let his interest get piqued by the guy's correspondence, and now the guy had drawn a knife out of his pocket and given it the flick of a wrist while he pushed the little button, and the thing opened up and he glared at Chris, and then closed it back up and put it away.

The first response to the CraigsList posting from this guy Dale had read:

It's ours. Give it back immediately. Where do you get off holding others people's rings?

And there'd been a couple follow-ups after that, and the guy was getting on Chris's nerves, so Chris strung him along, which was admittedly ridiculous and a waste of energy, and one of the things he told the guy was he'd had it appraised for 10 grand and therefore how could it be yours because you'd know for sure what your 10 grand ring looked like.

Which was of course a lie, he hadn't done jack about getting it appraised.

Chris had decided this was one of the problems with spending too much time out here, meaning the southwest, and specifically these planned communities north of Phoenix--that you had all these retired people around, and your brain starts losing its edge, and you get caught up with idiots like this Dale.

The guy had on work boots and Carhartt shorts and could have come off a construction job--even somewhere like Phase 3 of Chris's Rancho Villas complex, where they were in the middle of slapping up a couple hundred new homes at least--except it was 2 o'clock on a weekday.

Chris said, "Like I say, no need to threaten . . . Why *did* you do that, *anyway?*"

The guy said, "You can shove it up your ass there pal. Just give me the damn ring. Since you know it's rightfully mine."

"Well my interpretation," Chris said, "when someone needs to show off a big bad weapon, it usually indicates a shortcoming in the manhood department."

There was no one at any of the adjacent picnic tables but still it was a public place, a few people coming and going, and of course the ubiquitous golf carts rolling on by.

So Chris figured it was highly unlikely that Dale was going to take it to the next level . . . and fortunately he was right, the guy only gritted his teeth at the comment and it looked like his face was inflating, but all he could do at the moment was sit there.

Not that Chris hadn't experienced a bit of his *own* shortcoming in the manhood department, after witnessing the action in the Strand house, but that was a different matter.

"Okay I'll tell you what we'll do," Chris said. "We'll dive for it."

"Fuck *WHAT?*" the guy said.

Chris hadn't planned it, it just kind of came to him on the fly, looking over at the pool complex beyond the row of pickleball courts.

It didn't sound like there was too much going on over there, not a lot splashing, no music at the moment like they use for the water classes, and if you had an afternoon kids' team working out in one of the pools it was a little early for that too.

So Chris said, "Yep. Follow me."

And the guy got up and tagged along, surprisingly no resistance at all, simple curiosity apparently getting the better of him.

This place had not *three* major pools like the Rancho Villas did, but actually *four* of them, though he could see now that one might have had a movable wall that divided it into two, and frankly the whole setup was a little confusing.

Whatever . . . one pool had diving boards which meant that would be the deepest, and there was one old guy *doing* a little diving, climbing up onto the thing and assuming a position and taking a moment and then hitting the water pretty nicely.

Chris said to the ring idiot, "That's the way I want to be doing it when *I* turn into a senior. Not *his* deal necessarily, but *some* physical activity at a high level . . . You can tell, right? The guy's been diving his whole life."

“You don’t produce my ring,” Dale said, “in about 30 seconds, I’m gonna take it personally.”

“That’s not bad, the way you put that. I should file it away, for my *own* possible use . . . Do you *mind*?”

Chris was probably going a little too far with Dale at this point, and luckily before the guy could answer--or maybe *really* lose common sense and *pull* the switchblade back out and stick it in Chris’s face--the senior diver climbed out for the last time and grabbed his towel and was on his merry way . . .

So Chris took out the ring and fired it overhand into the center of the diving pool.

“You’re kidding me,” the guy said.

“Keep an open mind here,” Chris said, “this is normally fun . . . I count to three, we dive for it, guy that comes up with it keeps it. Capiche?”

“What kind of cocksucker . . .”

“One, two . . . three!”

And apparently the guy *took* it seriously now, yanking off both his boots and emptying his pockets into them, which included the knife.

And son of a gun . . . he trotted over pretty quick to the side of the pool and dove in.

Except it wasn’t a great dive. Pretty shaky form in fact, and Chris was thinking too bad the old guy just left because this younger dude needs some lessons, bad.

Chris saw what he needed to though . . . and *he* did the same thing quick, which was yanked off his *own* shoes and shirt and dove in after him.

And of course if Dale was smooth, and knew what he was doing, Chris would have likely left him to own devices, and if he came up with the ring God bless him . . . and this chapter was over.

But . . . since he *didn’t* look good toppling in and didn’t look real comfortable in there period, Chris figured he’d join him.

And Chris wasn't a world-class swimmer, but he had been on a swim team growing up . . .

And he *had* employed the maneuver on the Damirko fellow in San Francisco Bay . . .

Underwater now, the guy flailing away, unable to pinpoint the ring, and then having to resurface frequently, all of it pretty sloppy--this was feeling a bit *reminiscent* of that previous experience . . . where *that* guy'd been a poor swimmer as well.

Though Damirko, he'd also been a pit bull, you had to give him that. Chris remembered he'd given him an ultimatum about swimming to the rocks, and if he made it out there all would be forgiven.

Damirko knew that was bullshit of course, but what *he* also figured out was if he *did* make it to the rocks he had another escape route, and at that point he slowly but doggedly, methodically, starting working *toward* them, with a funny stroke but even so . . . all his adrenaline and every survival instinct kicking in . . . and Chris could see that Jeeminy Christmas, he *was* actually going to make it--unless someone did something about it ASAP.

This was different of course, the pool doofus going head first over and over to try to find the ring on the bottom, and each time breaking back to the surface and taking a big gulp of air . . . and Chris was thinking Jeez, it's not *that* hard, is it?

Though admittedly the center of the pool was pretty deep, 12 feet at least, maybe 15 even--since it looked like they had a higher dive at one point, you could see the base of the structure, which they probably had to scrap for insurance purposes.

No reason to compare the two, but just for fun, you'd have to conclude Damirko had the *right stuff*, and this guy doesn't.

Chris observed Dale for a while and then followed him to the bottom and grabbed his foot, and held on for a couple of seconds.

The guy kicked like mad and turned around like *what the hell* but there was fear in his eyes.

A rational person would be thinking *this guy can't drown me though, can he? He has to go up and breathe too, right?*

But Chris felt on his game, like he *had* this guy, so what he did, he let go and beat him up to the surface and took a healthy gulp of oxygen . . . and then went back underwater and found the guy's leg again as the guy was about to surface for *his* gulp of air.

The guy was in a panic mode now, and Chris was getting kicked but he managed to wedge the guy's left foot against his shoulder and wrap both arms around it and pin it--and then it was like an old-fashioned tug of war at summer camp.

The guy almost made it to the surface and Chris changed his angle slightly and pulled the guy back down a couple of feet . . . and something you didn't expect so soon, but was the guy really going limp on you already?

Chris let up his grip on the leg to see if Dale was only decoying him . . . but no, no significant difference in energy level, and this wasn't good, and Chris scrambled upward and got the guy around the neck like they used to teach you in lifeguard classes, and he got the head out of the water and worked Dale over to the side.

The scary part was, there was no huge, desperate gasping gulp of air from the guy when he *did* finally break the surface . . . and the continuing alarm now was do you try to perform CPR on him? And of course Chris was kicking himself for not paying great attention or practicing, the one time he took a CPR refresher class on a cruise ship all those years ago.

So should you scream out for help?

There were two older women sitting on the grass in lounge chairs, and that was about it in the immediate vicinity, and one of them had her mouth hanging open like she was asleep and the other had a newspaper opened up hiding most of her face.

Or you could get out and race inside . . . and Chris saw now they had a fire alarm on the outside wall of the locker rooms, and you could just pull *that* . . . and a lot of thoughts were racing around, mainly the police asking questions soon enough . . . but this mope Dale meanwhile who Chris had gotten halfway out of the pool to where his ass was resting on the edge . . . he wasn't looking any *better*, so you needed to do *something*.

Chris jumped out and started for the fire alarm and was going to yell out for help as well, when something told him to smack the guy on the back, at least give it a try . . . and the guy was laying there like a lump but Chris got him righted enough and drove his palm as hard as he could between the guy's shoulder blades . . . and that didn't work so he moved down the guy's back 6 inches and tried it again . . .

And Dale spit out a bunch of water, and started coughing bad, and looking like he was going to throw up too.

Dale was looking at Chris, dazed, like *what just happened*, not so different than a guy who just got choked out in a UFC match and doesn't quite know where *he* is . . . and Chris supposed that can happen when the brain gets deprived of oxygen . . . but *thank God* his guy seemed to be okay.

Chris said, "That door right there, go in and get cleaned up. You were lucky, you must have dived too deep, too quickly."

"There's a ring down there, right?" Dale said.

"There is indeed, and it's not going anywhere, so let's go . . . Inside, get yourself straightened out before you worry about *that*, take your time."

Dale sheepishly got to his feet and wandered kind of lost-looking toward the men's locker room and disappeared in there.

Chris put his shoes and shirt back on, and fortunately if anyone around the complex had noticed or been paying attention to Chris and Dale's little episode in the pool, they weren't anymore, and the two older ladies were wrapped up in their same activities in the lounge chairs.

Chris hesitated and thought of the guy's switchblade, and the fact that it was in one of his boots right now along with his wallet and keys and so forth, since Dale had emptied the pockets of his Carhartt shorts into the boots before he went in the water . . . and Chris figured what the heck and scooped up the boots and took them along.

An hour later back at the Rancho Villas a hot tub effort sounded real nice, and there was Arty.

"I'm getting ready to leave," Chris said, "trying to tie up loose ends."

"Hmm," Arty said. "You caught a break, back home then?"

"Something like that. Right now I got two issues - finalizing the silly ring, but more importantly trying to get some money back on the condo."

"Yeah, when you told me you pre-paid, that sounded dumb."

"What, you're one of those guys who can read the future? If that's the case, you can come back to LA with me."

"The ring though," Arty said. "After all the obsessing you've been doing, you still have it on your person?"

"Yeah. I don't know what got into me today, I had to meet some guy. I guess like you said, I can't leave shit alone."

"You're putting words in my mouth, but I'm assuming it was counterproductive."

"Oh yeah, big time. I did give him a chance, put the ring at the bottom of a swimming pool, left him with a challenge . . . Different ring of course . . . Again though, huge mis-use of time. I feel like I'm losing my focus, going off on tangents."

"So you *switched* the ring?"

"Yeah. You know that flea market they have Sunday mornings over by Target, the side parking lot? I picked up one for 5 bucks, a costume jewelry type thing. My pool guy is chasing that one. If he maintained his interest."

“Not a bad idea,” Arty said. “Except what makes you think the authentic one is worth any *more* than that?”

“It easily might not be,” Chris said. “This has been a major headache. So when I said yes I still have it, that’s going to change in about 20 minutes, I’m putting it back where I found it.”

“That’s sensible. And then notifying all the inquirers of that fact?”

“I wasn’t planning on it, no.”

“So back to square one. Meaning . . . you could have simply handed it *over* to your pool friend, settled it that way too.”

“Yeah you’d think,” Chris said.

Arty got out, and Chris wanted to relax a little longer before he went to find Pat, not something he was looking forward to.

And yeah, the Dale idiot was still on his mind, but when you looked at the big picture, it shouldn’t be a major concern.

If the guy called the police, for instance, what was he going to *tell* them?

That some guy he pulled a knife on and tried to rob, then turned it around and tried to drown him and took his boots?

That was the other thing, Chris only wanted to *scare* the guy in there by tugging on him, not have it approach a medical emergency, for crying out loud.

At any rate, to conclude the pool debacle Chris had jumped in a taxi that was dropping someone off in front of the Anthem complex, and the driver seemed absorbed in some middle eastern music, and that was fine, he wouldn’t be worried about a passenger carrying a couple of boots stuffed with some other guy’s belongings and a switchblade.

Chris did have the driver drop him at the Panda Express in Eclipse though, since *a* the underwater exertion had worked up an appetite, and *b* you could pretty conveniently get rid of the guy’s stuff in the various

garbage cans at the strip mall . . . though Chris debated hanging onto the switchblade, since you never knew . . . but nah.

Now Chris was giving it the extra couple minutes in the hot tub, but you could only duck it so long, so he went to hopefully find Pat in a good mood.

“Hey stranger,” he said. He had her office door part way open and was pretending to knock on it.

Pat looked up from her paperwork. She had glasses on and her hair tied back, and a fairly tight blouse actually. “You,” she said. “I must say, you have a certain style.”

“Good then . . . you’re not mad at me anymore.”

“I didn’t say that. What do you need?”

“Well . . . you remember helping me out with my housing deal, right? A month ago, when I showed up here? Which I really appreciate.”

“Keep going.”

“Uh, well maybe kind of stupid in retrospect, but we worked it, where I put up the 3 months, \$3600 bucks.”

“I’m aware of that. Which reduced the rent as I recall from \$1500 to 12.”

“Something like that . . . Listen, my . . . situation changed . . . and I have to vacate. Can you help me out?”

Pat took off her glasses and took a swig from a water bottle. “I thought I already did that.”

“Oh. The car you mean, letting me borrow it . . . a couple things I just noticed though--the glasses, you don’t need them for seeing distance? And Jeez, you’re one of those people that carries your water around all day?”

“What can I tell you,” Pat said, “you need to educate yourself. All the literature is clear, one needs to stay hydrated.”

“And that’s bull *shit*,” Chris said. “What’s wrong with being old-fashioned thirsty?”

“Okay that’s enough . . . what did you have in mind . . . exactly?”

“I mean I don’t know, you tell *me*. I’m not trying to jam anyone, that’s for sure, I’m just hoping I can recoup *something*. Whatever you think is fair.”

Pat had come out from behind the desk and pushed herself up onto the side of it. Chris couldn’t help noticing the relatively short skirt.

“You’re saying you don’t believe in obligations?” she said, and dang it, there was a *tone* to it, a sultry-aggressive one, that’d he’d experienced from her before.

“Well . . . yeah, sure I do,” Chris said, thinking just give me a figure, let’s not overcomplicate this.

Pat took a moment. “I’m off at 5:30,” she said. “We can talk about it.”

“Hmm. You’re saying . . . like by the pool or something? You’ll find me?”

“No, I’ll stop by.”

“Ooh boy.”

“Why not?” she said. “Now if there’s nothing else . . .”

Chris realized it was pretty close to that already, 10 after 5, so he figured he better stop by the bar and pick up some ice and tonic water.

It was just the little bar of course, part of the in-house restaurant here at the Rancho Villas, where Chris had been working a weekly shift and enjoying it okay.

Much of the time was spent conversing with the clientele, a few of them around your age but most of them older, the main thing being you didn’t mind helping them get sloshed, since all they’d have to do was stumble back to their respective units.

Chris hadn’t done it before but he figured it was no harm, and the guy on duty, Dan, was pouring a drink and Chris went behind the bar and got what he needed and opened the register and threw in a 20, and Dan gave

him an amused look, like if you just asked me I would have *given* you that stuff.

Chris didn't think of himself as a *significant* boozer, though that vice got stepped up when he moved to Manhattan Beach, so who was he kidding . . . starting with Emma dragging him to Target that night for the blender after they raided the hard liquor department of Ralph's on Sepulveda Boulevard . . . and of course that was an hour after he'd mistakenly dunked Ken in the toilet bowl in Big Wok.

And that wasn't quite right--he remembered telling Ned that first time in the Crowe's Nest--*before* Emma-- that he'd moved here with a few goals, one of them being cut *back* on the hard stuff, another was *eat better* . . . and that he was so far off to a flying start.

Anyhow. Here in Eclipse he'd accumulated some gin and some rum, that was about it, and not sure if rum went with tonic at all, but they'd figure it out.

Meaning he and Pat, and he had an unfortunate idea what Pat might be up for, and hopefully his mind was running away on him because *he* wasn't going to be up for that at all.

So you feed her some booze, pull out some cheese and crackers, keep her busy, turn on the news maybe, discuss the events of the day, and she gets tired and agrees to give you back half of the remaining \$2400 advance rent money that you've idiotically thrown down the tubes.

Pat tapped on the door at 5:33, and this gal wasn't kidding when she said she left work precisely on the *nose*--even if someone was poised to sign a contract right then, that was too bad.

"You're true to your word," Chris said. "Very efficient. Clinical, even."

Pat took the drink that Chris had finished stirring with a soup spoon and took a healthy gulp, apparently not concerned what it was.

"And you are a rotten scoundrel," she said, sitting down. "But I'm all about second chances."

“Okay I’m going to be honest with you here,” Chris said. “I don’t think you’re talking about *me being a nice guy* second chances.”

“That’s part of it, why wouldn’t it be?”

“The tirade you went on, when I was late with the car, there was more to it than me screwing it up by 10 minutes.”

“Yes there was. It was a blatant lack of respect on your part.”

“I get that . . . but upon further review, I wondered if it had more to do with my not . . . performing adequately that morning.”

“Well,” she said, “seeing as how we’re being so direct here, that absolutely *was* at the root of it. I fully expected to be welcomed back to your unit for a second round. I looked forward to it the rest of the day.”

“Jeez . . . do you have to use those words?” Chris said, at the same time thinking, *get me outta here*.

“And instead you’re in the parking lot, and I was clearly the last priority on your list.”

It was all kind of a blur, but Chris was wondering was that after Blaise--no, it was the road rage guy who’d been texting . . . except that wasn’t right either, because that ended with Chris having to bowl the game and getting bandaged up by the convenience store lady, and going to bed with a serious headache.

So yeah, it *was* post-Blaise, which would be Sunday, a week-and-a-half ago now . . . and Chris had been avoiding the news, TV and print both, as much as possible, but it was a pretty big event around here unfortunately for 3 or 4 days.

Much as he didn’t want to, he’d have to go online and look for updates before he left for California, it was the responsible thing to do.

At any rate . . . how do you handle things *right now*, this gal sitting here working on her second rum-and-tonic at the moment, apparently expecting something?

Then too, the core issue might be, she wants to walk out of here with the upper hand. Crazy as that sounds. And you *were* attempting to get some money back, correct?

Chris said, "To continue in the interest of full disclosure, like you were saying a minute ago . . . my deal is I'm afraid I've developed a bit of performance envy."

"Hmm," Pat said, "performance *anxiety*, you mean?"

"Maybe that too."

"You seemed okay the first time. I mean it wasn't quite 4th of July fireworks over the Grand Canyon, but even so."

"I might have got a little lucky there . . . What are you referring to though, the Grand Canyon business? They actually *have* those?"

"No, it was just an example. The *ultimate* of something. What do you mean, you got lucky?"

Chris said, "Okay, like I say, you're a very attractive woman, nothing to do with you."

"Gee thank you."

"It's been maybe . . . 6 weeks now? I happened to see some adult flicks being made. Not the film part, or like the editing, but the real mccooy."

"My Land," Pat said. "How on earth did that occur?"

"That's irrelevant. What's got me kind of screwed up--100 percent honesty here--is matching up to what I saw going on."

"Oh."

"I mean, it's likely mostly mental, I know that intellectually--and I know it will pass--but right now don't count on me . . . Is that plain enough?"

Pat drained what was left of her second rum-and-tonic, tipping the bottom of the glass up real high. She moved closer to Chris on the couch.

"What *was* it, specifically?" she said.

“The whole package was bad, frankly. The intimidating anatomy, the stamina level, even the positions to an extent.”

“And an example of one of *those*,” Pat said, “would be what?” She was distinctively slurring her words at this point, and she began rubbing Chris’s shoulders.

And Chris was feeling it just a bit now as well, his own liquor kicking in, her hands working the middle of his back not the worst thing he’d felt in a while, actually.

He said, “Well the one that stood out, really got in my head, was this one guy suspending his partner, and then walking her all over the apartment, and it was a penthouse, so no one could see in . . . but the script being, he’s teaching her things along the way, and whatever other clichéd bullshit they added, opening up her world and so forth. It supposedly concludes with them at the window, him talking to her about the ocean. Though when *I* left it was still going full-speed ahead.”

“Wow,” Pat said.

“I’m getting long-winded.”

“Not in the least.”

“Ah. Anyhow . . . I learned a lesson, a couple of them, but the main one, don’t get old.”

Pat said, “Didn’t you attempt anything like that when you were younger?” She’d begun nibbling on his earlobe from behind, and the words were muffled.

“What you’re supposed to come back with,” Chris said, “is you’re *not* that old. But to answer your question, once or twice.”

She swung around and before he knew it she was straddling him, that skirt looking *awful* short presently, and everything up above too beginning to strain against the surprisingly thin material of her blouse.

“I feel you’re up to the task,” she said quietly.

This was a serious crossroads for sure. It was yet one more in a ridiculous number of decisions these days, where you're never sure and you have to go with your gut.

"Fine. We'll turn back the clock, you're saying."

Pat was taking a few things off, leaving the skirt on though. "Or start a new one," she said, with a more urgent tone.

"What you just said," Chris started to say--and what he was going to add was, *it makes no sense*, but she was all over him now . . . and you had to admit, it wasn't altogether terrible . . .

And the main event, launching her up there, waist-high and all, that wasn't too bad either . . . and it seemed to be going fine, and she called out a few times, though she used weird expressions, that made Chris pause momentarily, like "Mother-of-pearl--Fuck!".

Coming down the stretch though--in fact Chris thought of it later, if you were using the horse-racing analogy, the more accurate one would be coming around the far turn--his right leg started to spasm.

He fought it off, tried to straighten it abruptly--in fact that maneuver actually seemed to please her--but it was no good, this was a serious charlie-horse, and he'd been down that road before, going back to high school football . . . and it was excruciating until you were able to do one thing, which was lay on your back with your leg up and have someone push back on your toes.

"Very sorry," Chris said, easing Pat back down on the couch, or at least trying to, almost missing it . . . but the main thing, he was able to get on his back.

"What in God's name . . ." Pat said.

"If you know the drill," Chris said, "would you mind?", his leg twitching worse than a rabbit's nose, and all of it, the calf included now, completely seized up.

Instead Pat grabbed whatever garments she'd discarded and tidied herself up for about two seconds, and was out the door . . . almost, and then she hesitated and said, "I'm going out of town tomorrow. We have a corporate event in Flagstaff."

Chris squeezed out, "Have a good time then," even though the leg was torturing him like an absolute mother.

"On your refund," Pat said, "I'll cut a check. You can pick it up from Kit."

And then she *was* gone.

Chris tried pushing himself up and balancing on one leg, and trying for some relief that way . . . but there really only was one method, and that's why even on TV, multi-million-dollar NFL games with the finest medical techniques and equipment, some poor trainer is still out there holding the guy's foot and pushing the toes back.

It took about five minutes and then he was able to shake it off enough to jump in the shower, and *whoa nellie* that had been an awkward ending to an unusual episode--but the good news was on two fronts . . . that up until the 'accident' Chris had surprised himself today with his vigor . . . and that thank God, the woman had a heart and was going to at least refund him something.

So . . . what the heck, the night was young, you might as well act like a resident in this place, in the day or two you have left, and Chris wandered back over to the bar, and Dan was happy to see him, and things were festive enough for a Wednesday evening, Chris supposed, and what would another cocktail or two hurt.

Though he paid for it in the morning, violating those rules about mixing your liquors indiscriminately, so things didn't get off to the greatest start on Thursday.

And it got worse, around lunchtime, when he stopped in the Rancho Villas sales office to see Pat's assistant Kip and pick up his check, like Pat had instructed, and Kip didn't know anything about it.

"She's at a workshop," Kip said, "but shall I try her cell? It's no problem."

Chris said that wouldn't be necessary, no need to bring it up to her . . . and in fact come to think of it, I have it worked out a different way, so we're good . . . which was of course a lie . . . and he told Kip he was moving on but if you're ever on the west coast to please look me up, and you could tell the guy appreciated it but it ended there, Kip not asking for any contact info and Chris not volunteering any.

He'd gotten to know Kip a little bit by now and did like him, and maybe at some point you'd give him a call out of the blue, see how he's doing.

Unfortunately you couldn't say the same for Pat.

Chapter 2

One tidbit he'd picked up in the in-house bar last night was there was an online bulletin board where people shared rides.

The guy on the stool next to him told him this, a guy named Albert who looked about 95 years old but was still *with* it, obviously.

Albert said his daughter came to visit last year from Wichita, and she'd made the mistake of staring at a solar flare years ago and screwing up her eyes to where she couldn't drive.

Chris assumed that *was* possible, but it sounded extreme, and something else had probably happened, but either way she made it here and back, he said, using these ride shares.

So after walking out of Pat's office empty-handed, Chris took a seat at the bank of public computers in the rec center lounge.

As he did so, he couldn't help wonder what the result would have been if he *hadn't* gotten the charlie horse and was able to maintain his poise and consistency last night.

Would a fat check then have been waiting for him just now?

This gal was hard to read. So maybe it didn't matter.

Either way, it served him right for mixing business with pleasure--not to mention being greedy in the beginning and congratulating himself on being such a wheeler-dealer, when in the end he turns around and gets smoked.

The Phoenix-area ride board was pretty extensive, it turned out, and well organized, and Chris thought you needed something like this in the

Bay Area, and LA too, though undoubtedly those *did* exist, they were just off his radar.

Most of it was straight shares, just like the old guy'd been talking about, and it looked like it worked different ways, but the upshot was you paid the gas at the very least, and you rode along with the person to your destination. And often it was with *multiple* persons, which everyone seemed to favor because that split up the gas bill.

After Chris's Greyhound bus experiences, this may have been an upgrade for *some* folks, but the concept didn't cut it, even though Jeez, there were several *hosts*, as they referred to them, looking for *partners* to travel with to southern California.

You had to figure, end of January, maybe you were into semester break for Arizona State, and U of A too, because there were a dozen similar setups looking to leave this weekend.

So Chris didn't know *what* he was thinking on this ride board, if he couldn't tolerate riding with a *host*, and how did he *expect* it to work?

A return to Manhattan Beach by bus was 100 percent out of the question. You could fly, like any normal non-idiot would do, and be on the beach in about 2 hours--but there was the issue of the ID and the security check and the credit card and so forth, and even though Chris couldn't pinpoint what the problem would be with that--since he was apparently not a wanted man at this point--but it just didn't sit right.

Same with renting a car, not as intense security-wise, but they still had your basic info in the master computer. You could try the fake driver's license, but paying cash would be tough--and he'd gone through all this before, starting back in Bingham, and there had been no clean solution other than the torturous Greyhound.

So yeah, that's why you were on the ride board now, hoping for a *different* solution . . . and then there was a small link for **Drivers**.

Chris perked up. He'd forgotten all about this concept, and he'd done a couple of these back in college, driven to Boston one summer and then down to see a girl named Rhoda in Blairsville, Georgia, population all of 580, the Welcome sign had said . . . and that was a big mistake, Chris had misread that one.

But this looked like the same deal--you connected with someone who needed their vehicle transported essentially, and yeah, you paid the gas and ground out the driving, but you were by yourself and in control.

So . . . he scraped through the listings and people wanted you to drive their vehicles all over the place, Jeez, including Mexico City in one case, and some of them had conditions attached, like you had to bring *their* dog or you had to detour on the way and pick something up.

Finally one jumped out, nice and clean:

**Need pedal to the metal. Valley of the Sun to Bakersfield.
Will fork over burger money.**

You couldn't tell, but without further adieu, screw it, he called the number that was included.

And Chris *was* getting jumpy, you had to get out of here now, and let's face it, you *did* handle your two issues--the ring and the condo refund--even though neither one worked out great.

A guy answered and he was nice enough, and he confirmed the basics in the listing, one weak point being you'd be driving a Ford Focus, a 2004, which Chris had a hunch was the first generation of the thing, but the guy said it ran great and the only issue was the compressor was shot so you didn't have air conditioning.

Chris could deal with that, even in hot weather he liked to open the windows, and this was still mild, high 70's during the day.

The Bakersfield ending wasn't ideal, that left you a couple hours away from MB, but you'd cross that bridge when you came to it.

The guy seemed eager, and told Chris to come on down and he'd make sure he was trustworthy and hand over the key--and Chris liked this attitude, the old fashioned hand-shake, increasingly rare these days with too many lawyers typically stirring the soup.

On down meant Gilbert, which was basically southeastern Phoenix--and this didn't sit great with Chris, going down that way *period*, since he avoided Phoenix and Scottsdale and all the rest of it since the incident with Blaise--so he asked the guy if he could deliver the vehicle to *him* in *Eclipse*, and the guy said for how much, and Chris said a hundred bucks and the guy said 2 . . . and Chris said fine and he'd see him in an hour and hung up.

And dang . . . he was getting real good at throwing money around like a sieve.

But the guy showed up on time, he had his wife drive a second car, and the meeting was short and sweet and the guy said he'd appreciate it if the car got to Bakersfield by Wednesday, and that was that.

Having the actual wheels staring him in the face fired Chris up, and he went back and cleaned up the apartment as best he could, and then packed the Focus, and fortunately that part was easy because there really wasn't anything *to* pack.

By then it was close to 5, and Jeez, where did the time go, and he decided he was probably still a little hung over from last night and the day was moving at an odd pace . . . and he remembered something else, the **Will Fork Over Burger Money** part of the guy's listing, and Chris had neglected to ask about it and the guy hadn't addressed it.

Maybe it meant when you get out there, Bakersfield, he's waiting for you and rewards you with 20 bucks to grab a bite?

Whatever . . . right now Chris's thought was what time is it in California, and he wasn't sure but you figured it was an hour earlier if

Eclipse was on mountain time . . . so that would be 4 o'clock in Santa Monica . . . and Chris dug up the number of that therapist and called the office.

The receptionist was short and to the point, and Chris thought you need to be a little more laid back if you're dealing with troubled people calling for appointments--and of course he didn't put *himself* in that category, but still.

The earliest appointment, she said, with the same gentleman from last time--who Chris couldn't remember the name of but she came up with it quickly, the record of his appointment back in December with *Dr. Stride*--that the earliest booking would be Tuesday February 20th.

"That rings a bell now," Chris said. "A curly-haired guy right? Opened a stick of gum halfway through?" Which the guy had actually, Chris not dwelling on it back then because he had enough to worry about, the various questions the guy was firing at him, but yeah, maybe the therapist had some issue of his *own* he was battling by needing the gum.

"Sir," the receptionist was saying, "I can add you to that time slot if you like, but I need to move on."

"Jeez," Chris said, "today's the 1st right? So we're talking like three *weeks*. I mean what if I was on the brink?"

The receptionist's tone was unchanged, but she said, "Sir, if this is a mental health emergency, I can provide you some numbers."

And she waited, but you could hear typing and plenty of noise in the background, and Chris figured she was more concerned about getting to her yoga class in about an hour than him jumping off a bridge. And you couldn't blame her, he was being a jerk, and if there weren't any openings what was she supposed to do?

"I apologize," he said. "I'm going to pass. Please enjoy the rest of your week." And he hung up, though he could hear her saying something back right at the end.

And that was one thing he'd gotten right on this trip, the Arizona adventure . . . Despite his mental block against cell phones, he'd managed to figure out the settings, and no one (hopefully) could pick up his number, and so far no one had return-called him, which is what he thought the office person might want to do to talk him back into the appointment . . . since it was a business after all.

Chris felt a little awkward calling the therapist. The guy had been okay that time, he gave Chris some stuff to think about in that way Chris supposed they were trained, which meant the guy didn't judge him.

In fact most everything was *indirect*, and the guy was reasonably clever, the way he had *Chris* drawing his *own* conclusions.

The one direct question the *guy* did answer though, at the end, was Chris asking him if he could use more therapy in the guy's opinion, and the guy said absolutely.

Chris drove home that day dismissing the answer to an extent--since the therapist likely needed to pay an LA mortgage--except the other interpretation was he was being honest.

Of course that session was a freebie, the coupon he'd torn off the menu at the pizza place in Hermosa Beach when Marlene excused herself, though she figured it out anyway later, and supposedly didn't hold it against him.

But this thing now with making the guy dive in the pool . . . and to an extent even the road rage guy, since let's face it, if you didn't act out and get in his face for texting while driving, none of that would have happened.

Obviously the way *that one* played out, Chris got backed into a corner where he had to do something . . .

But this Dale yesterday, at the pool, wanting to strongarm him for a dumb ring . . . what were you doing getting mixed up with that?

So that disturbed Chris, scared him a little.

It seemed like a serious deviation from his original list, and the initial concept.

Maybe it was as simple as Dr. Stride could give him a mental technique, some kind of attitude adjustment. Who knows.

Either way, it was a thought, that you get back to MB and then a day or two later you meet with the guy, a little tune-up, a re-set, and you're good to go.

Three weeks away though, forget it, a lot can happen between now and then.

Chris had dinner in the Rancho Villas restaurant, the irony being he actually had his own transportation now for the first time since he'd been here, but you might as well finish it off by saying goodbye to a few people--not making a big deal about it, just explaining you were moving on.

And as far as most of them knew, your name was George and you were from the Seattle area, and again Chris supposed it really didn't matter if they knew a little more about him at this point but no one seemed to *want* to, and only one guy, Merv, from when Chris bartended, asked *where to next?*

The implication being Merv assumed Chris moved around, that was the deal, and what was wrong with that actually--someone *thinking* it, and Chris actually *doing* it?

Except the reality was, both in Bingham, Nevada, and here, you got homesick.

So . . . bright and early, 7am, Chris was all set, and he checked the map, and no surprises, 17 to 303 to 124 to 10 . . . and then a straight shot to MB.

Although shit, he forgot, he was driving the guy's vehicle to Bakersfield, that was the arrangement . . . but it looked like the same route, you didn't have to make any decisions on the Bakersfield finish until at least Riverside.

And like any trip, you knew you were forgetting *something*, but if it wasn't front and center it couldn't be that important . . . and then Chris remembered unfortunately he *had* intended to at least do a cursory check of the Blaise situation on the in-house computer . . . just for instance on the off-chance that there was a warrant out for his arrest, or something equally benign.

Yeah, it would be *highly* unlikely two uneventful weeks would have gone by since he machined Blaise, if he happened to *be* on the radar . . . but for your piece of mind, and before you show up back in LA--*somewhere else where you're not entirely convinced you're off the radar*--at least take a look.

So Chris got back out of the guy's Ford Focus that he was about to start up and went inside and fired up one of the Rancho Villas computers . . . and oh yeah, there was plenty, probably a dozen articles spanning the main news, the crime blotter and the sports section . . . and Chris decided it was a little too much actually, you're torturing yourself here, and he made sure he didn't spot any reference to a guy looking like *him*, being spotted at the scene, or driving away in a green Avalon . . . and he left it at that, and keeping it simple was kind of cathartic.

Should you roam around, see if there was anything about the Camaro guy who he'd had to bowling-ball?

Again . . . what was the point? What would you *gain* from reading about it?

So this was good, a bit of an eye-opener actually . . . except as he was getting ready to sign off the thing and get on the road with a relatively clear head--there was an article he couldn't help noticing, because **Cold Case DNA** was in the headline . . . and Jesus Christ, now they were taking DNA and creating people's *faces* from it . . . and they showed the side-by-side, from a crime they just solved in Irvington, Texas, of the *computer* face and then the *real* face of the guy they'd just arrested, and they were eerily close.

Fuck this shit.

If it's not one thing, it's another. Chris was barely coming to grips with the DNA *family tree* nonsense, and how you might have an outside chance to combat *that*--and now an entirely different concept . . . you leave an eyelash behind, apparently--and they can reproduce what the heck you *look* like.

Unreal. He got back in the car, a new set of concerns now, and by the time he'd hit the 303 turnoff he had a plan--to shave his head and get real tan and grow a beard--and when he got to the 124 junction that was ridiculous, the stupidest idea he'd had in a month.

By the time he stopped for his first bite to eat at a Pilot on I-10, he was a little more relaxed about the concept, that if it *really* worked they'd be arresting guys right and left, and that this close match in Texas was likely the exception, and that even then there was probably other evidence that pointed to the guy.

So okay, you could relax (hopefully) and try to enjoy the scenery, and not worry that the sky was falling in just yet, and while you're at it, count your blessings that at least you're not on a Greyhound bus . . . but one thing for sure, everything was a lot simpler when he took care of Donny that first afternoon on the running trail in Santa Rosa.

His biggest concern was did he leave any fingerprints on the bat, and when he threw it into the water at Mountain Lake Park, that seemed to be the end of that.

Chris had a crazy thought that if he'd gotten the terminal diagnosis 10 years earlier, when he was 32 instead of 42, that would have been a much more comfortable window, with police technology being downright ancient back then.

But *oh well*. Chris reminded himself of the old John Madden wisdom he liked to pull out, that worrying about something you can't control is a waste of time.

And so you forged on . . . except the Ford Focus was starting to make a funny noise, not a constant one, but increasingly often when Chris got it up to 65 and then eased up on the gas, you'd get a *rattling*.

And that was never good.

First he thought (prayed) it might be the muffler. He had that happen once in New York, mufflers much less durable back there due to the winter conditions and salt on the roads that tended to wear through the exhaust pipe, and once Chris's fell partly off and started dragging and sparking coming across the George Washington Bridge, and he had to get out and stop traffic for a moment and pull the thing off and put it in the trunk.

But that wasn't it, and the rattling became more frequent, and louder, and the Focus lost power eight miles east of Wilma, Arizona, and it took another 50 yards to come to a complete and final stop, and by that time Chris had at least angled the thing onto the shoulder.

Hmm . . .

Chris got out and stood there and looked around. It was Friday morning, very little traffic, and of course you were in the middle of the desert.

Which one of those he wasn't sure.

He hadn't learned a whole lot, honestly, about Arizona, but he did commit to memory the names of the four deserts, though he couldn't tell you where any of them were.

You'd *assume* this was the Sonoran, the main one, where you were stuck at present.

Though it could have been the Mojave of course.

Or Jeez, maybe the Great Basin. Or even the Chihuahuan. *Well whoopee, how about that . . .*

The other thought that crossed Chris's mind . . . the doofus assuring him that even though the Focus had a few years on her, she *ran great*.

Chris made a mental note--whenever anyone, in the history of the rest of your life, uses that expression . . . run the other way.

But fine, that was later. Right now, even the darn cell service didn't work.

So Chris handled it the old-fashioned way, not that he had any choice, and waited for a cop. Which took about 90 minutes, finally a guy pulling up behind him, lights going like he's responding to the World Trade Center attacks . . . though admittedly what was the guy supposed to do, he couldn't just shut them off.

But then of course the guy sits in his vehicle for 5 minutes first, and Chris is thinking, *do I really seem that dangerous out here?*

Then the trooper got out and said hello and made a joke that it looks like something won the battle and it wasn't your car, and he jiggled as he laughed. He was friendly enough, a big guy, overweight, though Chris decided the various state trooper hats tended to have an ominous look, and the Arizona version was a cowboy hat shape but with a more official overtone, and a big gold badge with high wings was staring him in the face above the brim as the guy got closer.

There was also a tidy roped tassel at the base of the crown, which resembled something that could be used in a rodeo, and it had these ends on it that reminded you of numchucks, so Chris supposed the guy could take it off and use it as an extra weapon, if he ever came up short.

"See your license and registration please?" the trooper was saying now.

This wasn't great, and Chris was getting a little ticked off here, that it's been almost two hours and you can't just help me a teeny bit by calling a tow truck?

But you figured it was procedure, regardless . . . and the issue now was do you give him the real license, Christian Seely, and take the risk that your name is conceivably in the system and they're looking for you . . . and

Chris reminded himself of his conversation with Chandler, and how that wasn't a concern at the moment, otherwise you wouldn't be on your way back to California, would you . . .

But still . . . you could fork over the fake ID, George Worthy, but that really didn't sit right if the guy takes it back to the squad car and scans the sucker through something . . . then you *are* in some trouble . . .

So the unfortunate judgment call was--is this guy just busting your chops, since he knows you only have car trouble . . . and he's not going to run anything?

Meanwhile Chris was digging around in the glove compartment trying to *find* the registration. You had an old Ford Focus manual, a half box of tic-tacs, a couple pens, a receipt for an oil change, someone's hair clip . . . and that was about it.

"Not looking great," Chris said to the trooper, "on the registration deal. I gotta be honest, I'm driving it for another guy, and it's my fault, I didn't check any of that stuff first."

"Oh yeah?" the cop said. "Where's the *other* guy at, then?"

"I have no idea. Not behind me if that's what you mean. All's I know, I'm dropping it in Bakersfield. It beats taking a bus." Might as well be real.

"*Were* headed to Bakersfield," the trooper said, and laughed.

"I have to be honest," Chris said, "I can appreciate a sense of humor on a public official--I mean yeah we need *more* of that--but joking about someone when they're *fucked*, like I am at the moment, I don't know."

"I got you Bud. Just trying to keep it interesting. No harm intended."

"No offense taken. Sorry."

"Gonna let you slide on the registration. Since we're towing it. Technically it's not a moving violation."

"Oh boy, thanks."

"So just give me your John Hancock here, and we'll get the show on the road. You got Triple-A, any of that shit?"

Chris wasn't quite sure how to answer that one either, so he said no.

The bad part, the guy was asking for a signature, one of those you give with your finger on an I-Pad, which apparently authorized him to call the tow truck.

You could scratch something illegible, but the fear was it would have to match up, to an extent, to the driver's license the guy no doubt hadn't forgotten about.

A car came barreling by, over the speed limit for sure, a red Chevy Blazer with big tires. His brake-lights were on as he passed Chris and the trooper.

"Hold that thought," the trooper said, and he hustled into his car and peeled out of there after the guy with a major squeal of rubber and a cloud of dust.

Unbelievable, Chris thought. Now I got another hour.

You did have to wonder how the guy didn't see the cop in advance and slow down. Highway 10 was straight as string at this point, bright day, huge domed sky, and you'd be able to spot the trooper's flashing lights from about two miles back.

The conclusion would have to be, the guy was on the phone or texting or otherwise so pre-occupied that even though he no doubt *saw* the trooper, the brain receptors didn't react until it was too late.

The other observation was, it was surprising how agile the heavy cop was, the guy really went flying into his vehicle when the chase was on.

Whatever. Chris looked around in the back seats, Jeez, even an old newspaper or something would help, and on the floor under a rolled up piece of canvas were two books, both out of the 1960's and kind of radical, not what you'd expect from the Focus guy, based on their brief--and now ill-advised--interaction.

One was *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, and Chris had heard of it, it was a memoir from a radical black guy. The other book was a series of stories, or more like essays, by Tom Wolfe.

Chris had read one novel from the guy, it was about a girl from the backwoods of North Carolina who ends up at a fancy basketball college like Duke, and dates one of the stars of the team. It wasn't bad. You got a feel for the rich and somewhat corrupted big-time college sports culture, and all that went with it, including plenty of head-scratching fraternity/sorority stuff.

Chris liked how Wolfe didn't necessarily try to conclude anything or throw his opinion around, he just laid it out there.

This book here on the side of the road seemed to be a mixed bag, as Chris thumbed through it, but then there was a profile of Carol Doda.

Carol Doda was legendary for years in San Francisco. She was a skinny gal who was go-go dancing at a club in North Beach, and someone convinced her she could make a lot more money if she got enlarged . . . and this was before people *got* enlarged . . . so she essentially broke new ground.

And Jeez, Wolfe was telling a pretty good story, that:

She blew up her breasts with emulsified silicone, the main ingredient of Silly Putty, and became the greatest resource of the San Francisco tourist industry.

Chris had been aware that was true. She had a show at the Condor on Broadway and Columbus, and the finale involved her dancing on a piano that got raised to the ceiling by invisible wires, and so forth . . . and Wolfe was doing a good job putting a human spin on Carol Doda and Chris was getting into it . . . though even better, the trooper was back.

“Sorry about that,” the cop said, “but guy pissed me off. Right in my face. Some infractions you tolerate, some you don’t.”

“Well thanks for keeping us safe,” Chris said, and he meant it, especially in light of the road rage Camaro guy. If there’d been a cop there when the guy was texting and straddling lanes, Chris wouldn’t have turned into an idiot and gotten involved.

“So . . . where were we?” the trooper said.

“Uh, I think you needed me to . . . okay the tow.”

“Oh yeah . . . Listen, I called it in as I was circling back to you. Shouldn’t be long. I gotta get a move on.”

Wow. Chris was tempted to ask what the rush was all of a sudden, but of course you kept your mouth shut since you may have dodged a bullet.

But the guy volunteered it anyway, “I’m on lunch.”

So Chris couldn’t resist asking if there was a specific place, since he was always up for a food recommendation, despite the circumstance.

“They’ll be towing you to Wilma,” the trooper said, “which should work out perfect. Right across from the Arco you have *Evelyn’s*. Best chicken-fried steak in three counties. So long now.”

And he was gone pretty quick again, not setting a record like when he was chasing the speeder, but not fooling around either . . . and Chris knew the feeling, when your blood sugar’s dropping you take care of it.

The guy was right, the tow truck got there in 10 minutes, and the driver opened the hood and took a look, and mumbled something about it smelling like a head gasket, and Chris figured if the guy was a *real* mechanic he wouldn’t be doing roadside duty--but then again he’d had experiences with these guys being right on the money, quicker with the correct diagnosis than the *shop* guy.

Either way, what difference did it make, the thing was caput, and you weren’t going to wait around to confirm the issue, much less fix it on the side of the road, and Chris asked the driver what next, and he said it goes to

a repair place in Wilma--which Chris assumed was the *only* repair place--and 24 hours of storage is included in the tow, and then it's up to you.

So they hooked him up and Chris got in and as you got closer to Wilma his cell service worked, and he called his insurance company--and nope, he was covered for *liability* when he drove someone else's vehicle, but not for *roadside situations*--and dang, they sure loved telling you *no*, didn't they, your typical customer service people, kind of an uplifted tone to their delivery, and slightly jubilant.

The state trooper had been right, *Evelyn's* was something else, jumbo portions and various gravies dripping off the plates as the good-natured servers brought people's food to them. The entrees--and the desserts too--had the messy quality of everything being homemade.

If Chris had to guess, that was Evelyn herself orchestrating the proceedings back in the kitchen, and when it slowed down she came out and said hello all around, and you had the impression a lot of these folks stopped in here every day.

Chris was at the counter and she gave him a "How are *you* today?" and then spoke a minute with the guy next to him, and refilled both their coffees before getting back to work.

Chris said to the guy, "You got the better treatment there. Not the *local* one, but close."

"I'm in a big rig," the guy said. "Stop here whenever I can time it."

Chris had seen two trucks in the back of the parking lot but he assumed both guys were in there sleeping.

"So where are you headed?" Chris said.

"Where are *you*?" the guy said, not being argumentative exactly, but maybe not appreciating the direct question out of the blue . . . which seemed innocent enough, but maybe there was an unwritten code of trucker etiquette.

“It *was* LA. I have to wait now. Car trouble.”

“Ah,” the guy said. “Well at least you got this place to keep you company. You at the Set-Tee?” That was the motel in town, up the block from the car repair place.

“Should be, yeah. Haven’t quite committed myself though.”

“I was gonna say, I could offer you a ride, except you’re waiting on your repair.”

Dang.

“I don’t *have* to be waiting . . . no,” Chris said.

“Okay then,” the guy said, finishing up. “Let’s get *to* it.”

And just like that . . . Chris was back on I-10 heading west, this time resting comfortably about 15 feet up, his head positioned just right against a passenger seat that might have out-comforted anything he’d ever sat in, except maybe his Costco recliner.

He liked this guy’s style, whose name was Abe. No screwing around, no asking things twice or making sure, like most nervous nellys in the population, which seemed like a higher percentage of it than ever these days.

Though a half hour in Abe did say, “You return-tripping it, or what?” Which Chris assumed meant, would he be going back to Wilma to retrieve the vehicle when it was fixed.

“Not at the top of my To Do list, no,” Chris said, and Abe seemed satisfied and left it at that.

Chris was already \$350 poorer for the tow, cash, which seemed like highway robbery, especially in a rural environment where prices are more reasonable, but what he figured they were doing was charging him the automatic rate they charged the insurance companies.

So the money pit continued. Then after the first 24 hours, like the tow guy was saying, there was a daily rate for storage, unless you opted to have them do the work.

Chris had found the registration after all, it was in the center console in a plastic sleeve, the owner's name and address on it, and he'd given it to the repair place as a placeholder . . . and now he called them and told them to please junk the car and send the guy on the registration the bill, and the repair place was okay with that.

"More definitive now," the trucker said to Chris, "that you're not coming back."

"That was an error, yeah. I've made a lot of them lately."

"Like what?" Chris didn't feel like going into anything, and he was awfully comfortable at the moment and it felt wonderful to just watch the road. And what a view from up here.

He particularly didn't want to get into anything *off-beat*, such as offering a political opinion without meaning to, and risk having *this* guy throw him out.

But a direct question, *like what?*, was reasonable.

"Well . . . for starters, I think I ran away from something I didn't have to. That led to some other deficiencies."

"You been acting out of character, you mean?"

"Yeah. I guess you could say that. I seem to be overdoing shit. Not letting it flow natural."

"You ever speak to anyone about that?"

"Hunh? You mean, psychologically?"

"Yeah. Like a counselor, a therapist."

Jeez, was this guy a mind reader or what? So Chris turned it around and said, "I have not. Is that something you'd recommend, based on your own experience?" No idea where it was going, but let the man talk.

"I did," Abe said. "After my brother died in Iraq."

"Ah no . . . he was a soldier?"

"702nd Brigade Support Battalion. Pete. 11 years my junior. He was a good man."

“Very sorry to hear that,” Chris said.

“He looked up to me from day 1. It’s been tough.”

“So you’re saying . . . you sought some counseling?”

“As a result, yeah. Other issues eating at me too, I rolled them into one. Started with a *guy*, a drop-in clinic in Pensacola. He was well-trained and all, just didn’t feel I could lay it on the table like I wanted . . . So I switched me to a gal, been a good move ever since.”

“Meaning you still . . . see someone then?”

“Bud I just told you. What part didn’t you *get*?”

“No, I was just thinking, on the road and all, the logistics of it.”

“She’s in Manitowoc. I’m back there enough, running through to Buffalo. I make it happen.”

“Sorry, *where*?”

“Wisconsin. East side of the lake. Geography ain’t rocket science.”

Chris was wondering which lake would *that* be, and guessed it was probably Lake Michigan, but you better not ask.

He said, “But the female presence, you’re saying, you could open up more? Why do you think that was?”

“First of all,” Abe said, “this one’s voluptuous. Not trying to be, or flaunting nothing, but damn she’s sculpted out.”

“Oh,” Chris said, not sure if that would help with the therapy, but yeah, dang, you’d at least be more enthusiastic driving to the sessions.

“Other than that, I can’t pinpoint it, why she’s more in tune with me than the other one . . . What she got me realizing, after Pete, it’s *never* gonna go away, the pain.”

Of course Chris was wondering if they tell you those things so you keep coming in, feeding the meter--and he felt like smacking himself for being so cynical.

“From what I’m hearing then,” Chris said, “she’s realistic.”

“Don’t need no sugar coating,” Abe said. “When I brought up Pete’s teeth too, she stayed with me, didn’t tell me I was a kook like plenty of others.”

Uh-oh. Chris tentatively asked, “What about your brother’s teeth?”

“Only that he was visited by a alien. Not personally, but the shit got into the dental mix, and he ended up fucked.”

“Ah,” Chris said, but Abe was on a roll, and he bit off a hunk of beef jerky and continued.

“See my brother, he had a girlfriend in Las Cruces . . . For the geography-challenged, that’s in New Mexico. 46 miles from El Paso. Which is one of your border towns.”

“Unh-huh.”

“They’re in a pizza joint--and that’s kind of curious already, with about 10,000 Mexican restaurants there, why would you choose Italian? At any rate, they order a house special, the works, and there’s an olive buried in the cheese that didn’t get pitted, and Pete breaks part of a tooth, a lower rear molar that has a filling in it.”

“Ooh.”

“He’s gonna wait until he gets home, which back then was Lafayette.”

“Indiana,” Chris said, hoping he had it right.

“Exactly. But it starts bugging him, and the girlfriend convinces him to take care of it. So the upshot is, he gets a replacement filling, local, and then all hell broke loose.”

Chris would have been fine with the story stopping here, but you had at least 4 hours to LA still, probably more, once you hit traffic . . . and this Abe was sounding like a bit of a lunatic now, but at least he was handling the big rig fine.

So Chris said, “What *kind* of hell broke loose?”

“Two departments. One, he developed a super strength. You wouldn’t believe it unless you saw it, at least I didn’t. But he could lift up cars and shit, the front ends.”

“And there’s a *two*, as well?” Chris said.

“Yep. He could time travel. He didn’t intend to. But he did it once by accident. Scared the shit out of him.”

Chris was thinking the voluptuous therapist in Wisconsin was right, in not getting rid of this guy too quick.

Though admittedly . . . Chris had a bit of a fascination himself, with Area 51. It took him a long time to become even a half-believer, but maybe we *were* back-engineering some kind of unwordly technology there.

You had a ton of stuff on YouTube, most of it garbage or faked, but . . . it was hard to completely dismiss the concept when you hear commercial airline pilots talking about weird stuff they’d seen, as well as a couple astronauts who spoke out.

Chris had taken it a step further, out of curiosity, and listened to a PhD physicist give it a shot, and the guy mentioned time travel as being theoretically conceivable--though he then launched into seriously confusing esoterics about the universe being made up of multiple dimensions, and that lost Chris pretty soon, and he clicked on one of those animal videos instead.

But the trucker Abe had gone this far, so you might as well ask, “You’re saying the tooth caused all this?”

“Damn straight. Something he suspected. After he passed, I did my own investigation. You remember Roswell?”

Chris was aware of it, but it was back in 1947. One of those folklore bits, where a rancher out there on early morning horseback checking on his livestock claimed he found pieces of a crashed flying saucer. The government said it was a weather balloon, but meanwhile they had half the US Army there cleaning it up, so the explanation sounded suspect.

“I heard of it,” Chris said. “What about it?”

“We was developing the earliest nuclear weapons back then. And guess where? In New Mexico. The theory, which I’m buying into, is crafts from other worlds were monitoring the activity. One of ‘em crashed in a lighting storm over Roswell. But another one around that time, they released a discharge above a silver mine . . . outside Capitan. That’s Lincoln County.”

Abe let that hang for a minute, and Chris realized he was being tested, and it was the last thing he felt like doing but he had to work his brain here.

“What you’re getting to,” Chris said, “you’re not going to tell me silver, from the particular mine, then ended up in your brother’s *tooth*.”

Abe smiled, pretty much for the first time. “You’re not bad . . . Rough start, didn’t know if you were all there, frankly, but you righted the ship.”

“How the hell is that going to happen? I mean *realistically*.”

“Easy. That particular silver mine, they shut it down after the Korean War, along with a bunch of others. It got re-opened in 1996 . . . Those investigation things are tricky, I gotta tell you. You ever gotten your hands dirty, done any detective work?”

Chris had never thought of himself as a detective, but he supposed the deal with Mel, the possible Zodiac killer, the running around from lead to lead like the Columbo guy on TV, ending up in the basement of the high school in Brisbane combing through the old yearbooks with Ken--that might have qualified.

“Not really,” Chris said. “But what I’m hearing coming, is you nailed it down . . . that the silver from that mine was gobbled up by a dental lab.”

“Bingo, again. Though not gobbled up, employed in amalgam fillings. My brother always went with the acrylic ones, because they look like your teeth, but they convinced him to go metal, because the hole was bigger.”

That sounded like about enough. Chris got the idea. And fine, it was interesting, something you could put on a sci-fi TV show, and it would sit

more within the realm of possibility than some of the ridiculous notions they *did* expect you to embrace.

Chris assumed Abe's conclusion was that a trace amount of alien craft material got mixed in with the silver, ended up in Pete's filling, which leached into his bloodstream, and then Pete took on super powers as a result.

It would be good to change the subject now, not let Abe break into another wild tangent if he had one of those in him . . . so Chris started asking questions about long-haul trucking.

Abe was surprisingly upbeat about the profession, despite what sounded like plenty of negatives to it, and man, when you got him going, totally different subject than his brother, he could really talk your ear off there too.

Over the next couple hours Chris learned a lot.

The computers in the modern big rigs program the engines so you can't go over 62 miles an hour.

Sometimes, if you can believe it, they can't park where they need to and they have to jump in an Uber to take care of something, like some paperwork.

Insurance doesn't allow them to pick up a passenger. Abe winked at Chris as he explained this, pointing out that he was currently in violation therefore, but that if Chris caused any trouble, such as sued him for something, he'd simply have to kill him--and Chris believed the guy.

They still use CB radios, though Abe had only spoken into his once so far, and he said it's frustrating for the older drivers like him, because the young guys don't know the CB lingo.

When you *have* to be somewhere, the only way is travel at night.

From your vantage point, you see unusual stuff going on in people's vehicles sometimes, whether you want to or not.

A cow wagon (cattle hauling truck) is your most dangerous 18-wheeler, takes forever to stop.

20-minute power naps make all the difference in staying awake.

Most long-haul drivers crank out 125,000 miles in a year.

US truckers as a total drive a whopping 200 billion miles in a year, meaning they could have driven to the sun and back 1,000 times.

Holy Freaking Shit. How do you wrap your head around that one?

On-board recorders keep track of you now, so you can't cheat and over-drive without the required rest time.

Chris didn't have the reasons straight, but if you're a veteran driver who owns his own rig (like Abe) you prefer to get paid by the load, rather than by the mile or by the hour.

Abe's rig was a 2012 Kenworth, made in good old Chillicothe, Ohio.

If you lined up all the semis on the road in America, end to end, they'd reach the moon. *Holy Smokes.*

You don't want to pick up or deliver in Gary, Indiana, under any circumstances.

A flatbed trailer is called a skateboard. Weigh stations are called chicken coops. A trucker's log book is a comic book. Toll booths are cash registers. A rest area is a pickle park. The center median strip is a comedian.

The final fact: plenty of long haulers live in trucks, including Abe.

"Jeez," Chris said. "That one kind of floors me. Not the way the *sun and back* business does . . . And no offense, I don't mean it this way . . . but *this* doesn't feel like *home*."

"I hear ya," Abe said, "but the price is right. Sometimes my lady comes with me, if I got a favorable run. Meaning she doesn't like the south--and she doesn't like the north either, except in the fall."

"That doesn't leave much then,"

"No. And that's how I like it. Why we get along, I suppose."

Abe stopped for coffee and a piece of pie at a pull-off in Indio, and Chris decided this was his kind of driver. Abe kidded one of the waitresses, and she teased him back, and obviously this was a regular stop, and it was nice to see that the guy spaced some fun out in his day, that it wasn't all pedal to the metal intensity.

They started back up and Chris decided you'd never see this Abe again, and for that matter Abe likely didn't give a hoot about Chris one way or the other--who he was or what he was all about.

So Chris . . . loosely . . . ran the DNA business by him.

"Come again," Abe said. "*You've* committed a crime?" Abe lit a cigarette. He wanted to hear *this* now. Chris could see that the presenting it *loosely* hadn't quite worked out.

"I haven't personally," Chris said, "that I'll *admit* to, anyhow . . . For argument's sake, can we leave it at that?"

"We absolutely can," Abe said, pretty sizable smile, and Chris aware that the son of a bitch was unfortunately reminding him of Chandler.

Chris said, "Another guy reacts the same way. Gives me that look, like *sure, go ahead*, and meanwhile he's got me tried and convicted of something, and always with a stupid little grin."

"You mean he gives you like a *knowing* look?" Abe said, laying the exact one on him now.

"Whatever. It's unimportant . . . The issue that's been keeping me awake--and I hate that word *issue*, but you got me using it, talking about your therapist, the sculpted out one . . . When you say she low-keys it, she wears, like, loose sweaters then, or what? . . . Forget that, I'm being a juvenile here."

"It's a standard term, *issue*, covers what you need."

"Fine. The deal is, we're in a new frontier, apparently. Almost overnight. This genetic testing. What they're doing, they're tying folks together--inadvertently almost--through familial DNA."

“I know,” Abe said, “I’ve been reading about it.”

“Wait a second. You’re the second guy now--maybe even the third when you include the old guy in the hot tub back where I was living--who’s one step ahead of me . . . You’ve been reading *what?*”

“Pretty clever. They caught that guy in New Hampshire, cold case going back 35 years. What they done, they ran the old DNA, came up with like a 5th cousin, and worked it backwards from there.”

“Is that right,” Chris said, not having a good feeling about this at all, if even ol’ interstate-Abe here considers it common knowledge.

Abe said, “What . . . you don’t seem to *like* that. You got something against justice being served?”

“The *appropriate* justice, not at all . . . Let’s not debate that . . . My deal, and please don’t read anything into it, but you mind if I run it by you, my thought?”

“Shoot.”

“You’re not going to . . . report me or anything, some crackpot spouting nonsense, who might warrant being investigated?”

“Son I’m the last guy you’d be worrying about that from.” And there was a definitive tone to it, almost like you’re insulting my intelligence by even *asking*, and it was one of those life’s too short ones where you trusted your instincts.

So Chris said, “What I’m worried about, them finding *me* that way. The New England deal you’re referencing.”

“New Hampshire,” Abe said.

“Not that *I* did anything wrong, let’s keep that upfront . . . But my thought, to counter that shit, which gives me a ray of hope here, after I slid into a depression about it for a week, wondering if I could lead a normal life again . . .”

“You’re overtalking. Get ‘er to it.”

“Well, what if I found one of those hacker guys, and he messed with the internal code to where I get an email if anyone enters my DNA.”

There it was, for better or worse, you couldn't lay it out more plainly than that.

Abe thought about it, puffing a little harder on the cigarette. “You're talking, internal code of CODIS? Or the public one?”

“What's CODIS--the law enforcement database, you're saying?”

“Yep. FBI.”

“For that, you already have to be in the system, right? I mean *someone* would, hypothetically?” Chris couldn't help running through it for the umpteenth time though, whether he could have inadvertently given a sample sometime in his life, such as at a holiday drunk driving checkpoint, and for the umpteenth time concluded he never had.

“That's right,” Abe said. “Ones not in the system, law enforcement is turning to the public ones. GED Match, is how they nabbed the New Hampshire person-of-interest.”

Jeez. He's throwing out the *name* now and everything.

Chris said, “Well in that case, let's *say* we're dealing with GED Match, fine. Could my guy--I mean some guy who a suspect enlisted--help him get a heads up, like I was saying?”

“I wouldn't have thought so,” Abe said, “that you could penetrate a system like that. Seems too easy.”

“Yeah, that *has* occurred to me too. Unfortunately.”

“Except,” Abe said, “if the Commies can infiltrate our voting booths--and you have to assume the US government knows *something* about cyber-security--then all bets are off.”

Nothing to do with it, but Chris couldn't resist asking, “You voted for Trump?”

“Oh yeah. He *conned* my ass.”

“Anyhow . . . *if* it were feasible to hack in there--what do you think of the general concept?”

“Should be able to. What I was getting at, it ain’t set up like the Feds, the article said two kids in Florida got it going out of their garage . . . but what are you trying to gain?”

“Not sure, other than a heads-up if they really were looking for me, for some unknown reason.”

“Meaning you’d have time to hit the road.”

“Something like that . . . I’ve tried a couple of those now, false alarms, but the living out of the suitcase part is over-rated. Again, no offense.”

“I’m with you now. It’s a cockeymenyed scheme, if you ask me. But maybe it helps your peace of mind, knowing that if you *don’t* get notified, no one’s *bothering* you.”

“That was my thought. Kind of reverse psychology.”

“It were me,” Abe said, stubbing out the cigarette but lighting up a fresh one, “I’d try to go in there myself, first, see what they’re gonna find, should they decide to look in on me.”

“Like a pre-emptive strike,” Chris said. “I thought of that too. Although the *probable* result of that--all I do is confirm that I’m in trouble, if they take a look.”

“You cut me off mid-thought.”

“Sorry.”

“Where I’m going with it, this New Hampshire one, they found a 5th cousin that matched the perp’s DNA. You with me? Then they’re inside the family tree--the cops-- and it’s a question of time, some basic detective work, before they start narrowing it down and honing in on the guy.”

Of *course* Chris was with the guy, he’d been obsessing over this, but you didn’t want to be rude so you kept your mouth shut and nodded.

Then Abe threw him a curve ball.

“After you look around in there, meaning confirm you’re most likely in *trouble* if they go that route . . . then you hack into the motherfucker and get the relatives *out* of there.”

“Huh?” Chris said, trying to process that one.

Abe was getting worked up as he formulated the idea, and his eyes were narrowed and a little spit was flying, and how could you not love the guy at the moment for taking your ‘hypothetical’ situation personally.

Abe said, “You going to all the trouble to get a hacker, use him for something *purposeful*.”

“You’re saying . . . all right I think I have it . . . If I’m understanding you right--man, that is brilliant.”

“Let’s not get carried away. May not be doable. All’s I’m thinking, why screw around getting *notified*. Eliminate the *possibilities*, sits a lot better, in my book.”

Wow. Something to look into now for sure.

On the one hand, it was almost like a slapstick comedy routine, a game of cops and robbers, and you could even get a kick out of it--if it weren’t a matter of life and death.

But yeah . . . what a simple concept. Find out if you have any relatives doofus-like enough to have submitted their DNA to this site--in search of God knows what critical piece of their identity--and get ‘em the hell out of there, before the authorities start looking around.

And Chris didn’t mean to be too hard on his 3rd-cousin once-removed, Bob, in Lawrence, Kansas--and he was being facetious, he had no idea if he even *had* one of those--but the point being, Bob of course had the right to be curious if he was 1/16th Lithuanian, and Chris could see how you got sucked into these things.

But so what? If Abe’s idea miraculously worked, Bob gets removed and never knew what hit him.

“What else you got?” Abe said. “You don’t strike me as a serial murderer, or nothing.” And he was back to giving him the amused look, the one that reminded Chris of Chandler.

“Okay I’ll level with you,” Chris said. “I helped a guy do the right thing, is all. It seemed prudent--at the time--not to wait for the system.”

“God damn right. You talking *California*?”

“*Some* place like that, yeah.”

“Liberals ruined it, messing with the death penalty . . . You hungry, or should we go straight through?”

It was fine with Chris that Abe was more interested in unloading on California politics than wondering about the specifics of what he might or might not have helped someone *do* . . . and yeah, he could use a bite.

So they stopped in Plaster City at a CoCo’s, and son of a gun, Abe knew everyone there too, even the bus boy, and he asked him how school was going.

“You have a nice set-up,” Chris said. “I *envy* you to an extent.”

“No you don’t.”

“I had an uncle who was a doctor, a family physician. He didn’t love it. He told me all things being equal he would have rather been a coast to coast trucker.”

“Your uncle was delusional. Where’s he at now?”

“He’s got Alzheimer’s bad. He’s in a retirement home in Grass Valley.”

“I was going to say, I could give him a ride if he was up for it, show him the flaw in his thinking.”

This guy was okay. Chris wanted to tell him that, specifically that he was impressed with his intellect, coming up with some surprising suggestions--but better not to open that subject up again.

So Chris asked where he might mind dropping him in LA--and Abe said what are you talking about with LA, we’re an hour and a half east of San Diego.

So when they got to a warehouse in Imperial Beach, Abe got out and stretched, and told Chris the good thing was he wouldn't have to *fingerprint it*, which Chris in his new exposure to trucker slang took to mean Abe wouldn't have to unload the cargo himself, and there'd be a guy showing up with a forklift.

Then Abe went in the back of the cab and laid down, and it didn't take long before you could hear him snoring away.

Chris got on the phone and called an Uber, figuring he could negotiate with the guy when he got here, and one showed up within a few minutes and told him that'd be \$289 to LAX, for up to 3 people--and that was non-negotiable, but that he could swing him over to Manhattan Beach at no extra charge . . . and Chris felt around in his front pocket to assure himself he had \$289 *left*--and told the guy fine, what the heck, and please wake him up when they get there.

Chapter 3

It was after 8 when they pulled in to the *Cheater Five*.

It hadn't been your most economical day--you had \$350 for the tow, another \$325 for the Uber after you threw in a tip, plus some incidentals along the way . . . so it had just run you ballpark \$750 to get here from Phoenix.

Chris didn't want to think about it, but he suspected you could find a cheap flight on Southwest for around \$69 bucks, the way a *normal* person would handle it . . . and not to mention, that would have gotten you here hours ago and you'd probably spent the afternoon on the beach.

But what the heck, Chris figured, he was *home*.

Ken was happy to see him--though not deliriously excited like a couple of previous times, and Chris threw his bag down in the bedroom and it was clear that Ken had taken it over, and of course you couldn't blame him.

"Boss," Ken said, "just to give you a heads-up, Michelle's been staying here."

Chris took a second. "The only part of that that bothers me," he said, "is your using the expression *heads-up*. Don't do that anymore."

You could tell Ken felt bad, and Chris knew he was being a jerk for latching on to that out of the blue, and how was Ken supposed to know that Chris had been consumed with his own various heads-up possibilities.

Ken said he was sorry and he'd be sure not to, and Chris, like he'd done more than once before when he jumped the gun with Ken, said don't worry about it, not a big deal.

“But Michelle now?” he said, a little curious about that.

“She’ll be back soon. She went to pick up Chinese. Boss they got a new place on Rosekrans, pretty tasty, big portions . . . Hey, you want me to see if I can reach her in time? And add you in?”

Chris said he wouldn’t mind, if it didn’t make her turn around or anything, and Ken took care of it and twenty minutes later Michelle shows up, big smile, at least until she saw Chris, and carrying a couple of those take-out plastic bags.

They went down to the pool and spread out at one of the patio tables. There was a flowering scent in the air, Chris didn’t know what it was, but mixed with the feel of the ocean a mile away you knew you were distinctly in an LA beach town.

“This is the life,” he said. “Thanks for including me . . . I’m not going to *recommend* it--that’d be going too far--but when you have to deal with other places, you *do* appreciate what you’re missing.”

“That came out funny,” Ken said, “but that’s twice now.” Half-saying it to Michelle, filling her in that Chris evidently likes to take trips, but also throwing it out to Chris in case he wanted to expand on the two recent mysterious ones.

“In any case, Michelle it’s good to meet you,” Chris said. “Though you seemed to tighten up a little, once you saw me.”

“Sweetie, Boss doesn’t mean anything by that,” Ken said.

“Jeez. Sweetie already,” Chris said. “You guys know each other from *work*, or where?”

“That’s none of your business,” Michelle said, speaking up for the first time. “And the reason I did a double-take, Kenny asked if I could add a Mongolian beef for a friend.”

“And you didn’t expect that to mean an *old* guy,” Chris said. “Fair enough. But what’s the big deal about where you met?”

“There is no big deal,” Michelle said. “I just felt you were starting to order me around.”

Ooh boy. Ken was shifting his position uncomfortably.

Chris said, “You know what? Let’s start all over.” And he got up and approached Michelle and offered a hug, and she conceded and gave him a tentative one back, kind of all shoulders and elbows though, not much substance, definitely not like the embrace he got from Stacey that time under similar circumstances, meaning his return from laying low in northern Nevada.

“Good to see that,” Ken said.

“Might have been a little light though,” Chris said, “Which is just as well, because my mouth was kind of full and I had some hoi-sin sauce on my lips.”

Ken said, “See what I mean Sweet? I told you Boss had a good sense of humor.” Though Michelle didn’t look that convinced.

“Not you,” Chris tried to tell her. “I’m in one of those wise-guy punch-drunk moods where I shoot from the hip like a jerk. I’ve been known to get myself in trouble that way.”

“I’ll bet,” Michelle said. “But meanwhile, thank you for the accommodations. Your apartment is great.”

“Oh no, let’s not go overboard. Well located though, does the job, that’s for sure . . . I think I told Kenny the story, those two guys I met in Starbucks?”

“Boss you did. You’re starting to repeat a lot of them.”

“I didn’t hear it,” Michelle said.

“Oh. Well to condense it real brief--you had two guys wheeling and dealing, guys, not sure I *respected*, would be the exact word, but they got your *attention*. The one guy points out you could live down here in a hole in the wall, because how much time are you going to spend *in* the place?”

Michelle thought about that. “That’s a very wise observation,” she said. “What *else* did he say?”

“His only other take, was you need to be on the ocean side of Sepulveda Boulevard.”

“I can see that too,” she said.

“Feels like a major accomplishment when you actually make it across,” Chris said, “when you’re stuck having to.”

“Especially on foot!” she said.

Now Chris looked at *her* a little funny, since that reaction, even though he agreed with the sentiment, seemed a tad over the top.

“At any rate,” Chris said, “what’s on tap, the rest of the evening? . . . And oh, the other thing, were you going to say thank you for the accommodations--a minute ago--but add that you’ll be moving on?”

And of course this was *deja vu*, Stacey doing the same thing when Chris came back from Bingham--and you could tell Ken was aware of it too, likely hoping to God that Chris didn’t run his big mouth and mention Stacey out loud, for comparison’s sake.

“I have a place with my cousin out in Burbank,” Michelle said. “We’ll be going there. Is tomorrow morning okay though?”

“Jeez,” Chris said. “Long way . . . I mean why do *that*? Just stick around.”

Michelle and Ken looked at each other. You could tell what was going on. On the one hand, Michelle was pleasantly surprised at the offer, but on the other, she’s thinking, *are you kidding me, I’m not staying in an apartment with this guy.*

“And *I* was just thinking what you’re *thinking*,” Chris said. “Don’t forget now, one big advantage, what we were just talking about, the *Cheater Five* is on the correct side of Sepulveda.”

“Though barely,” someone said, and they all looked up, and coming through the gate was Marlene.

Now *this*, is going to be a little awkward, Chris thought.

Fortunately, and quite unexpectedly, all that Marlene cast in Chris's direction was a little wave, as though to say *hey there*, and Michelle was happy to see her and she got up and the two of them sat down at a smaller table down by the deep end of the pool.

"Jeez, old friends already," Chris said to Ken. "I see why I got the short end of the deal."

Ken said, "No, that's the way Michelle is, with *everyone* when she first meets them. She has her guard up. It's not at all who she is."

"I meant *Marlene*, giving me the shaft just then."

"Ah."

"Not that I didn't deserve it. I cut out of here without saying anything, never contacted her after, either."

"Well that's none of my business," Ken said.

"You think I handled it wrong? I mean we were friendly, having some good times, not like we were an official *item*, or anything."

"Boss I can't say."

"What it was . . . I was sort of going with the reverse. I *do* say something, then you open *up* the possibility that we *do* have a relationship . . . You get what I'm saying?"

Ken shook his head and didn't answer.

Chris said, "She coming back, do you think? I mean for the food?"

Michelle had left most of her plate, which included a sizable portion of kung pao shrimp, and Chris was still hungry.

"No, help yourself."

"You sure? I'm already on her bad side, I'm pretty convinced."

"She consumes very little. And when she gets up, that's it. You can take it to the bank."

"Okay then . . . healthy looking gal though, I must say. Very pretty."

"She is."

“So at the risk of pissing *you* off now too, I’ll give it another shot--she in *the business* with you?”

“That would be an affirmative,” Ken said. “Your powers of deduction must have sharpened while you were away.”

“Okay now you’re sounding like Chandler, going comedian on me . . . And I want to hear about him too, but first . . .” Chris looked at Michelle and Marlene over there, animatedly deep in conversation, and he lowered his voice. “Did anyone . . . like, stop by looking for me? The last month or so? Since I’ve been AWOL?”

“Boss I’m pleased to tell you that you can relax. It’s been completely quiet on that front.”

Which was of course an unspoken reference to last time, when Chris had hightailed it out to the intended destination of Chicago, but stayed off the bus too long during a rest stop in Bingham and it left without him.

The point being though, Ken stood up to the cops, Detective Hamm and the other guy. Ken would have to go a long way in life to undo Chris’s appreciation for that.

The real point now though, Chandler *had* once again set him straight, that through a confluence of events that Chris hadn’t fully understood, he was free to return to MB--as apparently was Ned Mancuso.

And that could change quick, so you weren’t going to pop any champagne--but you could at least take a deep breath.

So Chris went back to the other, more interesting subject. “You guys--you know what I mean . . . with each other, and so forth?”

“At work?” Ken said. “No. I guess it’s conceivable, they could schedule it at some point, but so far no.”

“Oh. So you just . . . bang away on each other at home . . . and--”

“Come on, *Boss!*”

And of course the reference was to Ken’s recent and dramatic career change--from recycling books in the basement of the Manhattan Beach

public library--to *acting*--and quite successfully apparently--in the adult film industry.

Chris said, "Well what part am I off-base with? What I'm getting at obviously, it's noteworthy that you can have a relationship with someone, when . . . you know . . ."

"I think we've addressed this," Ken said, "and it's getting old, frankly. It essentially boils down to a state of mind. Either one is at work, or he's not. You conduct yourself accordingly."

"You use 'one' now?" Chris said. I never heard you say that before."

"Oh brother."

"Well jumping around . . . so you've been playing tennis?"

"Not too much. Chandler had a finger that was bothering him, and I didn't try to find other partners. The last week or so he's back to normal, we've been hitting some."

"Guy sounds like a hypochondriac. Always letting you know he's not 100 percent."

"Oh," Ken said. "I forgot. One person *did* come by the apartment. Just last night."

"Huh?" Chris said, as his heart started racing, and Ken said to excuse him for a second, the guy left something in an envelope, and he'd run up and get it, and sorry about that, he should have remembered this.

And this was the thing. Not only was it an extremely dumb idea to celebrate by popping champagne--probably *ever*--but even when you were good, as was the case a couple minutes ago . . . you *weren't* good.

God *damn* it, what could *this* be now?

Ken made it back fast, he obviously was uncomfortable having to add this to Chris's plate, out of the blue . . . and he handed Chris a plain white envelope with his name handwritten on it.

Ken looked away to give him privacy but Chris didn't care, he tore it open with a fury, and the only thing inside was a business card . . . which he was processing now, that therapist from Santa Monica, Dr. Stride.

The card was a standard professional type deal, the address and office phone, everything so small you could barely see it, and Chris figured that was the idea, keep it understated--and it listed the guy's credentials after his name, which were *MFCC* and *PhD*.

Chris flipped the business card over, and on the back though was a handwritten note:

Are you ok? Call me anytime. Bruce Stride.

And there was a phone number, the guy's personal one, Chris was pretty sure.

Wow.

"Boss, everything all right?" Ken said, after a minute.

"It is," Chris said. "Thank you. Sorry to put you through the ringer there. I just . . . I don't know *what* I was imagining . . . that it was some IRS official, or a US Marshall or something . . . whatever *those* guys do, I'm not even sure."

"So that's terrific then, it was none of that . . . The gentleman didn't strike me as that type, honestly."

"Wait, so you *met* him?"

"I did. He seemed concerned."

"Jeez . . . and I haven't even paid the guy a penny yet."

"What's that, Boss?"

"Don't worry about it," Chris said. "All of a sudden . . . I'm hitting the wall like a ton of bricks. If I could just go through the mail, make sure nothing's jumping out there either--which I don't expect . . ."

Which was true. If someone needed you, as in a bad way, they weren't going to screw around mailing you something.

But for peace of mind, you run through it and then you hit the sack . . . and Ken picked up on that, and ran upstairs again and brought the five week's worth of mail down in a nice wicker basket.

"Where'd you get *this*?" Chris said.

"Marlene. She brought it over, said it would make a nice place-holder until you got back."

Sheez.

"She knew I was *coming* back?"

"Not sure. I told her you do go away sometimes, but that you haven't *not* come back yet."

He thought he might have gotten lucky with Marlene--meaning off the hook--the way she responded a half hour ago like it was no big deal, but no, that'd be one more apology he'd better dish out.

Chris said to himself, *and you know what?*

You want to stop having to make excuses and apologize to people?

Then stop killing guys.

Anyway . . . the mail was ordinary, still an awful lot of junk, despite the worldwide domination of email--wasn't that supposed to help take care of it? The *paperless* notion, that they hit you over the head with?

There were only two items of note. An annual Christmas card from this born-again Christian couple that he'd met one time in Colorado Springs--one of those with the picture on top, and what they did in 2017 condensed into a paragraph and printed in small type below. The photo looked tropical, like they were on vacation in the Caribbean, and it didn't look real Christmasy . . . and they don't look too *born-again* either, the woman in a skimpy flowered bikini that showed a healthy hint of cleavage and the guy not wearing much himself.

Chris supposed it was still nice to be remembered at Christmas, even though the card arrived after New Year's. The other personal piece of mail, an invitation to a wedding in North Carolina, a guy he'd known since junior high school who settled back there and Chris couldn't remember, but suspected this might be the guy's second marriage, since it seemed a little late for a first one--but either way, he wouldn't be showing up at that in a million years, but he'd take care of the RSVP card they included.

That was about it.

Except Jeez . . . one final thing, what about the Broderick rent?

Chris thought of this a little late, after he just came back in from discarding the pile of junk mail into the *Cheater Five's* recycling bin out back . . . so this was not gonna feel great, having to dive in there and go through it again with a flashlight, to make sure.

So he asked Ken. "My tenant up north, guy's name is Herbel? You remember spotting anything from him at all?"

"Boss, I'm sorry, I do not." Ken standing there kind of helpless, waiting to assist on something that's probably not assist-able.

"Thinking back on it," Chris said, "Jiminy . . . pretty sure this is two months now, coming up on three."

He ran it through his head, everything going on around Christmas, that he lost track of December's payment too. He remembered now one coming in around the 10th, and that being for *November*--but the guy including a note saying he'd bring it current soon--and then Chris pretty much forgot about it--and then of course Eclipse got in the way.

But meaning, the guy owed December right now, plus January that apparently never arrived . . . and dang, we were into February so that was due now too if you want to get technical, since today was the 2nd.

Ken said, "I'm happy to double-check outside in the recycling, I can tell that's what you're thinking. Make sure."

“Nah,” Chris said. “Thanks but don’t bother. Let me call the guy. If he said yeah he sent it, I’ll take another look out there.”

And he went back in the bedroom and dug his old address book out of the closet and someone answered on the second ring.

“Dixson Herbel please?” Chris said. It had been a while since he’d spoken to the guy and wasn’t sure he’d recognize his voice.

“Speaking,” the guy said.

“Oh. Well hey then, it’s Chris Seely. Down in LA? I’m sorry to bother you, and I may have missed something, but I’m not finding any rent for the last couple months.”

“Whatever,” the guy said. “You woke me up. Don’t call this late.” And he hung up.

Chris stared at the phone for a moment and scratched his chin. Hmm.

He called Herbel back, and the guy didn’t wait, he picked up right away but didn’t say anything this time, a silent presence on the other end . . . and when Chris started to speak he told Chris to go fuck his mother, and he hung up once more.

Chapter 4

It was a postcard Manhattan Beach afternoon, and Chris was sitting on the bench at Polliwog Park waiting for Chandler to finish loosening up.

“That’s a weird brand of exercise for you,” Chris said. “Hopefully no one besides me sees you doing it. Not something you want to inflict on the world.”

“Got a new trainer,” Chandler said. “All that shit’s out, that we grew up with. You have to adjust.”

“So you’ve said. The static stretching, the situps and pushups, we did everything wrong apparently. But you keep *talking* about it.”

“That’s your interpretation. I believe in it. Without our fitness, what is there?”

“Okay give me a break. I knew someone one time went on a macrobiotic diet. The way they eat in one particular village in Japan, where everyone lives to 110? Supposedly. This gal, when I even looked at an ice cream cone, she delivered a lecture.”

“So what happened to her?”

“How should I know?”

“Oh, I thought you had a punch line, that she went *off* it and gained 50 pounds.”

“That would have been good. Then I could have laid the hypocritical angle on you.”

“How’s Kenny?” Chandler said.

“Jesus that noise,” Chris said. It was the thwap of pickleball paddles making contact with the dumb plastic ball. It seemed more incessant than

in the past. There were four dedicated pickleball courts, but they weren't normally all in use, like now.

"Tell me about it," Chandler said. "We got some developments on that front. There's a supervisors' meeting coming on the 8th. The idiots have a proposal on the table, take away one tennis court, convert it."

"Oh no. Don't let 'em do *that*."

"Fine. So you'll be there with me, making your case."

"We'll see," Chris said. "Meanwhile Ken . . . yeah, he seems fine. Busy."

"I can imagine," Chandler said with a sly grin. Chris couldn't remember if Chandler knew about the new porn-star job, but obviously he did.

Chris said, "Listen . . . a couple things before we get started. First, my peace of mind, I mean Kenny confirmed no one came calling on me or anything--but."

Chandler got more serious.

"Well you boys got a little lucky," he said. "Don't be doing things like that anymore."

At this point, all these mini-battles under his belt, Chris considered leaving it at that, with Chandler. *Something* went in his favor on the Harrison episode. Did you really need to know more?

But he said, "What about DNA?"

"You're obsessed with that topic, aren't you," Chandler said. "That's part of where you got lucky. They didn't even send out CSI."

"They didn't?"

"No. Christmas Eve for one, when they made the discovery, the lion pit for two, no one was crazy about getting in there for any extended time."

"Ah. And there's a three? You seemed poised to deliver one more."

"There is. That'd be, they're happy--not to mention relieved, with the public pressure--that this scumbag is off the street."

Chris was delighted to hear all this, and meanwhile wondered, could you limit any further activity to serial killers like Harrison? Would that be a good percentage play?

“But Ned?” Chris said. Meaning, that time they spoke, Chris on the phone from the baseball stands in Arizona, Chandler’s implication was Ned was in trouble.

“Like I told you,” Chandler said, “they’re liking the poor gal’s brother, the artist. A revenge killing. Yeah, they tied Ned into that for a while, the notion of the guy contracting him, but that went away.”

“Just like that?”

“Yeah. Ned’s back, have you seen him?”

“No. Back--holding court at the Crowe’s Nest and all, like nothing happened?”

“Exactly. They can’t locate this fellow, the brother. They assume he’s on the run . . . Which admittedly people do when they’re guilty.”

Chandler gave him a sideways look, sticking the needle in, his *own* situation . . . but Chris had to think--given what the vibe he had from Mancuso since day one--that there was more to it than the guy disappearing because he’s on the run.

That was enough though. There were a couple holes in Chandler’s story, probably, if you poked hard enough--and you scratched your head at some of the logic--but at least you had a degree of closure, and you weren’t in mortal fear of a squad car pulling up when you were getting ready to return Chandler’s topspin serve.

Which wasn’t much of a weapon, but Chris had to admit, it did have a little more kick to it . . .

“I was gonna ask you one more thing, something different,” Chris said, “but you got me thinking, if some guy . . . like with a vigilante mentality . . . was out to improve a few things . . . would he be better off sticking with serial killers?”

Chandler laughed. “That’s a good one.” But you could tell he was considering it. “You’re saying, because the cops won’t be as inclined to work it hard?”

“Well yeah. We’re all human, right?”

“Put it this way. Don’t count on it.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“What was your other thing? Come on, I’m getting stiff here.”

“Ah stupid. But I’ve been subletting my place up north, my one-bedroom in the Marina. 3 grand a month.”

“Holy Mackerel.”

“You don’t know San Francisco. Anyhow, the mope stopped paying, it seems like.”

“You’re screwed.”

“Jeez, you’re a lawyer. Just like *that*?”

“Yeah big time. Especially Frisco. Liberal landlord-tenant courts, takes you forever to evict someone, and they can put in simple defenses, which really hamstring the process.”

“Now I’m in a real bad mood,” Chris said. “So let’s play. Though again . . . thank you.”

This was getting uncomfortable, having to keep appreciating the guy, but the fact was, he might be in jail or dead by now if it weren’t for this guy . . . though maybe he’d be just fine . . . but still.

Chandler said, “You won’t be thanking me in an hour. I re-worked my forehand too. You’re going to have a very tough time, my friend.”

And Chandler wasn’t kidding. He was ripping the ball, sending Chris corner to corner, and he won the first set 6-Love.

Chandler had that cockey bounce in his step that Chris always hated to witness, and they sat back down for a minute between sets and Chandler started in.

“You see what I mean now. The way I approached it, I identified areas that were weak. And then I took care of them. When you think about it, playing high level sports isn’t that different from high level business.”

Chris was getting ready to throw up, at how full of himself this guy was--and making the comparison to someone who actually *did* play a high level sport, if you could believe it.

But it wasn’t worth commenting, because then you’re giving Chandler a chance to open *his* mouth again and counter you . . . so Chris went back on the court and waited to start the second set.

Chandler continued where he left off, hitting lines, it seemed at will, and hardly making any errors. He went up 4-0 like it was nothing, and then at 0-30, Chris serving, Chandler starts doing some stretching before the next point.

“You okay over there?” Chris said.

“I’m good, don’t worry about it,” Chandler said, but the reply was a bit shaky.

And Chris was more than happy to win the next four points, and capture his first game all day, though he was still down 1-Love in sets, and 4-1 in games. And of course they were playing 2 out of 3, so he was still one step away from finished.

But now with Chandler serving, the guy started to make some mistakes, and Chris won that game and held his serve once again, so he’d closed it to 3-4, and on the changeover Chris said, “That’s the thing about getting hot. Guys can’t keep it up.”

“You an expert on the mental side of it now?” Chandler said. “Why’nt you worry about your own game.”

“Fine,” Chris said, and he didn’t think he’d been trying to dissect anything mental.

But meanwhile, he won the next three games, and lo and behold the match was knotted at a set apiece.

“Well *this* was unexpected,” Chris said. “Wild swings out there. You win, what, 10 games in a row? And I’m history for sure--and then heck, I win 6 straight!”

He knew that getting excited would stick a little needle under Chandler’s skin, and you could tell the guy was fuming but he didn’t say anything, and instead he was stretching again, against the fence . . . which unfortunately conjured up the image of Jonas Blaise engaged in a similar activity against the batting cage.

“I gotta get something,” Chandler said, grabbing his keys off the bench.

“Or,” Chris said, “why don’t we *forget* it. Call it right here. Tomorrow’s another day.”

“Don’t be *silly!*” Chandler said, and he stormed off toward his car.

Chris sat there soaking it in. Forget the Harrison business, the new DNA lunacy, and now the idiot up north not paying the rent . . . this was turning out to be a real good day.

He couldn’t remember ever beating Chandler in a legitimate 2 out of 3 match. And yeah, okay, it did look like something happened to the guy there, when he was up 4-zip and on cruise control, that he tweaked a muscle maybe, and everything changed.

But who cares? All that counted was the scoreboard, right? And if the guy insisted on getting something and continuing--which Chris assumed was some kind of wrap, plus maybe some Ben Gay heat rub or some shit--then fine, we’ll play that third set.

And you shouldn’t laugh about this stuff, but Chris couldn’t help thinking about Chandler proselytizing in the warm-up, about his amazing fitness routine and how you’re nowhere without it.

Chris decided this could be a little while though, Chandler scrambling around trying to find the right thing--so Chris tried the number for Dr. Stride.

“You answer your own phone,” Chris said when the guy said hello. “That alone separates you from the pack, in most professions.”

“Mr. Seely, I appreciate your calling back,” the therapist said.

“Okay,” Chris said. “It’s Saturday, I’m playing a little tennis, everything’s casual, so you have to call me Chris.”

“Certainly . . . Where are you playing tennis?”

“See now, I know what you’re doing, you’re trying to trick me, put me at ease, so you can level the *real* questions.”

“That wasn’t my intention. But now that you bring it up . . . how is your mental state, in your opinion? On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being your best day.”

“Right now it’s a 7,” Chris said. “It was a 9.5 an hour ago--but I saw light at the end of the tunnel.”

“Interesting,” Dr. Stride said. “Please tell me about that.”

“First of all,” Chris said, “you got me feeling guilty here. Is the meter running?”

“That wasn’t my intention, no.”

“You’re a good man then. And coming by the apartment, checking on me . . . I’m not going to forget that.” And Chris meant it, and he couldn’t help it, as the whole thing fell into perspective he choked up slightly.

But you had to control that part, otherwise the guy would think you’d *really* gone off the deep end.

“It’s part of the job,” Stride said. “One of the receptionists indicated a red flag when you called. We want to make sure.”

“That I’m not gonna jump off a building in the interim . . . got it.”

“Has that sort of contemplation ever rooted itself?”

“Holy Moley, what a way to phrase it. *No*. Killing someone *else*, maybe.”

Might as well throw it out there, harmless, intended to be hypothetical of course. Chris was in a playfully aggressive mood, after

winning that second set from Chandler and sending him scurrying for back-up equipment.

Dr. Stride said, “Unh-huh. I can’t detect if you are serious, or not, but obviously there are consequences that need to be addressed, if that is indeed inclusionary of one’s thought pattern.”

“You play tennis?” Chris said.

“I do, actually.”

“So come on over. You can check me out in person, put your concerns to rest. You know where Polliwog Park is? Manhattan Beach?”

You could tell the doctor wasn’t used to being thrown that kind of curveball, at least when he was working, which this *was*.

“And,” Chris said, “I want to take care of you. Your time the other night, and the phone time now. What’s the hourly break-down, I’ll have a check for you.”

“No check, or payment required,” Stride said. “I suppose I could come by, crazy as that sounds. I wouldn’t mind hitting a few balls. But we have to agree, it would be entirely in an unprofessional capacity.”

“Fine,” Chris said, thinking the guy’s going over the top here, but then again maybe he’s worried about losing his license, socializing improperly with clients or some bullshit.

“You’re on the boulevard, correct? Across from the bandstand where they conduct summer concerts?”

Chris wasn’t even aware of those but he said yeah, and Dr. Stride said he’d be there within a half hour.

A couple minutes later there was Chandler parking again and limping slightly back toward the courts, some definite kind of bandage or brace on his lower left leg.

Chris figured yeah, this wasn’t normal, the Dr. Stride part, but thinking a little more clearly, it wasn’t about the tennis for the guy, that was

a front at this point--he really *did* want to make sure, in person, that Chris *wasn't* going to do something rash.

And he tried to remember the conversation with the receptionist, and all he could recall was she was a bit obnoxious, but he obviously did leave a red flag and it was ticking him off that he couldn't figure it out.

He admired Dr. Stride though. That's how you did it, wasn't it, if you were dedicated. It wasn't unlike the old house calls that pediatricians used to make when an anxious parent called up after hours and the kid had a fever.

Chris suggested to Chandler, why don't they warm up for a few minutes, make sure he's okay to play.

"You know something?" Chandler said.

"Yeah," Chris interrupted him. "I'm getting on your nerves."

"Exactly. For God sake's here. Let's go."

Chandler was darn determined, in fact Chris was thinking he was almost behaving like a man-possessed, that he'd never lost to Chris, and he wasn't going to let it happen now if his life depended on it.

Fortunately for Chris though, Chandler's ball wasn't going where he wanted it consistently anymore, he was popping stuff up, leaving Chris in good position to angle him off the court, and Chris to his credit wasn't wasting his opportunities.

By the time Chris went up 5-2 in the 3rd and deciding set, Chandler had unleashed a *bunch* of profanities. At one point, the young couple on the court adjacent were startled by the outburst and stopped mid-rally.

Chris decided he hadn't enjoyed himself this much on a tennis court in years.

Chandler could still serve well, and that kept the pressure on, and he could still set up at the base line and hit some solid groundstrokes . . . but a couple games in Chris had realized he couldn't move *forward* well at all . . . and Chris began incorporating the drop shot into his arsenal . . . and man it

was fun to witness this guy coming apart at the seams, both physically and mentally.

Chris finished it off, match point, with a lob that surprised Chandler, and Chris snuck in behind it and over-headed Chandler's limp return with a definitive *Thwap* . . . and next thing they were headed to the net to shake hands, only Chandler didn't do that, instead he blurted out, "that was a *joke*", and he grabbed his stuff and left the park in a huff.

When Chandler had disappeared out of there Dr. Stride showed up.

"Shute," Chris said. "Too bad you didn't make it earlier, you might have caught me at my all-time best. That's a performance that may never be duplicated in the history of me trying to play sports."

"No I saw it," Dr. Stride said, "at least the last 3 or 4 games. You were on fire."

"Not really, if you're looking for full disclosure. He did something, his leg, or some bull roar--but the son of bitch is so stubborn he wouldn't stop with the score tied at 1 set each."

"It *was* kind of amusing," Stride said, smiling. "I could sympathize."

"So why didn't you show your face?"

"I didn't want to barge in, better to keep my distance, I thought, until the conclusion."

That actually made sense to Chris, and he flashed on watching Blaise and the other player from beyond the deep centerfield fence, where no one could see *him*, until the other player departed and the timing seemed right to run Blaise over with the field maintenance machine.

"You didn't bring a racquet," Chris said, "or the right shoes either."

"Guilty," Stride said.

"You're a sneaky dude. And in your own way just as stubborn as the other guy . . . But fine. You see now my mental health is AOK."

"That's good to hear. If we could just sit down for a moment, and I can ask you a few questions."

Gee Whiz. So after all that smokescreen, this guy doesn't believe a thing Chris just told him on the phone . . . and has the decency to show up in person on a Saturday to do what Chris supposed would be considered a welfare check on a patient--even though Chris wasn't even one of *those*.

Meaning, the only session he'd had with the guy had been free, on account of the coupon from the Hermosa pizza joint.

Chris dug around in his pocket and got hold of the one-time wad of cash--which was a shell of itself now after the adventures north of Phoenix, and the travels to and from--and he pulled out 300 bucks and held it out to Dr. Stride.

"Don't be silly," the therapist said. "We take an oath, a variation on the hippocratic one that MD's adhere to."

"They don't adhere to it that great in my experience," Chris said. "I've read it, it tells 'em to take it easy with the interventions, but they tend to pull out the prescription pad right away when someone comes in with a common cold."

"I won't disagree with you entirely. But the point being, it's not about the money, and I'm not going to take it."

"You are a fucking noble piece of work, you know that?" Chris said.

"Interesting. Would that assessment be predicated on some circumstance in your own life?"

And here we go again again, this guy trying to work a psychoanalysis session in between the small talk on the tennis court.

And that was enough of that.

"You mean well," Chris said, "but goddamn it, you're taking the money."

"I am *not*," Stride said.

"Oh . . . yes you *are*," Chris said, and it was a bit of game now, two kids in a schoolyard . . . except when Stride didn't take it on the second

attempted pass, Chris pointed across the street to that bandstand Stride had referred to and said, “Wow, what’s *that* guy doing over there?”

And of course there was no one over there to speak of, but when Stride turned to look Chris came up behind him and locked him in a Full Nelson.

“You faked me out,” the doctor mumbled, though the guy wasn’t stupid, he didn’t actually think Chris was assaulting him, and he didn’t seem surprised when Chris let go with one hand and stuck the \$300 into his shirt pocket.

Chris let go and said, “Okay, on to the next subject . . . And if you want to *see* a patient go crazy, try to give me the money back.”

“Fair enough,” Dr. Stride said, brushing himself off slightly, and shaking his head like *I can’t win here*.

Chris said, “What time you got?”

“I have 4:42. Something urgent, I take it?”

“You have a wife or something?”

“I’m divorced, actually.”

Chris was tempted to comment that therapists sure have their own imperfections too, seeing as how they’re supposed to be the role models--but that was unfair and a cheap shot.

He said, “What we’ll do then, since it’s getting close to 5 . . . go back to my place, round up a few doofuses . . . and go eat. Unless you got something more pressing going on.”

Dr. Stride smiled again, though it looked he was having a little trouble with his neck, and Chris hoped to God he hadn’t overdone it with the Full Nelson--which was of course a wrestling hold Chris learned as a kid from watching it on TV--but Stride said, “I’m game.”

“Dang,” Chris said. “I didn’t think you’d go for it in a million years.”

Stride gave Chris a hard look, not regarding him funny like some people had been doing of late, various situations, maybe Pat being one of them, when he said something odd.

With the doctor it was different, like he wasn't trying to judge Chris or even figure him out as much as it was make sure he's a stable individual.

"One more question if I may," Stride said, before they left the tennis courts.

"Uh-oh," Chris said.

"When you first phoned me today, you raised two concerns, unprovoked. They were: jumping off a building, which you dismissed as a ludicrous notion . . . and killing someone. Would you care to elaborate?"

"Not really."

"I'd like to remind you, you did not dismiss the latter. What we call that, in clinical terms, is hindsight bias. Or a variation thereof."

"Well whoopee."

"What this suggests, the patient may be masking his struggle with intent, by employing sarcasm."

"Okay," Chris said. "Only because you're so relentless in making me dredge this stuff back up, Jeez . . . Some asshole, trip I was just on in Utah, he almost runs me off the road, and I confront him. Only to find out he was texting. Luckily cooler heads prevailed--but yeah okay, maybe I feel like I got unfinished business, that if I had a bazooka with me, it might have felt good to shoot it off at the guy. Okay, I said it . . . Wouldn't *you* still be ticked off?"

"Are you concerned," Dr. Stride said, "that you may not be able to so readily control a similar impulse next time?"

"What I'm going to *control*," Chris said, "is making sure to buy you a stiff drink, so you turn into a regular guy the rest of the night. Which I'm betting you have the capacity to do."

And Stride shook his head again . . . but got in his car and followed Chris up Manhattan Beach Boulevard, and then the half-mile south on Pacific Coast Highway to the *Cheater Five*.

Chris had told Stride to pull into the lot, since it was small, and *he'd* park around the corner.

When Chris got there Stride was parked fine, but he was standing in the parking lot looking up, so Chris did too.

And extremely unfortunately, the door to his apartment was open, and there was activity in there, people moving around, and a moment later you could see the uniform of a cop.

And Chris hadn't noticed it at first, but there was a squad car in the corner of the parking lot, over by the manager's office.

If you were looking for something to get you hyperventilating, you could have done worse than arrived here at present.

"Interesting," Dr. Stride said. "Is this sort of activity typical of your apartment complex?"

Chris said, "If you say that word *interesting* one more time . . ."

"What?"

"No, forget that. This may not be good, to be 100 percent candid. That's my apartment."

"I see."

"If they arrest me for something . . . can you get me off, on the basis of insanity?"

Chris was in a deep panic, and he felt like he was *watching* himself have this bizarre conversation with Stride . . . and he supposed it was a defense mechanism . . . to avoid showing your face up there and confronting what might be inevitable.

Which he was about to do, when Michelle came into view, and Stacey too--dang, what's *she* doing here?--and there was a heck of a shouting

match breaking out between the two of them, and the cop and Ken both were in between them trying to get everyone to calm down.

So Chris went upstairs, and he stepped inside and took a deep breath and gave it his best line, to whoever might be listening, “What seems to be the trouble here?”

Ken, Stacy and Michelle spoke at the same time, and Chris could only understand bits and pieces. The policeman didn’t say anything, but Chris could make out his uniform patch loud and clear, LAPD.

There was one more attendee, a guy sitting on the couch looking pretty relaxed under the circumstances, and it took a moment to place him and then Chris recognized him as one of Stacey’s friends helping her that time when she was moving out of *her* apartment downstairs, and there’d of course been some fireworks surrounding that.

The cop held up his hand now and the three of them stopped talking, and the cop said to Chris, “Sir, are you the landlord?”

Chris thought about saying, *Yes I am, officer, and can I be of assistance?*--that would sure keep it simple--but he said, “I actually live here, so technically I’m the tenant. *Unfortunately*, it looks like.”

The uniform guy said, “Now why is *that*? The unfortunate part.”

“Because we’re heading out to dinner, supposedly. My buddy and I, down there waiting, we came by to pick everyone up . . . But this is what happens, now you see what I have to go through, it’s like every week there’s some asinine disagreement.”

“So . . . you *know* all these parties then?” the officer said. “And you can account for their presence on the premises?”

“Can I *ever*,” Chris said. “Where do you live?”

“Pardon me sir--Where do *I* live?”

“Yeah, because I was going to say, I could send ‘em over to your place next time.”

It was a bad joke, dumb, but you could tell the cop was at least lightening up a little.

He pulled out his log book and made a note. He said to Chris, “All right then, we can wrap it up for now, but consider it a warning. An official one.”

“Officer, we appreciate that more than you know,” Chris said, and wasn’t *that* the truth. Meaning . . . how lucky could you be in an *unlucky* situation, the guy not even asking his name.

“Yeah, well, we aim to please,” the cop said. “The public don’t see it that way, but that’s what we’re all about . . . This deal now, you’re on the hook here, you need to ensure that none of these folks are left unattended in your apartment in the foreseeable future.”

“That’s a no-brainer,” Chris said. “Will do.”

“Good to hear,” the cop said, probably not believing it, but satisfied enough at the moment to close out the call. “You all have a nice dinner.” And he touched the brim of his hat, the way a cowboy in a western movie might do it, and he left.

Chris went out and leaned on the railing and watched him get in the squad car and drive away, and he signalled Dr. Stride to come on up.

It had been silent in the apartment since the cop left, and when Chris and Stride got inside the three yakkers started going at it non-stop again.

Chris held up his hand like the cop did, and said, “Everyone, this is my friend . . . uh, Bruce.” Looking at Dr. Stride like *is it okay if I call you that the rest of the night*, and Stride gave him a thumbs up.

“Now,” Chris said, “not going get into it with you right now--meaning WHAT THE HELL was just going on here--but cooler heads have prevailed.” Chris didn’t intend to put it exactly like that, since he used the same expression an hour ago when he lied to Stride about the road rage business.

“Anyhow,” he continued. “Me and Bruce are going out to eat. You’re all welcome to join us.” That meant the scruffy friend of Stacey’s as well, who it killed Chris to have to invite, but you weren’t going to be rude.

“Wow,” Michelle said. “Like, do you have a restaurant picked out?”

“Oh, so your decision depends on the quality of our selection then,” Chris said, and Michelle reacted with big eyes for a moment until she realized he was kidding.

“Sounds good to *me*,” Stacey said.

You could tell Ken wasn’t crazy about her joining in but he conceded that he was starving and happy to come along.

Michelle said that would be fine, and they waited on the other guy, the friend of Stacey’s--and he and Stacey huddled for a moment and the guy announced he was going to be taking off, and he didn’t waste any time getting out of there.

“Marlene around?” Chris wondered out loud, and it would be great to continue avoiding the inevitable serious conversation with her--having to fill in the blanks the last month--but you had to at least ask her.

Ken said he saw her in the pool when they arrived, implying she probably would be home, and Chris excused himself and went down to her apartment, though he wondered for a second if *she* had been the one to call the cops . . . but that didn’t add up, that wasn’t her style, plus you had at least 2 real busy-body neighbors that Chris knew of.

“Hey stranger,” she said, opening the door.

“I want to thank you,” he said, “for that basket. It helped immensely, with the organization of the mail.”

That probably wasn’t what Marlene expected out of his mouth, one of the first utterances after 5 weeks, but it would have to do, and at first she didn’t want to come but then Chris twisted her arm, that he had a nice guy with him, and Marlene said who . . . and Chris figured what the hell, and

told her it's the therapist from when he snuck-tore the coupon off the paper menu at the pizza place, when she was in the ladies' room.

"You have got to be joking," Marlene said. "How'd you work *that*?"

Chris said it was extremely complicated, but she'd have join in to find out, and Marlene said to give her five minutes.

They ended up at place called The Village Bark, in town, a block and a half from the pier, one of the restaurants of the month that you find in Manhattan Beach, where the place opens up with big fanfare the first few weeks, food critics coming around, impossible for a lowly non-celebrity human to get a reservation.

Then things stabilize, eaters come to their senses and try other new places, and the restaurant continues on more or less automatic pilot for a year or so, and then you get into that 3rd stage where things fall off, the menu becomes less cutting edge, and the place puts a happy spin on it but behind the scenes is bringing in a big-time restaurant consultant to try to save their ass.

Chris figured that the Village Bark was currently in a Stage 3, and those were the places he favored. You could walk right in on a Saturday evening--even a party of 6, which is what they were doing now--and as the customer, you were mostly *always right*, since the joint might be hanging on for dear life and couldn't afford to lose anyone at this point.

They gave them a nice big oval table in back, where it opened up onto the patio, a fountain flowing back there that probably was imported from Italy before the budget tightened up--and Chris made a toast.

"You're all important people in my life currently--that could change at any time--but thanks for joining me. The other thing, I see it's only 6:22, meaning we're still eligible for the early bird special by 8 minutes--so do me a favor, and stick with those."

Michelle's mouth kind of fell open and it felt like everyone else was staring at him, even Stride, and Chris said Jeez he was kidding, no one can take a joke around here apparently.

You could feel some continued tension between Stacey and Michelle, and Chris didn't want the details, whatever the story was going to be was some variation on an existing theme, meaning you take a nice guy like Ken and put him in a situation with his current girlfriend and ex . . . and there's a blowup, well Gee what a surprise.

Though what they were all doing in the apartment, including the scruffy other guy, that did raise an eyebrow.

As they got into a couple beers and a round of appetizers Chris decided he better ask anyway, and said, "You were all there . . . necessitating law enforcement . . . *because?*"

"Boss, I can explain," Ken said.

"See what I was telling you about this kid?" Chris said to Stride.

"No," Stride said.

"Oh. Well maybe I *didn't* mention him. But he's the working definition of a positive spin."

"*I* can explain," Michelle said, still apparently a little agitated.

"Before *she* does, let *me* take a crack at it," Stacey said, pretty dang loud, actually, and this wasn't going well.

"Hold on," Chris said, thinking on the fly. "What we'll do . . . yeah, that's good . . . *Bruce* here, is going to get to the bottom of it. That's what he does, for a living--he interrogates people. You need to spend a few quality minutes giving him your respect."

And Bruce was surprised but he shrugged his shoulders, like, sure, *I don't mind*.

The main course hadn't come yet, and the service as a whole wasn't going to break any land-speed records, and maybe that was part of why the

place was in Stage 3 mode--but either way, Chris went outside and tried his prick tenant again, up in San Francisco.

The guy did answer, and he did comment, but it wasn't exactly what you wanted to hear.

It was: "I thought I told you, but you're not absorbing it apparently. I'll have it when I have it."

"Hmm," Chris said. "You give me a little more hope today, I'll admit . . . I mean at least we have some dialogue, when last night you essentially told me to fuck off."

"I didn't say that," the guy said. "Since you're a bird brain, and you're misquoting me, I'll say it again a second time: Fuck Your *Mother*."

And boom, the guy hung up.

"Well *that* sounded unusual."

It was Marlene, standing there, Chris unaware that she'd come outside the restaurant too. There were enough lights that you could see the beach pretty clearly from here, even though it was dark out, early February, and there were a couple of volleyball games still going, and Chris figured the pier being lit up helped them see the ball.

Chris took a minute to replay the phone conversation in his head, make sure he wasn't *creating* things, since a guy did pass by on a motorcycle in the middle of it . . . but nah, he knew what he heard.

"How've you been?" he asked Marlene.

"Honestly?" Marlene said. "I would have been worried about you--and *was* for a week or so--but then I pieced it together, that you and your friend Ned have business sometimes, and you guys disappear."

"Wow . . . so just like that, a switch went off, and you relaxed."

"That's correct."

"You're kidding right? You just made that up."

“Not at all. Actually I finally wandered down one night to the Crowe’s Nest, your pub that you so commonly enjoyed working into various conversations--and I asked around.”

“You did?”

“Well initially I intended to find Ned--to perhaps get a clue where you might be--since your roommate Kenny gave me the blank, brain-dead stare whenever I broached the subject to him.”

“Ah.”

“But there *was* no Ned to be found either, it turned out, the waitress said he was out of town, and she didn’t seem concerned.”

“Which one . . . Cindy? Or Rory?”

“Cindy. The one with the dark hair. Attractive.”

“Backing up for a second, you went down to the Crowe’s Nest to inquire about me, you say--which I appreciate--but I’m thinking it gave you an excuse to look for Ned.”

“You are something else. You can think what you want.”

“Only because,” Chris said, “that time by the pool, when he shows up? Where you brought out those really tasty wraps, that I asked if they were from Costco even though they sure tasted home made?”

“I remember. That was rude.”

“Okay fine. Ned excuses himself to take a phone call, and you didn’t waste time pointing out how handsome he is, in your view, and inquiring about his marital situation.”

“Oh brother.”

“Sorry to interrupt you, I just wanted to clarify that . . . so what happened *then*?”

“Well, I’m there so I sit at the bar and have a glass of wine. It was a bit intimidating, I felt the bar was for men, or if you were a woman, you were sort of expected to be local.”

“That’s ridiculous. But *you’re* local.”

“You know what I mean . . . but I settled in, and after a while I struck up a conversation with one person in particular, and that’s when the notion of you and Ned surfaced, that you’ve been known to engage in *projects* together. That was the word they used.”

“Who is *they*?”

“It’s unimportant. In any case, the terrific detective that I am, I concluded that, with both of you rather mysteriously out of town, this was one of those projects.”

“So you weren’t surprised when I showed up last night. Good. I hate having to make excuses. Not that there was necessarily anything to make excuses *for*.”

“You’re babbling. Did you have any relationships while you were away?”

Oh boy. This is what he was afraid of.

“Physical ones you mean? Don’t forget now, it’s the emotional ones that carry the weight.”

“Baloney,” she said, but at least she was half-smiling.

“Ask your friend in there. *My* friend, whoever. Bruce.”

“He’s very nice.”

“He is. It was a fluke, he performed therapy on me this afternoon and I insisted on rewarding him with an MB experience.”

“Really? What did he deduce?”

“You’re supposed to be surprised by that, that a real therapist and client wouldn’t have that kind of relationship.”

“He’s laid back, I can tell. And he must think you’re relatively stable. But what questions did he ask you?”

“Ah, I had to fill him in on some anger-management stuff. Between you and me . . . I feel like I’ve started to nick-pick, instead of logically selecting my battles . . . Hypothetically obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“But, like I got into a road rage thing, which I had to rein in. Another instance, I thought of drowning someone in a pool, a petty wise guy--no big deal, just mulling it over, but still. Very poor judgment.”

“And that concerned you, which is why you met with Bruce today.”

“Jeez. You’re all over me here. It didn’t go down quite like that, I ran into him on the tennis court, if you can believe it.”

“You didn’t answer about the physical thing?”

“Yeah there was one person I got to know.”

“Well I got to know someone too,” Marlene said.

“See now, I didn’t ask you. You volunteered it for some reason . . . I think we need to corner Dr. Stride, get to the bottom of why you needed to do that.”

“You’re funny,” she said. “I still like you.”

“Yeah, well . . . you know what I’m thinking here? How about we forego the main course?”

Marlene was biting her lower lip, like she was having a tough time with something . . . and Chris realized she thought he was suggesting going back to the apartment.

“Not what I meant,” he said, “I was thinking the Crowe’s Nest. Hit it a little early.”

“That sounds better,” Marlene said, and Chris ducked back into the Village Bark--and dang, the entrees *still* hadn’t come, but there were two extra overflowing baskets of bread and butter on the table, probably to try to make up for the slow service.

“Little impromptu switcheroo,” Chris said. “Marlene and I are going down the street, the Crowe’s Nest. You all take your time, we’ll see you there after.”

He gave Ken his credit card and told him to sign his name, that they never check, and be sure to add in 25 percent. And he lowered his voice and

also told him not to let Bruce try to pay, under any circumstances, since Chris was afraid that was going to happen.

But meanwhile, Sheez, Dr. Stride seemed to be right in his element, holding court, two attractive young women, Michelle and Stacey, hanging on every word--and God knows what they were talking about now, but they they seemed *way* past the initial business of him getting to the bottom of why the police showed up today.

It was early for a Saturday night by Crowe's Nest standards, and they got one of the tables where Chris liked to be, near the front, and it was nice to be greeted by Cindy.

"Hey there stranger," she said, "where you been hiding yourself? We started to wonder about you, did you find a replacement watering hole you liked better than us."

"I might have hurt your feelings, you mean," Chris said, playing along, but at the same time wondering if Cindy was putting him on, and that *she* might have been the one to tell Marlene that he and Ned did business together sometimes.

If Chris had to guess though, it would have been Rory that Marlene got the alleged information from--since Chris that one time in here was carrying on like an idiot to Rory, pretending to be all concerned about what happened to Chip Reggio.

And underhandedly asking questions about Ned, and making a case that he had his suspicions about the guy.

Rory fortunately let it roll off that night, and didn't bring it up to Ned, but the point being she must have at least raised an eyebrow, that Chris and Ned apparently *did have* dealings with each other.

So . . . they both conveniently disappear for a while . . . and Rory runs into Marlene in here looking a little concerned . . . so yeah, she might have told her don't worry about it, Ned's not around either but that's normal, they do business together. *Projects*, as Marlene phrased it.

Whatever. The interesting part now, Cindy was lingering at the table talking to Marlene, almost like they were old friends, and the two of them giggled a couple times, and Cindy told Marlene she looked nice tonight and patted her arm, and she'd be back in a little while.

Gee. Maybe nothing, but still, a bit of a display there, on both their parts.

It had been relegated to the back burner for a while now, but Chris couldn't help remember that when he first met Marlene, she informed him that she'd recently gotten out of a relationship with a woman.

"You know what?" Chris said now, "I think Dr. Stride has helped encourage me to live for the *moment*, so I'm going to ask you something."

"Oh no," Marlene said. "I don't think I like this, and I suspect it has nothing to do with Dr. Stride."

She was right obviously, Chris was making that part up. But he said, "You were interrogating me pretty good a few minutes ago, and I came clean. So I'll turn it around."

"I came clean as well," she said, "though that's an awful expression."

"You're right. And forget it anyway."

"That's okay, you can ask. You obviously *need* to."

"Really? . . . Well, that connection you referred to, while I was on the road . . . how's that going?"

Chris shifted gears there at the last second. What he wanted to ask, was the person a male or female?--but he caught himself.

"It's going fine," Marlene said, and now Chris wished he *had* been more of an ass and pried deeper, but too late now anyway because here came Ken and Bruce and the two women tromping through the door.

Actually just one of the women, Stacey.

"Everything okay with Michelle?" Chris said, pulling up extra chairs.

“She’s tired,” Ken said. “She has to work tomorrow.” He said it casually, maybe not even thinking, and Chris hoped no one would ask *where* she was working and make things awkward, but they didn’t.

Chris figured something else was likely too, that things weren’t going *great* at the moment between Ken and Michelle . . . and here was Stacey with him right now, to possibly complicate matters, and Chris had mixed feelings about that because Stacey had grown on him, underneath everything she was a sweet kid with a good heart . . . but you left that stuff alone.

“Nice atmosphere,” Bruce said.

And it was. Chris was coming up on the 4-month mark of living in Manhattan Beach--give or take the side-trips and related interference--but yeah, you didn’t want to take it for granted in here.

Like any good establishment that you started to think of as ‘your place’, they knew your name and distracted you enough to take the edge off your day . . . and what more could you ask, really.

“Dinner work out okay?” Chris said to Bruce.

“Famously. You’re a good host. Even as an absentee.”

“Well it looked like you were on top of things, so we left you to your own devices.”

Cindy had asked Marlene to come with her by now, and they were having a private conversation at the edge of the bar . . . and Jeez, here came Rory to their table, so maybe Cindy was on a break . . . and Chris stood up and gave her a hug, and threw in the obligatory long time no see, and introduced her all around.

“Your memory is shaky,” Rory said. “I know everyone. Except for the handsome gentleman.”

Bruce stood up and shook hands, and laughed and said he’d *take* it, and they ordered drinks, and Chris decided he liked this guy okay, he was

showing that he *could* successfully shut down the psychoanalytical BS and have some fun.

Although . . . that conversation he was leading *had* appeared a little heavy back there, in the restaurant, so who knows. But Stacey and Michelle sure seemed into it, so Chris supposed it was all good . . . but . . .

“This guy take care of the problem then?” Chris said. “No more 911 calls from concerned neighbors I gotta worry about?”

“Oh he’s wonderful,” Stacey said, and *Holy Smokes*, she took Dr. Stride’s arm.

“Let’s not get carried away here,” Chris said.

“I don’t know that I’ve ever been directed as profoundly,” Stacey said. “I have so much to explore now.” There was a dreamlike quality to the way she said it, and not only was she still holding Stride’s arm, but she put her head on his shoulder for a moment too, for emphasis.

Ken wasn’t reacting one way or the other, he seemed absorbed in his own troubles, and hopefully there was nothing deeper bugging him than the silly relationship stuff with Michelle--though Chris suspected that *was* the extent of it, that at age 25 you can take that stuff hard, but at the same time you bounce back quick if it *doesn’t* work out, and say ‘Next’ like nothing happened.

So . . . there you had Marlene and Cindy still at the corner of the bar going at it like long-lost best friends . . .

You had Stacy now all over this Bruce, and you’d have to keep an eye how *that* might play out . . .

And then of course you had Rory saying hello to Ken as she greeted everyone, and it seemed quite superficial, like any cocktail waitress saying hello to a customer--but bottom line, you couldn’t help wondering if they were banging each other yet.

Not in the true sense, but in the professional sense, on the movie set.

Which did bother Chris, the concept, no matter how he tried to play it off. He'd invited Rory over to Sharif's that time, to go swimming, and to her credit Rory showed up, but the outcome was bittersweet at best, with Rory essentially scolding Chris for ogling her as she came out of the water in her white bikini.

The booze was kicking in, and he didn't see why not, so you might as well go and ask her, and he got up . . . and coming through the rear door now, all smiles, saying hello to a bunch of people and taking a seat at his usual little table by the far window . . . Mancuso.

Chris had mixed feelings about this. He wasn't crazy about complicating his evening--and he did want to ask Rory that question--but Jeez, this kind of trumped everything else going on in here, didn't it.

So Chris started back there and it only took a second before Ned spotted him as well, and Ned was up and coming forward, big strides, like *they* were long lost friends too. Go figure.

"My brethren," Ned said. "You hanging in there?"

Before Chris could answer Ned pointed to the table, please join me, and he signalled for a couple of drinks, and they came right away.

"I'm overdoing it tonight," Chris said. "The good thing, I can walk home."

"Yeah, you got a sweet set-up there," Ned said, apparently picturing his one visit to the *Cheater Five*. "That's smart. You don't have to depend on a car."

"I've been appreciating that since day *one*. Though it's a little far. Even two, three blocks closer would make a big difference in the long run."

"So get a bike."

"Yeah I *thought* of that. What holds me back, is not wanting to fly *off* the thing, negotiating the odd hill on the way *into* town."

"So you get a helmet."

“Nah, you can’t. I haven’t seen anybody with one since I’ve lived here.”

“Gee you’re right. Never thought of that. How about that *one* guy, you ever run into him up in the hills, always got a white t-shirt?”

“Yeah that guy’s something else. He’s doing interval uphill sprints on his one-speed cruiser. He’s got to be in his 70’s.”

“Cindy’s grandfather,” Ned said, leaving it at that, and it was a reminder that when you stripped it all away, Manhattan Beach was a small town.

Chris lowered his voice and said, “How about *you*?”

Ned took a second. “Don’t worry. I ain’t gonna flip on you, the lion pit deal, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I wasn’t, at the moment. In fact I’ve been a lot better, my outlook, for a few days now . . . Except you’re angling me back toward square one, by raising the possibility, you want to know the truth.”

“Nah, we’re good,” Ned said. “We got a little lucky, I won’t deny that.”

“Meaning the wise-guy brother of the victim, happening to disappear . . . after declaring revenge on the Harrison dude.”

“Sort of like that, yeah.” Ned deadpanning it, which he could do *anyway*, when there was *nothing* to worry about--so right now you had no idea.

Meaning no idea if Ned involved himself with the brother, to ensure the guy *didn’t* resurface and cause trouble.

Like a lot of scenarios lately, all of which contained elements of the unknown, you could choose to fret over it or not . . . and currently, you know what? The tequila was chilled just right, and going down easy, and Chris decided no need to solve his--and Ned’s--and the rest of the world’s problems tonight.

It was cathartic, looking at it this way--and that lasted for about a minute until Ned said, "So what else? Whadda you got coming up? Anything?"

"Not your fault," Chris said, "but I wish you hadn't reminded me. I got a guy not paying me rent?"

"You own rental shit, you mean?"

"No, no, I learned my lesson with that. This here, is I sublet my place in the Bay Area when I moved down here in October."

"So you didn't learn your lesson then."

"Okay, you want it nitpick it, fair enough."

"It seems to me," Ned said, "you make up your mind on something, you make a clean break. Don't half-ass it."

Ned had a point of course. The only reason Chris was doing this, hanging onto the place on Broderick, was if it didn't work out down here you'd never be able to afford an apartment in that neighborhood again, coming in cold.

"At any rate," he said. "I have to go up there. I fear. Sooner rather than later."

"I feel for you," Ned said. "Tenants hold all the cards. Nothing worse. No easy solution." And actually shaking his head . . . This wasn't a good sign, Chris decided, if *Ned* thought it was going to be difficult . . . Chandler too, didn't exude much optimism when Chris ran it by *him*.

"Let's don't worry about *me*," Chris said, and he was starting to get a little indigestion, an acid-reflux type thing, probably from skipping that entree and going straight to the booze. He lowered his voice again, "Where'd you go? You don't mind my asking."

"I don't mind," Ned said. "Minneapolis."

"Jeez. I had you pegged Florida, maybe the Grand Caymans. New York-Philly at the very least."

Ned didn't elaborate. He said, "You want me to peg you?"

“Sure, why not.”

“New Orleans. Just a wild hunch, but that seems to fit. Great town by the way--you ever been there, if that’s *not* where you disappeared to?”

“Never have. I know what you mean about New Orleans though, most cities being homogenized up the wazoo.”

“Still got some culture there. So where?”

“AZ. The opposite end of the spectrum. They took the desert and started building.”

“Yeah no thought to it,” Ned said. “Figured you wouldn’t hang out there though--that’s where your brother’s at these days, right? Might be one place the cops would look for you, if they were so inclined?”

“That crossed my mind, yeah. I was a little north, dug into one of the semi-retirement communities.”

“Not so stupid, actually. Hard to get in much trouble in one of those, I’m guessing.”

“True. Not the worst place. Your existence is substantially simplified, was how one old guy explained it to me in the rec center when I gave him a fresh towel.”

“Wait . . . you worked?”

“Sure. Why not? Killed time, and refreshed my bingo money.”

Ned laughed but said, “And you wouldn’t work for me. I’ll go out on a limb and say we pay better.”

“You keep bringing it up, the senior category.”

“*Mature*. Not a top-10 genre, but plenty of interest.”

“Yeah well, I got in a situation out there, it hit home once and for all that I’m not a candidate.”

“Ah Jesus. You better finish the story, but minimize the details.”

“Well . . . it wasn’t what I would expect to happen, but it ended up, I had to . . . perform . . . to get a bunch of money back at the end. It was my own fault, I pre-paid.”

“Oh, *never* do that,” Ned said. “But what was the outcome?”

“I came up short.”

Ned studied him, little smile. “Fair enough . . . What do we got going over at your table there?”

Chris turned around and looked, and you had Ken sitting by himself, not very animated, nursing a tall beer, with Marlene’s seat empty, and Chris seeing now that she’d taken a permanent position at the bar, likely so she could chit-chat more freely with Cindy.

Then you had Dr. Stride and Stacey behaving like old friends--not quite intimate ones--exactly--but you got the idea. She’d moved her chair against his, and he had his right arm draped over her shoulder and was speaking to her at a slow, measured pace.

“Hmm,” Chris said, “that guy, unless he’s been faking me out, is a psychiatrist. Psychologist. Whatever.”

Stacey looked up for a moment and locked eyes with Chris, and Chris raised his hand, and both Stacey and Dr. Stride raised theirs back, big enthusiastic waves . . . and they turned back to each other and re-settled into their conversation.

“Looks like an age difference, for sure,” Ned said.

“Father-figure type thing, conceivably?” Chris said.

Ned said, “Speaking of not exactly that, but *which* guy did you throw over the rail? The story I heard?”

“That was an *old* boyfriend of Stacey’s, before Kenny. In fact, no, I don’t think it was her boyfriend.”

Ned was smiling. “So just some *guy* then?”

“More or less.”

“But he found the water at least.”

“Yeah, though apparently a little shallow, in the end.”

Ned was still smiling. “Not something you can always calculate.”

“Not at all. Makes you wonder, when you hear about a college fraternity incident, spring break down at Cabo, one of the dodo birds jumping off a hotel balcony into the pool. How high is too high?”

“That’s a good point,” Ned said. “Where does it switch from novelty to suicidal.”

“Yeah. You ever read the one about the trick high-diver? The guy who climbs the ridiculous tower and dives into a little tank? Like they used to do in the circus?”

“That was good. It gave you a feel for it. The guy looking down at the tank, seeing it as the size of a silver dollar.”

Chris said, “Then of course, he’s up there on his perch, getting ready to do a test dive, no one around except the guy who just finished rigging the scaffold . . . and two guys come around the corner and shoot *that* guy. Then as they’re running off, one of them takes a glance back and sees the diver up there watching.”

“Yeah, great start. See now, that story was New Orleans. Part of it, anyhow.”

“The rest of the story didn’t quite match the beginning. They got into some Civil War re-enactment nonsense. Just stick with the diver.”

Ned said, glancing back over at Chris’s original table, “How’d *you* hook up with the shrink though? Or did *she* bring him along to start with?”

“No, *I* brought him . . . Just . . . some anger management stuff. I felt like I was losing a little perspective in that regard.”

“It work?”

“I don’t know.”

“Join the club,” Ned said.

Chapter 5

Chris said to Gloria, “You’re *sure*.”

They were in front of her house on Jackson Street in Presidio Heights, and Chris had just gotten out of a yellow cab.

“I’m insulted that you even ask that question,” Gloria said. “I’m giving you the count of three to get inside.”

It was late morning, Sunday, but that didn’t stop Gloria from asking if he’d had breakfast, and Chris said he was fine, but Gloria pressed the issue and Chris admitted he’d only been able to consume a microwaved Jimmy Dean Delight before hustling to the airport.

“Now that doesn’t sound like you,” Gloria said, “if it’s the one I’m thinking of, it’s turkey sausage and egg whites.”

“So true. My roommate Ken--oh Jeez, of course you know Ken--he has this new relationship--I think--and she eats differently. I stole it out of the freezer, by default.”

Chris had been mixed up momentarily, but Gloria got to know Ken when he was up here helping Chris chase down the Zodiac leads, meaning that guy Mel.

And of course Gloria took care of them that time, which she was doing again now with Chris, though he was hesitant when he saw the big dumpster in front of the house.

“*My* thing,” he said. “I feel guilty enough putting you out, this has to be like the 4th time now--but you’re juggling renovations on top of it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. All’s it is, they’re re-doing the rear bathroom. My daughter’s.”

“Ah.”

“And the reason it’s convenient, she’s staying at her dad’s full time for a while . . . I know she’s got regular teenage issues, but she pissed the daylights out of me, you don’t even want to hear . . . There, I said it. How strong do you like your coffee these days?”

And bubbly and upbeat as ever, Gloria led him inside, squared him away in his by-now pretty familiar room up top, and went to work in the kitchen.

Soon he was being showered with a variety of culinary delights, that included what sure tasted like the most delicate fresh-baked French crullers you ever had.

“If you haven’t won a Michelin star yet,” Chris said, “there needs to be an investigation.”

“Oh stop,” Gloria said. “I didn’t even ask you, what are you doing here?”

“Ah, dumb thing I got into, my old apartment. A few other odds and ends as well.” And there *were* no other odds and ends, the lone reason he was here--and still no idea how to handle it--was this *guy*.

And with all due respect to Gloria, San Francisco was the last place he wanted to be right now.

But of course you downplayed it.

“So routine maintenance, so to speak,” she said. “That makes sense, you still have your hand in both places, I can see that.”

True unfortunately, and Mancuso’s point about taking charge and making a clean break was becoming so obvious it was giving Chris a headache.

One way you could handle it, he supposed, was don’t do anything, let the system run its course--which meant Chris would eventually be evicted from the apartment by the management company.

Meaning the sheriff would come in at the end and throw out whoever was living there and change the locks.

Then you'd run the risk though of being sued for all the unpaid rent, though in Chris's experience that wouldn't necessarily happen . . . since a landlord in the hottest market in the country, which San Francisco is, is thrilled to have a vacancy where they can jack up the rent by a whopping couple of grand a month, from the \$2420 Chris was paying, to close to \$5K.

Obscene as that sounded. But it *was* a 1-bedroom in the Marina district, prime territory--and right now crummy studios in sketchy neighborhoods were renting for on average \$2500 a month.

The other issue, a minor one but still, Chris was illegally charging his sublet guy 3 grand, so an extra 600 a month roughly . . . and even though the scumbag was getting a great deal by today's admittedly bizarre standards, Chris could be in some trouble here for gouging the rent.

All that aside--and Chris thought it through as rationally as he could after getting home from the Crowe's Nest last night--you couldn't let the guy get away with this.

That's what it came down to . . . *that's what a lot of them did*, and who was he kidding.

"I'm a bit surprised," Gloria said, "that you didn't drive. That seems to be your MO. Much more civilized this way, don't you think?"

"What I screwed up," Chris said, "I was on a business trip recently and I *did* drive when I should have *flown*. Today, I have mixed feelings. Yeah it was quick, but they really do herd you in like cattle."

"I agree, it's a bit degrading. But alternately, Highway 5 is such a grind."

She was right, and that's part of why he bit the bullet, showed his cotton-picking real ID, used his gosh darn real credit card--just like a normal person, boarded a Jet Blue E-190, and was here in an hour.

Chris polished off a second cup of coffee, thinking it's so dang comfortable here, sun flooding in from three sides, first-class bed waiting for him upstairs if he was inclined to take a nap, and Gloria picked up on it.

“Take off your shoes,” she said.

“Well I don’t mind if I do,” he said. “So, other than your big renovation project, any other Bay Area news I should know about?”

What he was hoping she might address, was the auto break-in situation--Did his taking care of *what’s his name*--in the Original Joe’s parking lot--have any lasting effect?

Likewise the Berkeley guy--the 21st century Bernie Goetz--who Chris was afraid he may have influenced.

You couldn’t ask those direct questions, obviously, you had to casually dance around the topics.

And Chris had been doing his darndest, for a while now, to not look *himself* up in regard to the car guy, *and any of the others either*--since he was 99 percent convinced that nothing good would be gained from his knowing that stuff, that he’d only worry more.

But here you were, and you never know, you might find out something positive.

Gloria said, “Well one thing, everyone in the neighborhood anyway, has an opinion on the Presidio Terrace thing.”

“That’s where they screwed up not paying the property taxes, right? And the investors bought the private road at auction, and were threatening to charge the residents to park in front of their houses?”

“Yep. And the board of supervisors overturned it. Now there’s a lawsuit.”

“There always is,” Chris said. “Speaking of parking . . . anything more happen with those North Beach guys, who kind of went vigilante there?”

“Not in the last couple of months, that I’ve heard,” Gloria said. “I got a kick out of those two actually, taking things into their own hands.”

“Yeah, but wasn’t there an incident before that . . . that kind of precipitated it?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Some guy off his rocker, I seemed to remember hearing about? Writing threatening letters to the newspapers? That if the police don’t do more, he’s going to continue doing his own damage?”

“You might be ringing a bell, but I’m sorry, I really couldn’t tell you.”
So much for the big splash he assumed he had made.

If a normal, pretty dang informed San Franciscan like Gloria wasn’t aware of any of it--except for the part with the North Beach deli guys, the Vigliotti brothers, who admittedly *were* kind of colorful--that just goes to show you . . .

And all that effort, and supposed brain-power . . . Jeez.

“Well,” Chris said, “anything else?” Knowing now it would be a heck of a long shot for her to reference the Berkeley situation.

“Just what’s been on the news, that poor girl.”

“*What* poor girl?”

“The bicycle messenger. You didn’t hear about that?”

Chris had been actually one of those *himself*, years ago. He’d loved that job, but it was dangerous work . . . and he had a sick feeling now, picturing an aggressive Mack truck at an intersection, and he didn’t want to ask the specifics. He shook his head no, that he *hadn’t* heard.

“She was a homicide victim,” Gloria said. “Such a sweet thing . . . They’ve been running videos, public service announcements she participated in, when she was doing community work in Guatemala. She’s so alive and vibrant. You feel just awful.”

“Holy Smokes. I was sure you were going to tell me it happened on the job.”

“I know, that’s what people keep saying.”

“Was it . . . like a domestic thing?”

“I’m afraid not. She went out with friends after work, took the Muni home on the late side, but never made it. They found her the next morning in the park.”

When a native San Franciscan said ‘the park’ it usually meant Golden Gate.

Either way, this was hard to take, and it eerily echoed a bad experience from his *own* days as a bicycle messenger.

No doubt things were a bit different today, but back then--and Chris was piecing it together, this would have been 1993, ‘94--there was only one female that he could ever remember working for his company--and she was drop-dead beautiful.

And tough. But you worried about her, there were different examples, that she approached the city with too much reckless abandon.

One Friday night a messenger named Peter had a get-together at his apartment in the Haight, and everyone including the two bosses showed up, and it might have been the guy’s birthday or maybe he’d announced he was leaving--at any rate, this female messenger Edie arrives half-way through, beige leather miniskirt barely covering anything, total happy-go-lucky attitude, and when it ended the bosses offered her a ride home, since they were about the only ones who owned a car, but she says she’s fine.

Then she doesn’t show up at work Monday, but no one thinks too much of it, but a couple more days go by and the dispatcher gets a hold of her roommate and says they’re going to have to let Edie go if she misses any more time, and the roommate says she hasn’t seen her in a while either but will be sure and pass on the message when she does--and no one at work ever heard from Edie again.

One of the bosses waited a few more days and filed a police report, just in case, and SFPD got back to him that she’d been located and was okay, and no elaboration.

Chris got the lowdown a couple years later, that that night after leaving the party she’d at some point been abducted, forced into a van, driven all the hell over the north bay, as far as Lake Berryessa, and finally released in Jenner, in a parking area off Highway One.

Amazingly she was unharmed, and un-violated, but that was it for the big city . . . and either way Chris doubted she'd stray far from Topeka, Kansas, or whatever similar town she was probably from, the rest of her life.

And let's face it--who knows.

It could have been nothing but a big story, no truth to it, or it could have had a drug connotation or a lot of other things, and maybe Edie was *never* in any danger.

Even so, the incident was a red flag back then that stayed with him, that no matter how you cut it--and despite all of its glamorization as being one of the most desirable locations to live in the world--San Francisco could be a dangerous place.

Chris shook his head, for example, at the Millenials invading the Western Addition, which in Chris's day was a redevelopment neighborhood with housing projects sprinkled in, that you didn't want to be walking around in at 1 in the *afternoon*, much less 1 in the morning.

Today's residents were entirely casual about multiple neighborhoods that natives like Chris and his friends took very seriously, and still do.

"Where'd she live, did they say?" he said, getting back to it with Gloria.

"I believe in the outer Sunset. She and her boyfriend were surfers, it said."

The outer Sunset district being close to Ocean Beach, plenty of sharks out there and ice cold conditions and a serious under-tow, but good waves.

"And they apprehended someone--or not?" Though Chris had a feeling he knew the answer.

Gloria shook her head no. "You can thumb through the Chronicle, there may be an update. I'm going to excuse myself for a few minutes and go outside and water."

That was another continuing perk of being at Gloria's, she had the physical newspaper delivered every day. Chris figured she couldn't be the only one, by a long shot, but he couldn't think of anyone else he knew off hand, who still did it that way.

Probably because it happened Tuesday, according to the article, and there'd been no significant updates, Chris found it buried on Page 3 in today's edition.

Police Continue Probe of Suspected Foul Play in Delivery Employee Hope Hungerford Death
by Wilson Grappling

February 4th, 2018 - SFPD homicide detectives are seeking the public's assistance in unraveling the timeline leading to the apparent homicide Tuesday night of 22-year-old city resident Hope Hungerford.

"We have reason to believe the victim boarded a Muni public transport vehicle sometime after 11 pm," police spokesperson Sergeant Mike Briscoe said Saturday. "Anyone who may have witnessed such, we ask that they please contact us."

Hungerford's body was discovered by a PG&E worker Wednesday morning in a clearing behind the Hall of Flowers on the northeastern edge of Golden Gate Park.

Briscoe said it is thus far unclear which Muni route Hungerford chose after saying goodnight to friends at Gucci's Tratt Lounge at Howard and Beale.

"We are acting on reports that she got on either the N Judah, the L Taravel, the 38 Geary, or the 1 California," he said.

Hungerford had moved to the city from Connecticut in May of 2017, and had been employed as a bicycle messenger by Arrow Delivery Service since June 5th, according to company records.

Arrow lead dispatcher Bobo Wald called her “an exemplary employee whose motor always ran in high gear.”

City records show Hungerford as last residing at 44th and Pacheco.

Hungerford’s live-in partner Jake Pressley joined police in a plea to the public to come forward with any detail, no matter how small. “Hope didn’t deserve this,” he said.

Gloria had been essentially on top of it, probably very little here that she didn’t already know.

Of course one thing they didn’t tell you, was *how* she died. But that’s not surprising, the police holding that detail back for now.

You figured Homicide *is* looking real hard at the boyfriend of course, and Chris had to think *he’d* be doing that too, since what in God’s name is the guy doing letting her take public transportation home that late by herself, and all the way across town, end to end.

Then too, she’s got a live-in boyfriend but she just goes out with a bunch of *other* friends until close to midnight?

There could be a simple explanation of course, there usually was. Especially these days, when being in a *relationship* with someone was often compromised, and everyone seemed fine with it.

Not Chris’s cup of tea, if you really *were* committed to someone. But what can you do.

The four different Muni lines part though, that the sergeant was alluding to . . . that would be two buses and two streetcars, and that was strange.

The buses--the 38 Geary and 1 California--they ended up in the Richmond district, the north side of the park . . . while the streetcars, the N and the L put you in the Sunset, south side of the park, Hope's neighborhood.

Though even then, taking the L would be a little unusual, since the N dropped you a couple blocks closer to Pacheco.

But the more curious part, what she'd be doing in the Richmond district at that hour.

Again, there could be a logical reason . . . and furthermore, the cop could be wrong anyway, that he simply had *reports* that she may have been seen on the various transit lines.

And in the end what difference did *any* of it make?

The poor girl wasn't alive anymore, would never experience her 23rd birthday.

Hanging around Gloria's, you couldn't help be upbeat--you were temporarily insulated from the larger issues you didn't want to think about--and this news put a damper on things, the real world creeping back in.

Chris went out back and found Gloria, and told her he'd be getting on with his day and out of her hair, and she insisted on driving him where he needed to go, and he put his hand up and said he required the exercise bad.

"I put on some poundage since the reunion," he said. "In fact *starting* at the reunion, that weekend."

"How's your lady friend, by the way?" Gloria said.

"Emma? She's still around, pretty sure. Though we didn't particularly recover from that evening."

"So you can be a playboy then," Gloria said, a little goofy, making her eyes big. "Maybe that's for the best."

"You might have a point," Chris said. "Holidays possibly excluded."

"Gosh now . . . are you saying you get lonely? I don't like to hear *that*."

“Nah,” Chris said, “I’m way past all that actually.”

And he sort of *was*, it was true. And slightly uplifting to put it in that context.

Part of it of course was having to keep looking over his shoulder, more significant concerns--to put it mildly--than a tad of sentiment cropping up here and there.

Yeah, okay, Christmas Eve was a little rough, but the call to Ray helped, as did staying down at the beach late into the night, even though he was about the only one there after a while, but still, not coming back to the apartment until you were totally shot and could fall asleep right away without feeling sorry for yourself like a little doofus.

The thing now though, no holiday today, no occasion he could come up with whatsoever . . . and this was different, not *emotional* exactly, but the *old-time’s-sake* business was kicking in a bit as he cut down Spruce and through the gate in the Presidio wall . . . and he pictured strutting through the door at Weatherby’s and finding Shep hopefully working today, and unwinding there the rest of the afternoon.

That was going to have to wait though, you couldn’t keep getting sidetracked and avoiding the main thing . . . which unfortunately was ringing the lower outside bell, at 3904 Broderick, Apt 4.

Chris was sweating by the time he got down there, and it was pretty dang warm out for Nor Cal in what was supposed to be winter . . . and he realized he didn’t ask Gloria how the weather had been lately.

Meaning, were they getting enough rain. Those fires were scary last fall, even the aftermath with the smoke lingering all over the place when he was following Smith around.

As an idle thought, Chris wondered if the au pair gal, who Smith had been seemingly hooked up with, had returned to New Zealand following the mishap.

Chris did an inhale-exhale thing and cleared his throat and rang the bell.

It took maybe 15 seconds and the buzzer sounded, which is the way it worked in these original Marina district buildings, the old-fashioned system, you ring the bell, the person buzzes you into the hallway, not knowing who you are yet--unless the building upgraded to an intercom, which Chris's hadn't.

Chris actually had the key to the main door on his keychain, but he thought he better go through the diplomatic channel, rather than let himself into the building and then be rapping on the guy's door out of the blue.

And of course the apartment was upstairs, a fairly steep flight, and there were some memories there too, the most distinct being coming down because you thought it was the cops but instead getting clocked by that guy who was in the wine business.

Now . . . when Chris got to the top of the stairs, the door was open a crack, and Chris was going to say something but instead tapped lightly, and a moment later there the guy was.

A little bigger than Chris remembered, and he had on baggy basketball shorts and those Adidas rubber slippers that you see soccer players wear--and they could be baseball one's too, come to think of it, since you saw some of that at Scottsdale Stadium.

"Dixson? Chris Seely."

"I know who you are." The guy's full name was Dixson Herbel. Chris had found him off a notice the guy posted inside the gym at Funston playground, which was about 6 blocks away.

Right next to the Marina library, in fact, where Chris had done plenty of research, stemming from his paranoia of using his own computer to check on the assorted individuals he needed to interact with.

Anyhow, Herbel's little posting projected what Chris wanted--a nice-enough sounding guy from North Carolina who got recruited by a start-up in the city, which Chris learned after talking to the guy was a new twist on car leasing, and that sounded pretty dull . . . but the guy was fired up about the job, and was pulling down plenty of salary to afford the apartment.

And it was entirely irrational, but Chris's instinct was a guy from North Carolina was less likely to screw you than someone from, say, Brooklyn.

Right now the guy didn't offer to shake hands or invite him in, and Chris could see through the partially-opened door a pair of bare feet moving around in the kitchen, female ones.

Chris said, "You look like you're a workout person. That's good. You'd fit right in down south."

"Where's that?" the guy said, and for a moment it looked they might be headed toward a civilized conversation.

"West LA. Manhattan, Hermosa, Redondo. You ever been?"

The guy didn't respond either way. He said, "What, you *call* me? *Harass* me that way first--not once but twice--and that's not *good* enough?"

"Excuse me, there?" Chris said.

The guy continued. "Now you have to present yourself unannounced? During my quiet time? . . . Is that the way you were raised?"

"Huh?"

"Listen to yourself, you fat fuck. You know exactly what I'm talking about. You provide me sub-standard conditions, I go along with it based on your assurances that you will address the 8 items we agreed upon. And on your end? You didn't care enough to do *crap* . . . So you stopped getting paid."

For a second Chris wondered if there really had been a discussion about 8 items in the apartment that needed upgrade or replacement--or

whatever? He couldn't recall anything like that, unless he was truly losing his brain.

All he could remember was handing him the keys, and the guy telling Chris he was the luckiest man in San Francisco today because the apartment was 'killer' and the price was right on . . . and thank you so much for this opportunity.

Chris hated that expression 'killer', especially when there was no direct noun connected to it, which at least the guy did do, connect it to 'apartment'. Worse was when you'd hear something like, "I chilled, and it was killer."

But back to this developing motherfucker now . . .

Chris said, "Are you serious? I mean I'm willing to work with you, believe me . . . if you're in a jam or something . . . those things happen."

"You haven't been listening," Dixson said, "on account of you don't *want* to . . . So you'd best be moving on, would be my advice, unless you enjoy being in more hot water than you already are."

Chris tried to process this, and he couldn't understand how he'd be in *any* hot water . . . but before he could say anything further the guy pulled out his phone, which he'd been holding behind his back, and explained to Chris that he'd just documented the whole conversation, as part of his ongoing case, and that he'd see him in court, or the police precinct-- whichever came first.

And before Chris could conjure up a comeback to *that*--no easy task when you've been flabbergastedly blindsided--Dixson closed the apartment door in his face.

Chris stood still for a couple minutes. This had been a highly unusual proceeding, to say the least, and he was trying to get a grip on it.

Then too, it occurred to him that if he didn't go anywhere, the guy might at least open the door again, asking *what part of what I just said*

didn't you get, buddy? and sure, that would be unpleasant, but you might get a few more words in, which couldn't hurt.

That wasn't going to happen though, and someone turned up the music in the apartment, some aggressive hip-hop . . . and there really wasn't much to do now except wander back over to Chestnut Street and hang a left toward Weatherby's, and see what might be cooking there on a lazy Sunday afternoon after all.

"Mi best amigo!" Shep said, before Chris could sit down.

"I miss you man," Chris said. "I'm not too proud to admit it."

"That's a mutual affirmative," Shep said.

The place looked different, there were extra TV's set up, all of them tuned to college basketball at the moment, but then all the jerseys on the patrons started to register, that Chris had been oblivious to outside as well, obviously preoccupied with the latest tenant-relations business.

"Jeeminy Christmas," he said to Shep. "The Super Bowl."

"The one and only," Shep said. "Kicks off in a little over an hour. The doofuses all decked out might have given it away."

"I really am losing it," Chris said. "I read the paper--at least I did today--and I watch ESPN. How could I have not known?"

"I'm almost the same. You got Philly and the Patriots, I don't want either town to win."

"I know. And I tend to root against Tom Brady. It's irrational, since he's from San Mateo and all."

"Serra High School. Him and Barry Bonds both. But I hear you, I haven't cared for the guy since he deflated the balls."

"Never good to cheat," Chris said.

"Meanwhile . . ." Shep said. "You . . . coming along?"

And it was fine with Chris that at that point Shep had to go take care of a couple new arrivals at the other end of the bar, and he could ease down

a quarter of his Anchor Steam without having to think too hard--about Shep's question, but also *period*.

Shep of course could have been asking a couple different things.

The tamest would be, are you coming along with your adjustment to Manhattan Beach?

More poignant would be, are you coming along taking care of whatever business you were in the middle of last time--and Chris couldn't remember, but he suspected it was Jerry Smith.

The other interpretation would be, are you coming along with turning over a new leaf and not killing guys anymore?

Chris suspected the third would be Shep's favored one, that Chris had gotten whatever he needed to out of his system, and could successfully advance to a new stage. Shep's question that one time, when he broached the subject, was, "Haven't you accomplished enough?"

And there was an undeniable logic to it, and it made sense intellectually, not to mention physically . . . not to mention psychologically.

Except--stuff kept getting in the way.

Fortunately he didn't have to answer Shep this time, because all at once it got real crowded in here, and it felt more like a Super Bowl party than you would ever want or need, unless the 49ers or Raiders were back in it--and Chris was able to finish his beer and discreetly shuffle out of there, without Shep noticing--and hopefully without hurting the guy's feelings.

What now?

There was always walking, that'd be an option. It felt good earlier, for the most part, putting in a couple miles to get down here from Gloria's. Now you could head up the Union, check out 4 or 5 blocks of that, which was always a reasonable scene.

Alternately, you could go straight up Fillmore--the postcard views of the bridge and bay on that last block--and then down the other side,

Washington, Clay, Sacramento, some action over there too, people-watching as well.

Or you could head down to Chinatown, pop in one of those hole in the walls for a bowl of noodles.

Or North Beach. Or the Embarcadero, see what was doing on the waterfront.

Chris used to think New York was the greatest walking town in the country, hands down, but SF increasingly had its moments . . . as long as you stayed in the right neighborhoods.

So yeah, you had those possibilities.

Or . . . you could go a block west, turn a half block south . . . and you were in the Booker Lounge.

It was a good decision. The best part, amazing actually, was Booker didn't allow any Super Bowl viewing.

It was Sunday at 4, and his regular trio was on the schedule, and apparently he was going to be damned if he was going to change that for a football game.

Booker ran a tight ship, period. You didn't automatically have the right to be in the place, and that made sense. You come in with a baseball cap on, you're asked to take it off. You start talking on your cell phone, you're required to take it outside.

The irony about the Super Bowl was Booker himself looked like *he* could have played in the NFL back in the day, a smooth-moving muscular black guy about 6'5, impeccably dressed, with a gleaming shaved head and a refined manner. When he spoke, and put his hands out for emphasis and spread his fingers, he was a mesmerizing presence.

The trio was warming up as Chris made his way to the bar. Laid-back jazz . . . keyboard, guitar and drums . . . different vibe than when he and

Ray were here and they had the vocalist in the mix and there was dancing going on.

Booker spotted him and came over. “Chrissie. Not gonna ask you where you been hidin’.”

“Before we get to that,” Chris said, “or maybe *instead* of that, I’m impressed you’re going anti-NFL.”

“On account of the kneeling you mean?” Booker said, laughing. “I’m boycotting ‘em?”

“Oh boy,” Chris said. “I wasn’t thinking of that.”

“I’m just playing with you . . . You might be interested, one of your lady friends was in.”

“Hmm,” Chris said. Last time he saw Joyce, he all but accused her of having a fling with Booker, which he felt bad about now, none of his business. But still, you couldn’t help wonder . . .

“You playing it cool,” Booker said. “You not gonna ask, so I’ll give her up. Birgitte.”

“Ah . . . Jeez, how is she?”

“Fine as ever,” Booker said, letting it hang there, and Chris thought wow, something might have developed there *too*, you never know.

“But her old man,” Chris said, “meaning her ex-husband, guy named Maierhaffer . . . any mention of him?”

Booker shook his head no, and Chris was more relieved than he expected to be, though admittedly it *would* be a nightmare having *that* guy back and on the loose.

Booker said, “You been behaving yourself though?”

“Oh yeah.”

“I ain’t referring to the ladies now. Seems you was asking about something else. Wondered did something require you to act on it.”

“Whatever that was,” Chris said, “it was a long time ago.”

“Not that long. I’d place it under a year.” Which was about right, Chris had to admit, those couple of times he was in here, indirectly picking Booker’s brain on a few things.

Chris said, “You have a better memory, for *me*, than *I* do . . . But nah, that was strictly hypotheticals, I was considering trying to write a mystery novel, doing a little background research. Needless to say I don’t have the discipline, and it never came to fruition.”

“Horse *shit*,” Booker said, playfully. “Seem to me there was two main realms of your curiosity. You wanted to know, did a baseball bat work okay, if you was aiming to get rid of somebody . . . Your other concern, could they trace bullets on you.”

“Hmm . . . Well that sounds pretty crazy.”

“*Your* interpretation. *Mine* was, you was in the middle of something.”

Chris was trying to remember, was this *after* Donny? You would assume so . . . in fact yeah it was, because he remembered now being worried when he was asking the question about the baseball bat, whether he’d already made an error using it on the guy.

So okay, Booker had him pegged right, he was in the middle of the rest of it--and it may have been Chip he was thinking ahead to, wondering about the traceable bullets--or maybe even Thad, out in Idaho.

Chris said, “Whatever. The fact is now, what I’m reading, the bad guys have a lot more to worry about than fingerprints and traceable ballistics.”

“You talking DNA matching. Yeah, that’s some serious shit.”

Jeez, Booker now *too* apparently ahead of Chris on this. Just like Abe, the trucker, who not only was up on the latest cutting-edge techniques, but told *him* about a cold case they’d just solved in New Hampshire, *using* them. Artie, too, the old guy in the hot tub, he was a step ahead of Chris on the subject as well.

Chris looked around, made sure they had privacy. He said, “Okay, I didn’t come in to bug you or anything, but now that I’m here . . . and since you’ve brought up an interesting topic . . .”

“Now we getting to it,” Booker said.

“All’s it is, I’m getting ready to test myself? That \$79 ancestry thing you see on TV?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Yeah, so what I’m hoping, if I *do* all that and find someone I’m related to--you know what I mean, *unfavorably*--then how do I, like, *distance* myself from that person? You get what I’m saying? Do you know anyone who might be able to help me with that?”

Booker politely gave Chris his attention until he finished, and then he picked up a towel and began drying some glasses and otherwise neatening up the bar.

Chris figured from past experience that Booker wasn’t dismissing him, but was mulling it over, and sure enough a couple minutes later he circled back.

“Man,” Booker said, “you don’t show up here a lot, but when you do, you bringing with you some strange ass questioning.” Pretty big smile going along with it.

“I apologize then,” Chris said. “And you’re right, too much about *me*, not checking myself at the door.”

“You seem anxious. Not going to have you repeat what you was asking, cause it came out convoluted, like a mental patient.”

“Oh.”

“But some part of that, you talking computers?”

“I think so. Hard to avoid them.”

“That case, I can dig up a referral. Only heard some rumblings about this dude, can’t vouch for anyone.”

“Gee . . . yeah . . . if you have someone, that could help, you never know. Thanks.”

Booker went in the kitchen, and Chris figured into his little office back there, and it didn’t take long and he came back with a name and number.

Chris had mixed feelings, now that there was an extra element introduced. Yeah, you needed some help, someone in the trenches who could first of all give you a yes or no, on whether getting into the GED Match database and maneuvering some names was even feasible.

And if so--was it advisable? Not to mention, how complicated was it?

And now you’d have one more loose person, maybe raising an eyebrow what you were up to.

But like most projects, you had to do *something*, start somewhere, and Chris folded the piece of paper Booker gave him and put it in his wallet . . . and they had a new micro brew on the chalkboard to the left of the bar, featured on draft this week, Jzonkkysh Dark--and Chris figured the name was colorful enough, it reminded you of some of the arch-villains in the Superman comics, and when Booker came his way again Chris went with a 24-ouncer.

Halfway through *that*, it was turning back into a better Sunday afternoon again, and a slightly disheveled guy comes through the door and Booker reacts pretty quick, with a, “Now looky-here what the racoon drug in.”

It took Chris a minute to recognize the guy, and it was his old friend Rich Tomlinson. The last time he saw him was, yeah, about a year ago, right here--and probably one of those same times he was asking Booker about the bullets. In fact he remembered now, it was Rich who pointed out, in the hypothetical discussion they were having, that a baseball bat might not be optimum because part of it might splinter off and leave a little bit of yourself there with it.

Meaning Rich *too*, was ahead of the curve on DNA. Rich had gone on to speculate that an accident would be preferable, such as forcing the person off a cliff along Highway One on the way to Stinson Beach. Or another suggestion, what Chris liked a little better, a *medical* incident.

Then Booker had butted in, and cleared his throat and said excuse me gentlemen, you want to do away with someone, you don't dick around, you shoot him in the side of the head--or some hypothetical advice to that effect.

"Richie," Chris said, "we have to stop meeting this way."

Rich took a moment to get his bearings and said, "Ah Jesus . . . Christian--that you? Been a while, brother." And Rich was a hugger, and here it came, and you could smell booze on the guy even though he hadn't gotten started in the Booker Lounge yet . . . and Rich didn't look all that healthy in *any* aspect, and he'd definitely aged since last time . . . but he was a good man.

Chris joined Rich at a table, and Rich said, "This time, no shop talk, if you don't mind. I'm tired of lamenting the good old days."

"That's a good little piece of wisdom," Chris said. "Especially since that's what I do--constantly--compare modern efforts to back then."

"Well it's hard not to. You try to look the other way, but they can't get anything right."

Chris assumed Rich was referring to the newspaper business--so this *was* shop talk now, which was hard to avoid, since that's how they knew each other, Chris working as a feature writer those years for the Chronicle, and Rich doing a hard-news reporting gig at the Examiner.

"Since we *are* on the subject now," Chris said, "how about crime stories? They handle those the same, you think?"

"Not even close," Rich said. "First of all, they never talk to a detective. They let the department spokesman run the show . . . Which means, they're essentially telling the reader nothing."

“You’re saying they don’t dig enough? I hadn’t thought of that, but yeah, it’s all pretty formulaic.” Chris was applying it to his own situation, wondering if that helped or hurt him, his various endeavors, if Rich was correct that the public didn’t get as much information . . . Or did it make any difference?

Rich said, “The reporters today--bad enough they don’t come out of journalism schools anymore, because there *are* no more of those. But then where these kids *do* educate themselves is on Twitter and Instagram, is how it works . . . You ever watch the White House briefings, the daily nonsense with Sarah Huckabee?”

“Sanders, yeah. I try not to actually. I see what you’re getting at, they don’t give you much there either.”

Chris was hoping Rich hadn’t launched into a political discussion, but Rich continued with, “*She* doesn’t give you anything, that’s a given. But it’s the spineless reporters filing in there every day like sheep and being made fools of . . . I mean Bob Woodward must be throwing up. John Peter Zenger has to be rolling in his grave.”

Chris was familiar with Woodward of course, but had no idea who the other guy was.

He said, “Rich, all good points, and let me re-direct you for a second.”

“Sure.”

“This current thing now, the gal messenger--you have any take?”

Rich shifted around. “Oh yeah. I’d say don’t get me started but you just did. I’m telling ya? There’s been a few of these now . . . If I had nothing to lose, I would FUCKING take things into my own two hands . . . If I found that guy? I’d tie him up, drive him to an abandoned gold mine in the Yukon territory of Alaska--no one around--and over the course of days, maybe *weeks*, I would nip off small body parts with a pair of bolt cutters.”

Rich was getting worked up and was slightly redder in the face and his cheeks were puffing out, and Chris was thinking Jeez, don't go into a coughing fit or something on me now and scare the hell out of me.

When Rich stabilized and it looked like that *wasn't* going to happen Chris said, "So you don't trust the system to do its job then."

"You're putting me on, right?" Rich said. "The majority of these deals, the high profile ones? The lawyers get started and the technicalities surface and maybe even the ACLU gets involved because they violated the fucker's rights by letting him hit his head as they were feeding him into the squad car . . . Then of course it comes out on Twitter, somebody accusing the poor girl of having a shady past and not being the angel she was portrayed as . . . and is there a much deeper story here? Even if they ultimately put the guy away, that's not enough."

Rich put it well, Chris had to admit. He said, "How would you--or someone--go about finding this guy?"

Rich had polished off his martini and signalled for another, and his eyes weren't focusing great--one wasn't quite in sync with the other--and he was slurring his words slightly . . . but something told Chris he understood exactly what he was saying.

Rich was silent for a while and then said, "You need help, you let me know."

"Richie," Chris said. "We're just speculating right now. A couple of over-the-hill newspaper guys."

"Like I said," Rich said.

Chapter 6

Booker's guy lived on Douglass Street between Market and 18th.

A couple of regulars had shown up in the Booker Lounge, who Chris didn't know but Rich did, and that gave Chris an excuse to get out of there.

Chestnut Street was pretty deserted--you figured it must be getting close to crunch time in the Superbowl, and there were the usual intermittent screams coming out of the bars and restaurants but the stoop in front of Peet's Coffee was entirely empty, and Chris figured why not, and called the guy.

And the idea was to feel him out, maybe schedule something tentatively the next couple days . . . but Booker's guy was enthusiastic and eager and said now was a good time . . . so Chris said okay and found an Uber, and the guy was waiting for him on the sidewalk when he got out.

"Mark Feigenbaum," he said, offering his hand.

Chris shook it and said, "A few days ago I'd say George--Jeez, what was my last name, I honestly can't remember it."

The guy was going on about something, definitely high-energy, a rapid talker, one of those hyper guys who looked like he'd never gain an extra pound his whole life, and where you could see a lot of veins in his arms.

"Sorry," Chris said, "I'm afraid I didn't hear a word you said, because . . . God dang it . . ."

"Your last name you mean?" Mark said.

“The problem was, I had it ready, but I didn’t use it much at all. People mostly called me ‘you’, or nothing . . . *Worthy*, there it is, thank God.”

“Like the ballplayer. The Lakers. Showtime--We’re talking Magic, Worthy, Byron Scott, AC Green. Can’t forget Kareem. That was some group.”

“It’s just the *idea*,” Chris said, “that I can’t always draw up a name at will. Makes me nervous.”

“You have any Alzheimer’s in the family?”

“Not that I know of.” Though that was a fair question, since neither of Chris’s parents made it into their 80’s . . . so no, you didn’t notice anything front and center yet, but who knows.

“Let’s go inside,” Mark said.

The guy had the top floor of a three-family house, everything well-kept, the hallways, the alcove, even the gold numbers on the apartment doors looked freshly polished.

“Pretty nice digs,” Chris said. “You got a landlord on site?”

“Oh yeah. Mr. and Mrs. Gaviglio. The brick facade in front? Every couple weeks he’s out there power-washing the sucker. I lucked out here.”

Chris couldn’t help contrast this guy with the other guy today who once said he lucked out too, when Chris idiotically turned over the keys to him.

“So what do we got?” Mark said.

“First, out of curiosity--you know Booker? Or it’s more a third-hand relationship.”

“I know who you’re *talking* about, but no. I’ve done some work here and there, and pretty sure I *do* know how that connection would come about.” The guy playing it coy, or simply matter of fact, and you weren’t going to hold that against him.

“Reason I ask,” Chris said, “you seem like a decent fellow, all business. I just don’t want to open a situation where . . . we might have a problem later.”

“Not following. You want some nuts?” Mark grabbed a giant container of mixed nuts off his desk, a definite Costco look to them, and handed it to Chris.

“I tend to overthink,” Chris said. “So no offense intended. It’s just . . . if we get going on this, and you wonder--or deduce--anything about me . . . even though whatever that’d *be*, you’d be *wrong* on . . . could there be some carryover?”

“I think I got ya,” Mark said. “I stick to my job.”

Saying it nice and simple, not trying to convince anyone, which Chris appreciated. And let’s face it, if this guy had indirectly worked his way into Booker’s circle, you had to have reasonable faith in his word.

“Fine,” Chris said. “Cutting straight to the chase. Can you go into GED Match and get someone who shouldn’t *be* in there, the hell *out* of there?”

“Hold on, repeat that site.” Mark was on his desktop, a monstrous-looking box down below making a fair amount of noise, three large suspended screens up above, surrounding his desk in horseshoe fashion.

Chris gave it to him again, and meanwhile a dog jumped on Chris’s chair and onto his lap and startled him for a second. It wasn’t exactly a typical lap dog, more like a deep mix from an animal shelter, a little overweight and just not real attractive--and Chris eased him off his lap and back down, but the little guy jumped up again and curled up on Chris this time, looking very contented.

“Don’t mind Melvin,” Mark said over his shoulder.

Jeez, the same name as Mel the Zodiac, who went officially by Melvin, that’s the name the LAPD was asking about . . . and son of a bitch, what was *his* last name . . . okay, he had it, Melvin *Williard* . . . and Chris was

starting to wonder if he was doing this to himself now, subconsciously, temporarily forgetting stuff that he really did remember.

“I have to admit,” Chris said, stroking Mel behind the ears and the dog just about passing out from ecstasy, “the unconditional love business, I assumed it only pertained to dog and master.”

“Yeah he’s a good boy,” Mark said. “Okay now listen, I’m in. The back door. Not all the way, but what we call level 1. You want me to do *what*, now?”

“Holy Smokes. Already?”

“Not quite what you think, but we should be able to determine if your requirements are do-able.”

“I don’t *know* what my requirements are,” Chris said, “except to avoid matching up DNA-wise to any other individual they *got* in there.”

“I see. Let’s do a preliminary search then. What’s your date of birth?”

“My *what*, now?”

Mark was looking at him like an authoritative pediatrician waiting to administer a shot that everyone knew was necessary, except someone was hemming and hawing.

“My fault,” Chris said. “I’ve been in a funky mode, avoiding dishing out that type of information for a while. Something I need to adjust to. It’s 9-26-74.”

Mark’s fingers were rattling around the keys at lightning speed, and it almost sounded like a guy playing a buzz role with rim shots on a marching snare drum.

“Oh yeah, you’re in here,” he said.

“Huh?”

“No need for alarm. You and millions of others.”

Chris *was* alarmed, in full panic mode. “My . . . DNA, you’re saying?”

“Nah, doesn’t look like it. This appears to be . . . yep, strictly family tree data . . . What this is, this Gedmatch you gave me? Primarily a genealogy data bank.”

“Oh.”

“Meaning it’s set up for these retired guys who spend all day trying to trace their family’s roots to Norway, and all the hundred branches that go along with it. Also I’m guessing, folks who were adopted, looking for their birth parents, and long-lost siblings. Be a good resource for that.”

Chris had calmed down a notch. “But . . . who *put* me there then?”

“My guess? Some distant family member, likely someone you don’t even know . . . One of those hobby-genealogists I’m talking about.”

“And . . . you . . . hacked in there, to find all this out?”

“Not this, no. It’s public information, accessible to anyone who registers with a simple email address.”

“*Fuck.*”

“Take it easy, you’re not thinking clearly. What I’m gonna do now, take a random family member of yours, see if I can get ‘em out. Meaning a practice run.”

“Yeah, okay then,” Chris said, “*that* part’s good.”

This took about 5 minutes, and Chris re-directed his attention to Melvin, and *dang-it* this was rewarding. He started thinking maybe he should get one of these little guys. Some logistical headaches, no doubt, but currently impossible to argue with the end result.

Mark spoke up. “I tested an M-2 variation. No guarantees until we try it for real, but I’m confident we can. Whoever set this site up, to be honest, either they didn’t know what they were doing, or it’s not a priority. Reasonably easy to deal with.”

Chris was thinking that might not be as true in the future, if Law Enforcement really does start making use of it to track cold cases--at that

point you'd assume it would get a *lot* more secure--which meant all the more reason to take care of this now.

"Wow," Chris said. "You're good."

"So you want me to go ahead? With anything in particular? I charge \$50 an hour."

"Gee. Pretty reasonable. I expected a lot worse."

"That's if a client comes here. I have to go to them, then I tack on my travel time, plus the hourly jumps to \$75."

"Less comfortable then, working out in field."

"Oh yeah, I hate it actually. I'm a homebody."

"I can identify with you there," Chris said, and he ran by Mark in more detail the specifics of what Abe the trucker suggested.

"Sounds viable," Mark said. "When you get your lab test, don't have them email it anywhere, your profile. Give 'em a memory stick, have them put it directly on that for you. And make sure it's a zip file."

Chris was thinking don't worry about that, he wasn't planning to give any lab his email address, or even his correct name, but it was good that Mark was on the same page.

"And my original idea?" Chris said. "Which was, get notified if Law Enforcement happened to enter my DNA for some reason?"

"I see . . . that could work as well. We'd have to set up a trigger, that obviously matched your genomic code . . . I could take it a step further."

"Ah."

"The whole shooting match? My recommendation would be
1)Eliminate relatives with familial code profiles. 2)Trigger a notification if there's an outside entry for your DNA. 3)Trigger a notification if there's an outside entry of a familial match."

Chris had to digest this one for a second. "You're saying, you get Uncle Arthur in Kalamazoo out of there, but then if he finds out about it and decides to *re-enter* himself . . . or if some other 4th cousin of mine who

just had to find *their* Norwegian roots, subsequently enters *their* DNA . . . that I get notified.”

“Bingo. You keep referencing Norway. That where your family really is from?”

“I only referenced it once. *You* brought Norway up the first time, the example you gave.”

“I did?”

“But nah, I’m all over the place, but pretty sure Scandinavia’s not in the equation.”

“Definitely not in mine either, but we both used it. Go figure.”

“Well who knows,” Chris said, “maybe that means something.”

“Meanwhile though,” Mark said, “we good? Anything else?”

“Jeez, you’re springing a lot on me--which I appreciate, don’t get me wrong. Bottom line, you’re saying come back when I have my sample.”

“Yeah. Keep in mind, it’s not going to *be* a sample, don’t get that mixed up. Gonna be a *file*. Pretty substantial one, about 25 megs. But otherwise not unlike any normal document you might have reason to save on your computer.”

Chris nodded, and pulled out a hundred bucks and handed it to Mark.

Mark said, “This is strictly a consultation. I don’t charge for these.”

“Keep it anyway,” Chris said. “Because a, that’s ridiculous. And b, I’ll feel real guilty walking out of here if you don’t.”

Mark shrugged his shoulders and pocketed the cash.

But Mark hammering home the business about the files and the documents--that had Chris flashing unfortunately for a second on the guy from earlier, his tenant, Dixson--no doubt *that* guy *was* saving plenty of *docs*, if he was indeed planning to sue Chris and report him to the authorities and so forth.

Which could have been a big bluff . . . but you wouldn’t put it past the guy either.

And this Mark seemed like a square shooter, his head on straight, so Chris said, “To throw out one final thing, just your opinion, something different, if you don’t mind weighing in?”

“Happy to,” Mark said.

“I got this sub-tenant. He turned difficult. Impossible to deal with actually.”

“He paying the rent?”

“No. He was, no problem. Then he stopped.”

“You think it’s temporary? He lost his job or something, and is one of those stubborn types who won’t admit he’s in trouble?”

“I considered that. Pretty sure it’s not going to play out that way . . . I’m hesitant, to tell you the truth . . . to go through the normal channels.”

“Oh *hell* no,” Mark said, his eyes a little bigger, like *he* maybe had had his *own* issue with something similar one time.

“Kinda my view of it as well,” Chris said. “So right now I’m twiddling my thumbs.”

“So mace him,” Mark said, getting up and going in the other room. He returned a minute later with an unmarked silver can. “This is your best product.”

“Gee,” Chris said.

“Oil-based, but more powerful than what local law enforcement, or even the Secret Service, is allowed to use. This is military grade shit . . . And not *our* military. *The Russians.*”

Chris was more or less blown away, and he didn’t know what to think. “Unreal . . . I’d . . . ask you how . . .”

“Don’t worry about it. There’s a lab that produces the stuff over there, it’s called Earkootz. I’m told they’re somewhere in Siberia.”

“Well,” Chris said, holding the can, feeling the weight. “I guess there *have* been worse ideas.”

“If you can, wear a mask,” Mark said. “Not critical if you’re unable to. But this will wake up your cocksucker, that’s for damn sure.”

“Well I appreciate it,” Chris said. “Not sure how I’d work it exactly, but you never know. What do I owe you for this?”

Mark waved him off. “On the house. When a client is pissed off, *I’m* pissed off.”

Chris thanked him, took a moment to bend down and say goodbye to Melvin, and Mark let him out.

Monday morning Chris figured he’d drop into the executive offices of Speed-King Messenger Services, where once upon a time he was employed delivering packages on a bicycle around downtown San Francisco.

This was specifically the summer he got out of high school, and then various part-time stints over the next three or four years. You’d be talking the mid-1990’s.

Not that he’d had all that many jobs in his life, but being a bike messenger was the most enjoyable one. You’d show up at 7:30, get your bike squared away, strap on your 2-way-radio, your starched white cotton uniform jacket they wanted you to wear, then a little Speed-King bow tie to finish it off, and you were gone for the day.

No one looking over your shoulder, no two days the same. And all that physical work.

Those days were the tail end of messengers riding the old heavy-duty one speed yellow Schwinns. You essentially stood up the whole time on the pedals, all day long, to get sufficient leverage--the seat was irrelevant.

You weren’t going to set any speed records, and you had your limitations if you encountered a steep hill, but the Schwinns were rugged and you felt safe. Relatively speaking.

Now, the business was different, the messengers (including poor Hope) typically rode their *own* bikes at work, which tended to be your

lightweight multi-gear jobs that could cover a lot of ground quick, and the routes had expanded.

In Chris's day you'd stick to about 5 square miles of the city, from Townsend Street by the SP train depot, to Fisherman's Wharf at the north end of town.

Mainly you'd handle the financial district, in between all that. If you hustled your ass, you might make 10, 12 pickups and deliveries in an hour--whereas today's messengers, with the longer routes, might make 2 or 3.

Chris had prided himself back then on not only pushing hard on the bike, but mastering the one-way streets, the best entrances and exits from the buildings, the short cuts to circumnavigate the bad traffic, even the optimum procedures within the offices, to get the packages in and out of your hands quick.

Any logical person would think he was crazy, but he considered more than once *volunteering* to jump back on a bike and help out at his old company.

That never happened . . . but here he was now, Pier 7, where Speed-King was located . . . and it wasn't exactly an executive office suite, but more like a drafty afterthought of a tiny warehouse sandwiched between a couple of real ones, all of it a half mile north of the Ferry Building.

Pier 7 was like a lot of the other piers still standing, they were once used to unload actual ships that sailed through the Golden Gate, often from halfway around the world--but the game changed when container cargo was developed, and Oakland caught on fast and set up its waterfront with the equipment to handle the containers, and San Francisco didn't.

So now the piers were used by a variety of businesses, coffee roasteries, micro-breweries, SF Bay party boat companies, and of course yoga studios--what a non-surprise to pass one of those today, Chris was thinking, a couple doors before you got to Speed-King.

Which felt more or less the same, new sign and more colorful logo above the heavy sliding door but that was about it, and Chris pulled the handle and the thing rolled open.

“You’re kidding,” said Verne. He owned the company along with his son Errol, and they were hands on, at least back then, in the office all day, and Chris remembered once or twice each of *them* getting on a bike, and doing their best for a few hours when Speed-King was short-handed.

“Glad to see you haven’t caved in,” Chris said, with a nod to Verne’s cigar sticking out of the corner of his mouth.

Verne said, “You know something? The regulations they saddle you with now, they arrest me for smoking that’d be a positive.”

“Don’t be silly. Where’s Errol?”

A brief hesitation. “Me and him, we don’t see eye to eye anymore,” Verne said.

That was too bad, Chris always liked Errol. Now and then someone would call up and complain about a problem with a delivery, and Errol would always side with the messenger, even if it meant ticking off the customer.

“I wasn’t sure it was you at first,” Verne said. “But that walk looked the same, so I’m thinking maybe it *is* him.”

“Jeez, I’ve changed that much then . . . Though it has been a while.”

“How long?”

“20 years, maybe a couple more . . . Hey, where’s the dispatcher though?”

Verne let Chris try to figure it out. You had the corner set up with desks and office equipment, same as always, but there used to be a glass enclosed booth beyond that, and that was the key to the whole operation, that’s where the dispatcher took the phone calls and got on the mic and delegated the pick-ups and deliveries to the Speed-King bike messengers out in the field.

There was one dispatcher in particular, they called him Marz, the guy's real name was Monroe Zim, and they converted it to a nickname--but if there was such a thing as a genius in the dispatch booth, Marz was it. He knew where every messenger was at all times, had their awaiting pickups and deliveries committed to memory, and honestly, the guy must have had a map of the city indelibly imprinted in his brain.

Marz was at his best when it got overwhelmingly busy, he never got flustered, always passed on the orders to the best-positioned guys, never screwed up one thing that Chris was ever aware of.

And his voice on the two-way radio network was a thing of beauty . . . as calm and collected as an astronaut, and as clinical as a fighter pilot, always devoid of any unnecessary chatter.

In fact that was one of the best parts of the day, all the messengers were inter-connected on the radio, and you wore it on your belt in a leather holster and you took pride in being a part of the camaraderie and the dialogue.

Chris observed the office area a little more carefully. There were two women at computers, one of them on a headset, but she spoke rarely and when she did it was soft, you couldn't understand anything . . . and yep, apparently that was extent of the staff.

"My image of this place, the memories," Chris said to Verne, "if it works the way I think, what a let-down."

"You're overreacting," Verne said, "no good to be steeped in sentimentality. I miss the old days too, but what good does it do?"

"So those two gals, they're taking all the orders and dispatching 'em out? Just like that, with their fingers? Where's the good-old fashioned *pressure*?"

"That's pretty much it. It's all text messages to the kids on the bikes. Even the orders, 90 percent of them come in online now."

“Jesus. I know you tell me not to get excited, but that’s downright sacreligious.”

“I think you’re putting me on,” Verne said.

“Yeah I guess I am. I’m sure the streamlining is for the best--but what can I say, it makes you appreciate the way things once were.”

“You’re preaching to the converted. I’m thinking *that*, every time I go out the door.”

“You just contradicted yourself. You said it’s a waste of time glorifying the old days.”

“Not a waste of time. *Counterproductive*, is what I said. There’s a difference.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Chris said.

“More topical,” Verne said, “what are you doing here? Or were you going to get to that?”

“I was . . . Well I live in LA now--and that part’s not bad at all--but I had a few things to deal with here, and I’m staying with a gal in Presidio Heights, and she dropped me this morning at Van Ness and Bay, and I figured what the hay, I have an appointment later south of Market but no real rush, so I’d take a stroll down the Embarcadero, since it’s been a while.”

“You’re setting a record for explaining yourself,” Verne said. “How about you were the in the area and wondered if I was still alive?”

“That too. In fact I was thinking, Speed-King must be about the senior company these days, eh?”

“There’s a few still. US Messenger, Dial, Arrow, Big Top--they changed their name to Reliable, but it’s the same outfit.”

“Gee. So four or five then. You’d think there’d be more turned over actually.”

“Yeah, well. I know most of these guys pretty well. We’re friendly rivals. My sense is, they dislike the job as much as I do, but what else are they gonna do?”

“You pretend you don’t like it. They’ll have to carry you out of here.”

“Um.”

Chris said, “How ‘bout Arrow, for instance? I remember those guys on the streets, blue shirts, navy pants. How’s *that* company holding up?”

“Fine. As far as I know. They got 25, 30 bikes out there, we got 15-20 these days. They’ve always been bigger than us.”

“Decent place to work then I guess.”

“Why? You thinking of coming back? . . . Except Christ, you heard about the girl right?”

“What girl is that?”

“The messenger. Didn’t make it home the other night.”

“Oh my God, yeah . . . I *did* hear about that. You’re saying she worked for Arrow?”

“Oh yeah. One of their top producers in fact.”

“Ho-ly Toledo . . . what the heck you think happened? Any idea?”

“No *friccken* idea, and God I wish I did, I’d track down that scum in a heartbeat.”

“I’m sure I’d feel like that too,” Chris said, “especially if I was close to the business . . . SFPD’s good though, they’ll figure it out.”

“That’s your *opinion* . . . Mine? They’re incompetent, I’ve seen it too many times. One hand doesn’t know whose ass the other just wiped. Pardon my language.”

“You think . . . it could have been . . . someone she worked with? Some issue? . . . Or a robbery gone bad? Jeez I’m just grasping.”

“Anything’s possible,” Verne said. “I told you the owners of the other outfits are buddies of mine. At least sort of. There’s been a few trade shows

over the years, industry conventions, the most recent one was a couple years ago in Lansing, Michigan. Decent town actually, you ever been?"

"Not on my list, to be honest."

"Me neither, I thought. But I bit the bullet and went. Easier than flying to Europe or somewhere else I don't want to be . . . College town actually."

"Oh yeah, Michigan State . . . I thought that was East Lansing though?"

"Same difference, a few minutes apart. Anyhow, all these bozos show up, the friendly rival companies I mentioned--Dial, Arrow, US Messenger--"

"You don't have go through it again," Chris said.

"The point I'm making," Verne said. "The Arrow guy's kind of an ass. Name of Steven Mays. You get to know people better, an event like that, and I don't care for the guy much . . . what do you want me to tell you."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Can't pinpoint it. Guy's on his 4th wife I believe. Seemed jumpy, couldn't enjoy anything. Hard to see working for him for too long."

"You're saying, it could be a toxic atmosphere over there?"

"No idea, don't put words in my mouth . . . Who would know a little more, is Errol. He did some consulting work for them, after he and I had our falling out here . . . I couldn't honestly tell you what his number is, but if you're interested, one of the gals can take care of you." Nodding at the two women across the room on the computers.

Chris said, "No, no, that's fine. What I'm *more* wondering--and sorry to be overstepping my bounds--but Jeez, Verne, this is father and son stuff, now. Life's too short."

"Maybe someday," Verne said. "But probably not. We're two stubborn son-of-a-bitches. This way, my blood pressure meds, I can keep 'em on the low dose."

Chris looked at his watch, decided that's enough, don't wear out your welcome, and Verne told him not to be such a stranger, and Chris considered blowing off the rest of the day, and just be a tourist--except the whole reason he was here was this asshole tenant, so he turned left on the Embarcadero and headed south of Market.

Chapter 7

Dixon Herbel worked at *Sonic Boomers*, which Chris had looked up overnight and learned a little more about.

Chris hadn't bothered with any background check when Dixon rented the apartment last fall, and he didn't even ask the name of the guy's company.

Dixon had patiently explained the inventive spin his start-up put on car leasing, and that was good enough for Chris.

Luckily last night there weren't too many companies like that, 3 that Chris could find that were based in the city, and he went through them one by one and Sonic Boomers made it easy for you, a comprehensive staff directory link with everyone's smiling picture included.

They listed Dixon as **Mid-Field Manager, Corporate Planning**.

Whatever the heck that meant. Almost like they were trying to get cutesy with some soccer terminology.

The overall concept was interesting, and Chris figured it was probably going to work. What they did, they picked up fleets of Chevys, a few years old but still in good shape, and rented them to people by the week, month, or year.

So kind of like car leasing, but cheaper, no down payment, no complications. They started in California but had already expanded to several major cities.

Sonic Boomers occupied the top two floors of an industrial building on Howard Street between 4th and 5th.

And this area, the whole south of Market Street corridor, had changed dramatically since Chris was a bike messenger.

You had startups within blocks of each other that were household names: Twitter, Uber, Airbnb, Dropbox, Lyft, Pinterest. Craigslist not far away. The list went on and on.

Most of them occupied former warehouses and factory-type buildings similar to what Sonic Boomers was in. People didn't realize it, even a lot of natives, but the main industry in San Francisco for decades--next to tourism--was printing . . . all gone now of course, but you were smack dab in the center of it.

Even in the 90's, when Chris was on the bike, one of the cores of the messenger business was still the back and forth stuff between architects, photo labs, blueprint places and printers.

The startups in San Francisco, of course, were trying to mimic the Silicon Valley heavyweights in terms of atmosphere--meaning Google, Facebook, and Apple--all located an hour south, and those had more land to work with and often called themselves *campuses*.

So the SF companies didn't have the luxury of trees and parking and outdoor fitness facilities, but inside they were very similar, and the first priority was to be employee and customer friendly, rolled into one.

Meaning the guy inside the front door couldn't have been nicer now, when he told Chris he wasn't allowed in without a badge.

And this was becoming a pain in the ass already, and he didn't even know if Dixon was here.

So sometimes you're polite and you wait, and things may work out--and Chris thanked the guy and told him he just arrived from Kansas City and was here for a meeting with Dixon Herbel in Corporate.

And that would have been a heck of stretch, since Chris was wearing baggy cargo shorts with big pockets, and a Sacramento Kings t-shirt at the moment--but most of the Millennial doofuses working here looked like they

were dressed in their pajamas, at best--maybe that was stretching it, but not much, the point being Chris was convinced they don't look at you funny anymore no matter how you're dressed for work.

"Is he expecting you?" the guy said, looking at a screen.

Chris said that he was, absolutely, but to not bother him yet, he's a little early, and he'd prefer to give it a few minutes and not be rude.

So the opposite of what he was trying to do a second ago--which was barge right in--but the guy didn't have a problem with it, and Chris took a seat in the lobby . . . and wouldn't you know a couple minutes later these three women come in, talking loud, they'd just gotten out of a cab apparently and had some luggage, and they were here to see someone as well . . . and when the nice front desk guy helped them with the luggage and disappeared for a second, securing it into a back area, Chris walked in.

You still had no idea if Dixson was actually here, since Chris figured on any given day he might work from home, and out in the field too, after seeing his fancy job description.

But you may as well have a look around . . . and dang, the aromas of coffee and sweet stuff . . . and Jeez, mixed with garlic now too . . . so Chris couldn't help following his nose . . . and on the other side of a brick wall and down a long corridor was the employee cafeteria.

And no exaggeration, this place had the feel of a 5 star restaurant.

Chris checked the menu board, and they had these amazing looking specials of the day, everything described as organic and farm to table, and below it all was a photo and bio of the chef. Holy Smokes, they got an actual gourmet chef on the payroll.

Chris figured it would be fun to sample a bunch of things, except you'd probably go broke in the process, even at the discounted employee prices--except then he noticed there *were* no prices . . . and no one was paying for anything or signing for it or showing their badge for it, *none* of that . . . and God *damn*.

So he went with a chicken dish, a pork dish, and the fish of the day, which happened to be lobster flown in from Maine--and you could feel guilty about that if you let yourself--but Chris didn't, and when he busied his tray 45 minutes later the only thing required now would be a good cigar, since Verne, puffing away on his, was stuck in his head.

Chris was thinking: *You know what, that might be good enough. What a meal. Forget this guy for today.*

But then he spotted him, Dixson and another badge-wearing employee, female, sitting down with a couple cups of coffee.

And that looked pretty good too actually, so Chris went back through the line and went with the Archer Farms Ethiopian Light Roast, which had a nice ring to it . . . and for good measure a slice of the sour cream apple pie, which the server said comes highly recommended, especially if he allows her to top it off a scoop of--Jesus--home made french vanilla ice cream.

So Chris couldn't argue with that, and he took the coffee and pie, grabbed a fork, and sat down with Dixson.

"I am not . . . believing this," Dixson said.

"What?" Chris said, inserting a large chunk of pie into his waiting mouth. "I was in the neighborhood."

"Mona, will you excuse us?" Dixson said to the co-worker, and they looked at each other a certain way. It had the feel of a relationship, and just a hunch, but this wasn't the same female milling around Dixson's apartment yesterday when Chris rang the bell.

Of course you couldn't hold *that* against the guy, since Chris acknowledged *he* did a fair share of damage in the two-timing department when he lived there as well.

"I'm going to call security on you in a second," Dixson said.

"Do me a favor and let me finish this first," Chris said. "No idea that the perks were this incredible."

"You interrupted me," Dixson said.

“I got ya . . . you’ll be throwing me out in a second, but first you want to teach me a lesson.”

“That too. But I want to keep you around for minute, so I can try to understand how someone can have a death wish, and not be worrying about the consequences.’

“Dang . . . I know you’re exaggerating, you’re going for the dramatic effect . . . Still, those are fighting words. It’s a good thing I’m a pacifist.”

“I see. Meaning what now? Otherwise *I’d* have to watch out? You’d be kicking my ass?” The guy applying an ugly sneer to the delivery.

“No, the opposite. If I weren’t a pacifist I’d be getting *my* ass kicked.”

“Okay, good to hear we’ve got that straight.”

“What about the rent?” Chris said. “Not sure if this is the definition of *business booming*, but something tells me the joint isn’t teetering on bankruptcy either.”

“You would have gotten it, if you’d addressed the issues I’ve outlined multiple times . . . But keep your shirt on. Once the lawsuit resolves itself, there will no doubt be an arrangement.”

Chris said, “You remind me of my dad. I miss him pretty bad. Not you personally, but the expression *keep your shirt on*. He loved that one, could apply it almost at will . . . but he especially loved using it on entitled scumbag momma’s boys.”

“Fuck YOU there, friend. I’ll give you about 5 seconds to be on your way.”

The timing actually worked out well, since Chris had just finished that last morsel of the delectable home-made pie-ice cream concoction, and all that was required was one final sip of the special Ethiopian blend to wash it down . . . and he took care of that and stood up and headed back toward the main lobby.

And of course a couple steps in, the guy tells him calmly and quietly that he better watch his back.

When he got out of there and was on Howard Street again, Chris was surprised it was after 2:30 already, since the lunch service seemed to be going strong in the employee cafeteria, no sign of closing anything down. But apparently that's the way it worked, you could leave your desk (if they still used those) and stop in for a gourmet bite to eat, all day long.

Definitely a different world. Chris remembered when he was on the bike, you got a specific half hour for lunch and that was it, and he loved this deli at the foot of Montgomery called the *New Street* . . . and *wherever* Chris was in the city when Marz the dispatcher gave him lunch, it didn't matter, he sprinted to the New Street because nothing else quite worked as well.

He figured it would be good to make *Dixson* sprint somehow, force him to, but this was becoming increasingly complicated. Not to mention unpleasant.

Hmm. What now.

There was a text from Gloria 'Are you up for a late lunch?', and ah man, this was a wonderful woman, and any other time probably, but Chris had to tell her no thank you, and don't think about including him in your dinner plans either, but he'd hopefully see her later tonight.

So at this point, plenty of time to kill, you might as well try a different route, and he turned up 5th Street, which on the other side of Market changed its name to Powell, kind of ground zero for the herds of tourists who were seemingly running loose all over the city any time of year.

Powell was the turnaround for the cable car, and they were in the middle of one of them when Chris got there.

They still used the old round platform and the conductors still leaned on the car and pushed it around by hand, and Chris supposed there was something to be said for the old techniques still being carried out . . . though obviously it was an intentional show for the tourists . . . and Holy Toledo, *7 bucks now one way to Ghirardelli Square?*

He stayed on Powell, following the tracks up the hill, and by the time he got to Washington Street, the middle of Chinatown, he'd had about enough . . . so he went another block to Jackson, thinking get on the 3 and transfer to the 22 . . . only the 3 doesn't run along Jackson down here, he was brain dead right now, and he settled on Union, 5 more blocks, and that worked, the 41, but he dozed off and missed his transfer at Fillmore, so in the end he still had to hoof it about 7 more blocks down to the Broderick apartment.

The little doze off was a mistake, because it wasn't enough, and now he was *really* sleepy.

Very unfortunate to not live here, currently, because dang, then you could go up and take the nap you badly needed. Just like a million times before.

And it must have triggered a Pavlov's Response or something, walking up the block toward the front of the building, because the old familiar territory instincts were kicking in.

Chris did still have that main key, the outside door, and he thought maybe you could just go inside and lay down in the hall for any hour or so . . . so he went in.

Except of course there *was* no hall, you had a couple apartments downstairs, studios, and the one more up, *his*, connected by the steep flight of stairs, and really no where, on either level, to stretch out--and what the heck was he thinking, this was ridiculous.

Then he thought of one other thing, the garage.

He didn't have a garage door key anymore but there was a second way in there, an extra door downstairs, and the garage handled three cars, all in a row, which had been a constant pain in the neck for Chris, because you had to keep copies of each other's keys and juggle the cars around plenty.

Right now there was only one car in there though, a gray Ford Explorer, looked pretty nice actually . . . and Chris tried the driver's door, and what do you know.

So yeah, that could work, and there was even a way to recline the seat with the pushbuttons on the floor, without having to start the engine, and Chris assumed this was standard these days but still pleasantly light years ahead of what his old Camry offered.

So he napped. Solid. No idea whose vehicle this was, it could certainly have been Dixson's for all he knew.

And a couple hours went by, Chris clearly worn out, not used to all this walking--or mid-day eating either--despite what he thought was a decent routine in MB, and which he'd tried to keep up in Arizona too.

He had some strange dreams, one that was a bit alarming and startled him awake for a few minutes--he was fly fishing in Montana with a group of Native American Indians, and it was the old-days, the old West, they were on horseback with bows and arrows and the only sign of modern civilization was his LL Bean flyfishing gear.

The river he was fishing was in a canyon, and suddenly a US Cavalry division comes thundering along on a high ridge, and starts peeling off rifle shots, and Chris gets hit . . . and he thinks he dies, except he wakes up in a teepee being fed a strange tea and being nursed back to health . . . and when he's strong enough to walk again the Chief tells him he'll be marrying his daughter, who is a deaf mute.

That was just one example. Weird stuff, almost like the aftermath of a hallucinogenic drug experience . . . Not that he'd ever had one of those, but that's how he pictured it.

There was a grinding and then a thumping noise, the outer door opening and creaking slightly, and then closing, and someone hesitating . . . and Chris was half way back to sleep at this point, right at that sweet spot where you're fading beautifully--and now he bolted up.

And Jeeminy Christmas, it was 6:20, and could this be the a-hole? Chris knew the other tenants pretty well, their routines, and he doubted there'd been any turnover and figured the same ones were still here.

You had Carol, a big advertising executive, and she tended to spend Monday through Thursday in New York, not as much in the summer but the rest of the year.

Then you had Simon, Chris never was quite sure what *that* guy did, he was mysterious, but whatever it was, he started work late, like around noon, and got home late, like around midnight.

So hmm . . .

And the hesitation inside the door . . . that would be normal, since that's where the mailboxes were, and Chris always hesitated there himself, retrieving the mail and then thumbing through it for a minute before he went upstairs.

Which the guy must have just finished, because now you *did* hear someone going up the stairs . . . and that was a decent sign as well, since there was only the one apartment up there.

The monkey wrench of course could be, what if this was not the guy, but his girlfriend? Or one of them . . . If you had to put money on it though, Dixson wasn't going to *have* a live-in girlfriend--even one he'd been cheating on at work.

He'd rather play the field, was Chris's impression--plus the guy was too rigid. Unlikely he'd stand for someone actually moving in. Violating his space.

At any rate . . . only one way to find out, and Chris opened the door from the garage into the alcove . . . and yep, he'd called it right, it was the guy, and he was halfway up the staircase.

So Chris started up the stairs as well, and the guy didn't hear him for a second, until he got to the top, and then he turned back to see who this might be.

Chris was five steps away.

"Well what a surprise," Dixon said, and you could tell he really was surprised, and trying to mask it.

"I was in the neighborhood," Chris said, climbing another step.

Dixon said, "I was right then. You *do* have a death wish."

Dixon had a bag slung over his shoulder and he pulled it off and dropped it, and stood at the top of the stairs, pretty formidable arms slightly spread like a gorilla, getting ready to attack as Chris approached, two steps away now.

"Hi," Chris said, and he shot off the mace in the guy's face.

It only then occurred to him that he'd neglected to wear a mask, ignoring Mark's suggestion like a dodo bird, and he could feel the stuff right away, his eyes starting to tear, his throat having some trouble.

But nothing like what the *guy* was going through.

Dixon was down, on the little landing outside the apartment, and Chris was worried for a minute, the way he was reacting like a rag doll on steroids, that he might go flying down the stairs . . . and Chris tried to stand there and more or less block that possibility.

Meanwhile he kept macing the guy. Stopping, starting, stopping. Saying something in between, typically, "You doing okay?". And then leveling him with another healthy dose.

Pretty soon, the guy was curled like a ball, the fetal position, Chris said, "How about some fresh air, would that help?"

Chris was doing some coughing himself and figured *he* could use that as much as the guy, and Dixon moaned, very high pitched, kind of a baby pig squeal, that yeah he needs some.

“I need the keys then,” Chris said, “to the roof. We’ll both feel better up there.”

The guy tried to get them out of his front pocket but was having trouble getting his hand in there, so Chris walked around him, past his apartment door into a little corner alcove that wasn’t obvious, and that was the door to the roof and he tried it and it opened . . . and Chris’s first thought was an odd one, considering--that Jeez, they need better security around here.

“Let’s go, I’ll help you,” Chris said to Dixson. “I made my point.”

And he did, he helped the guy up, and there was the staircase to the roof, and dang, Dixson’s face was awful red, brighter than he’d almost ever seen anyone’s--and you supposed that was better than the alternative, which would be *no color*, and where you’d inadvertently killed the guy.

Chris was right, he felt a lot better up there, so you’d assume Dixson did too . . . it was dark already of course, days were still on the short side, and the fog had rolled in and when you took a deep breath it was cool and moist.

Dixson made it up there okay, though with Chris bracing him under the arms, but he sat back down right away, or more like kneeled, though Chris wasn’t sure *what* you’d call his position.

One thing, up here, you did admittedly have a view of the bridge, meaning the Golden Gate. It was a *slice* of a view, through the separation in a couple buildings to the northwest, but it was still a treat, one a lot of folks would kill for.

Chris didn’t get the view of the bridge out of the back windows of his apartment, you had to come up on the roof for it, and frankly he didn’t come up here much.

For one thing, there was a big sign when you opened the door, from the management company, warning you not to go up there except in case of a fire emergency. Chris supposed the reasons were a) the surface was

delicate, the tarpaper with the coated seams, the flat roof underneath, and Chris knew from his own limited experience as a property owner that someone walking up here with sharp heels for example, or plopping down on a chair with pointy legs--that alone could cause a leak.

So yeah, they were right, the roof of 3904 Broderick was not for recreational use, and that included the barbeques and picnics that you did see the Millenials all through the neighborhood engaging in on similar building rooftops, and that always made Chris cringe.

The other thing of course, the *b* reason the landlord didn't want you up here, was there was no rail--if you were drunk, or stupid, or otherwise stumbling around in the dark you could step right off.

Chris took a look at Dixson in his weird squat, both hands on his face, kind of pathetic actually considering what a tough guy he seemed to be up to this point.

Chris reached down and grabbed him by the feet, and now Dixson was fully engaged, trying his damndest to stop this . . . but Chris had moved in quick, by surprise, and had the momentum.

As they got close to the edge Chris's problem was, how do you swing him around . . . but fortunately the resistance Dixson was putting up, straining to his right, worked in Chris's favor, and he let it happen, Dixson without realizing it achieving a nice half turn and presenting Chris with a decent angle . . .

Chris said, "I just want to make sure we're good. Give me your keys, so I can make those repairs you seem to require."

Dixson tried his darndest again to get his hand in his front pocket, but he was just a bit too incapacitated--Chris thinking separately, man, the guy Mark wasn't kidding about the effectiveness of this stuff--so Chris told him that's okay and reached in there himself and pulled them out and stuck them in his own pocket.

Chris said, "But anyhow, what I was getting to--are we *good*?"

Dixson shouted they were, though it came out more like an overly-excited parakeet trying to chirp, that was the extent of it--and Chris grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked hard, and dangled half of him off the side of the roof.

“Gonna see you again?” Chris said.

Dixson moaned that he wouldn't.

“See now, you *say* that,” Chris said. “But then you leave traces of yourself, which I'll have to address. Such as the funny business with the lawsuit . . . not to mention the police. Those were jokes, right?”

Dixson grunted that they were. Chris said, “I don't believe you, but that's fine. I'll just have to throw you off a roof at a later date.”

Dixson was trying to say something, and it sounded like *Please*.

Chris figured okay fine, this was probably about enough. He had Dixson around the waist at the moment, his arms looked like a rope might be doing it, to keep the guy suspended but also keep him from toppling off.

Chris adjusted his grip and kneeled on the guy's legs for weight, and then grabbed him by the ankles and then by the feet, that was easier--you would think--but he couldn't get any leverage, the guy's upper body was too dang far over the edge.

And Chris started to panic a bit, the guy trying to help out but not much strength to him currently, and Chris decided the easiest way was grab one foot, with both hands, and bear down and really pull . . . and there you go, that started to work . . . except then HOLY SHIT . . . the guy's shoe came off in Chris's hand.

And Chris grabbed at his calf, and there was a brief instant where he thought he had it . . . and then he didn't.

And Dixson disappeared over the edge.

Chris let a beat go by, and then approached, and looked down.

Miraculously, the maneuvering at the end had worked Dixon a couple feet closer to the fire escape landing for the apartment below, meaning Chris's . . . so that his flight path ran him into it.

Not smoothly. What it did, it face-planted him squarely into the right-most railing of the landing, and when Chris peeked over the edge, it could have gone either way.

But thankfully, Dixon toppled to the left, and onto the landing. If he'd toppled to the right, he would have met the sidewalk.

These things truly being a game of inches sometimes.

Dixon got to his feet however, and this was a big relief, because for a moment Chris wondered if the guy might have broken his *neck* . . . and wouldn't that be ironic, you screw up and lose your grip on him, he goes over, fortunately lands short, but then breaks *that* in the process.

Quite a roller coaster. In any case the guy was moving faster now than he had in several minutes, it had to be an adrenaline thing, and he took one glance up at Chris and hightailed it down the steel ladder of the fire escape, making that little jump at the end, the last six feet or so . . . and the son of a gun hit the ground and was flying up the street, toward Marina Boulevard . . . the guy looking back and up at the roof one more time, like he was truly spooked, that Chris was going to be chasing after him, which was ridiculous of course.

And you never knew if you'd *truly* made your point . . . since you couldn't get inside someone's brain . . . but Chris had a good feeling about this one.

Hmm. He almost thought, Jeez, the car's sitting there in the garage--if that's his, why not drive it over to Gloria's? Since it wasn't as though the guy was going to be attempting to retrieve it in the near future. For sure not tonight.

That seemed a little extreme, *taking* the thing, but Chris went back down to the garage and tried the key off of Dixon's ring--and wouldn't you

know, it fired right up, and Chris thought how bad could it be if I take it for a spin?

There was an area at the top of Pine Street, the last block before you hit Presidio Avenue, and that was three lanes one-way, a major connector between the outer residential neighborhoods and downtown, and there were strict signs: **No Parking Tow-Away M-F 7-9 4-6**, and what was tomorrow, Tuesday?

So that should work, and Chris parked it there, and Gloria's house was a little ways, but not bad, about eight blocks, no real problem--and Jeez, that was kind of a busy day, some definite fireworks to it.

Chapter 8

“There you are,” Gloria said.

She was on the couch, looking cozy, her feet underneath her and her hair up and wearing this terry cloth robe that looked as plush as a polar bear--and that’s how you did it in Presidio Heights, if you were going to live in a house currently valued over 5 Mill, you might as well fill in the blanks with your elite variety of amenities as well.

She started to get up and Chris insisted no, but you weren’t going to win these kind of battles with Gloria, and so Chris sat down, one of those cracked leather club chairs that had probably been around for a hundred years and kept getting more comfortable with age.

She came back a few minutes later with a tall skinny ceramic mug, colorful Hawaiian hula dancers sprinkled all over it, and she handed him a frothy white drink, and he wasn’t going to fight this . . . and *dang*, that was good, a little bit coconut, a little bit pineapple, but not exactly a pina colada. Maybe a dash of rum entering the mix now too.

“Wow,” Chris said.

“Maui,” Gloria said. “My ex and I had a tradition, same spot every spring, 5 days. I half-bribed the proprietor to surrender the recipe for this one.”

“What I’m seeing,” Chris said, “you’re smiling about it, that far-off look people get when they’re reminiscing about old times.”

“Well you caught me.”

“So . . . why not get back together? What would be such a huge problem with that?”

“Chris, are you kidding me, that would never work.”

“You know something? I’ve gotten that response more than once . . . I’m drawing a blank, when the last one was, the circumstance . . . but same deal, someone dismissing a logical suggestion as *that would never work*. But no one ever *expands* on it.”

Gloria was smiling, not offended, but not about to do what Chris suggested and explain herself either. She said, “I like you. Better than I did in high school. You’re more direct.”

“I like you too,” Chris said. “You’re in-direct. To an extent.”

“Really?”

“Sort of, but that just sounded good. I tend to block out high school, to be honest, though I’m doing it less since the reunion.”

“Well, the 30th is around the corner,” she said, and they sat there for a while, Chris staring into space and Gloria reading a Vogue Magazine, until Chris said, “Home Depot still open? That you know of?”

“What?”

Chris checked his phone. There were no Home Depots in the city back in the day, and when they did pop up in recent years Chris didn’t have any use for them, so he wasn’t even sure where one was.

Looked like you had one in Westlake Village, and two in Daly City.

“That’s no good,” he said. “Forget it. No big deal.”

“Not true, otherwise you wouldn’t have asked,” Gloria said. “What about the one in San Rafael?”

“Well, let’s see. Yeah, they’re open ‘till 10.”

“So that’s what we’ll do,” she said, getting up, and getting right to it, picking up her purse.

“You sure?”

“You keep saying that, I’m going to get mad.” Wiggling her index finger at him.

“Okay then . . . thanks. But the robe?”

“What’s wrong with it? *You’re* going in.”

Chris supposed that made sense, unless she got there and decided she needed a certain light bulb or something, and they set off--down to Arguello, into the Presidio, the wind-around with the views of the ocean in the daytime, but still now the great view of the sparkling lights on the other side of the bay, in Sausalito.

And halfway across, the bridge, looking back at the city, that looked pretty sweet right now too, the lights flat and then jagged and higher as you got closer to downtown. Still one of the great cities, and you’d like to think the framework was intact, despite the components changing.

There was a Costco across the way in an adjacent shopping center when they got to Home Depot, and Chris was feeling that Hawaiian effort now, regretting not taking Gloria up on it when she offered to cook him something.

The engine was off and Gloria reclined her headrest and told Chris to enjoy himself in there--and what a nice thing to say, who says *that* when you’re headed into Home Depot?--and Gloria had opened her magazine back up and was immersed in it, and you hated to bother her.

So Chris snuck the other way when she wasn’t looking, meaning across to Costco, and he wolfed down two of the \$1.50 polish dogs with sauerkraut, still the best deal on the planet, and he hustled back to Home Depot with some ammunition in the tank.

Except he got inside and he started thinking, is this necessary?

The plan was to pick up a new lock--not even that complicated, just a new cylinder--and you change the doofus’s on the Broderick apartment door, to insure he’s not coming back.

But that was the thing--Chris was quite convinced the guy *wasn’t* coming back. So did you need to waste time and energy on this?

So he walked out of there, and then unfortunately, as he started getting in the car, he changed his mind again, and told Gloria sorry but he forgot something.

The new thought being, what if the guy *did* have a girlfriend, and he gave her a set of keys, and even if she only came over occasionally it admittedly would be awkward if he just happened to be there one of those times, replacing *her* guy.

So he figured you better add a couple screwdrivers to the mix, a little flashlight as well, and a hammer for good measure since you never know, mechanical shit can need persuasion sometimes.

And that was it, and on the way back to the city he said to Gloria, “I hate to do this, detour you, but can you let me off at my old apartment?”

“Sure. You’re dropping in on your tenant?”

“More or less. Then I’ll see you at home . . . Jeez, you got me calling it home.”

“I’ll wait for you,” she said. “And don’t blurt out, *are you sure.*”

Chris said in that case he’d try to get make it quick. The first part went okay, which was opening the door with the normal key that Dixson had provided--or tried to provide, given his circumstance, Chris having to do the honors up there himself.

And if *that* hadn’t worked you’d be kind of screwed here, and maybe that wouldn’t be the worst thing, you just get back in the car.

But now he had the lock loose in the framework, and was wedging the old cylinder out . . . and Chris started to get that funky feeling he sometimes did when he was landlording, trying to run around himself and fix stuff to save money on repairmen, and then he’d inevitably get in trouble, and naturally it would happen right at the end of the day, which was closing time for the hardware stores and off-hours for the actual repairmen too.

And that’s the way this was going, despite having a few tools and a flashlight, Chris felt like he was getting into more trouble by the minute,

and man, this wasn't a brand new building by any stretch, maybe there was something *different* here with this god dang door that you needed to know about.

He gave it a good 15 minutes, dug himself a nice hole, couldn't figure out how to align the new cylinder and get it to stay, he even tried to google a quick YouTube video on the subject--but there seemed to be too much space in there.

Screw it.

The idea was to evict the idiot--the old fashioned way--and you accomplished that, and your tenant acknowledged it--so to speak--and turned over keys . . . but then you had to get fancy . . . and now you're taking off for the night and leaving the joint wide-open?

"How'd it go?" Gloria said. "Good idea you had there actually, holding onto the apartment and finding a nice tenant to maintain it for you."

"Yeah, well, not quite all it's cracked up to be," Chris said, "but what can you do?"

Gloria started the engine and Chris said, "Let's go dancing."

"Huh?"

"Columbus Avenue, they've got this Latin place I read about . . . in your Sunday paper in fact . . . been there for a while, never paid attention to it.

"Well Gee Whiz," she said. "My first thought, I didn't know you had it in you. Secondly though, I'd have to go home and change."

"Forget that," Chris said, "you're dressed fine, and you know what, life's too short."

So without fighting him on it, Gloria swung down the couple blocks to Marina Boulevard, hung the right past Fort Mason, then Bay to Columbus.

"You remember Tower?" Chris said. "Did I ask you that before?" Meaning Tower Records, which used to be standing right there on the

corner, the ultimate music store back in the day, enjoying near legendary status in the Bay Area.

“Not really,” Gloria said.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me.”

“I told you, I grew up in West Portal. We had our neighborhood record store. I didn’t get over this way much.”

“There were a lot of them eventually,” Chris said. “Towers all the country, including in Europe. But this was ground zero. Nothing matched the scene here on a Saturday night.”

“Well I’m glad you have those memories then.” And most people, at least in Chris’s circle, making a comment like that would have some sarcasm or bite behind it. Including Chris himself, he’d have an edge to it as well. But not Gloria.

“What I appreciate about you,” he said, “you’re not cagey. Has to be plenty eating at you too, just like the rest of us, but I’m always amazed, you never lower the boom on anyone.”

“You don’t know me,” she said, a polite smile, but Holy Smokes, for the first time, maybe ever, Chris *did* detect a bit of an edge to her, like he’d said something wrong.

Luckily they were just about there, so it wasn’t a moment you were going to have to dwell on, and parking was a breeze on a Monday night, a half block from the place, called *Wanda’s Buen Sonido*.

“This is a Puerto Rican place,” Chris explained as they were walking up to it. “Something else your article pointed out, when the Latin pro athletes are in the Bay Area, this is one of their go-to places for nightlife.”

“Well that would be your baseball players,” Gloria said. “I’m trying to think, can you come up with many Hispanic players in the other major sports? Football, basketball or hockey?”

“Dang, you’re right,” Chris said, sorry he’d brought it up, since baseball players out on the town was not a favorite topic these days. “Football though, maybe a couple of place-kickers.”

“Regardless,” she said, “it’s not baseball season yet, so we should have the dance floor to ourselves.” A little twinkle in the eye, and thankfully whatever nerve Chris may have hit a minute ago had passed.

Gloria wasn’t a great dancer, at least by technical standards, but man she had energy, and it was a lot fun. There was a 3-piece house band alternating with a DJ, and Chris figured the band likely expanded on the weekends, maybe adding some horns to the mix, but it didn’t matter tonight.

“Kind of what the doctor ordered,” Chris said after a while.

“I’m *with* you,” she said. “Who would have thunk, when I can’t even understand one word of any of the lyrics.”

“Wait. You didn’t take Spanish at Lowell? Miss Nicora? She was great.”

“Afraid not. French. And plenty of good that did me.”

“Miss Nicora wasn’t a great Spanish *teacher*, I don’t mean that. In fact she was probably a terrible one, she spoke English most of the time. But to a 16-year-old sitting there, man what a sight she was up at the blackboard.”

“Not too late perhaps,” Gloria said, playfully. “You can make a few inquiries.”

Chris shook his head. “I tried that once. Not intentionally, but by accident I ran into Miss Lane about 10 years ago at the motor vehicle office on Fell Street.”

“Now yes, *she* was something else, I do remember *her*.”

“Freshman math, right?”

“I had her for health.”

“Whatever. Maybe it was the unpleasant situation, having to line up and register a vehicle, where they make you snake around different directions before you finally get to the window. It wasn’t that she didn’t still have a stunning presence.”

“But she didn’t remember you . . . how did I guess?”

“Jeez, you’re exactly right. That put a knot in my whole week, skewed my obviously inflated image of her back then.”

“Not her fault. Think of how many students they have--say you have 5 classes a semester, 25 kids in a class, and you’re there 12 years.”

“What,” he said, “you’re making me calculate that out?”

Chris was being playful now as well, and it was refreshing to be silly for a change, every move he’d been making lately feeling like he was climbing part of Mount Everest.

Gloria finally said 1 more, and that’s going to have to do it. Chris wasn’t going to argue with her. Latin dancing was physical, even if you don’t know what you were doing . . . and dang, maybe they switched up the lighting or something . . . *but man she was perspiring.*

“You doing okay there?” Chris said, putting the back of his hand on her forehead, and yeah, you weren’t kidding, it was like a fountain.

And then the robe, there’d been that part, her dancing up a storm in the same get-up she been lounging around the house in, the heavy duty terry cloth thing and a pair of minimal sandals like they might hand you coming out of a facial treatment spa.

Taking a good feel of the robe was alarming now, it was like a drenched towel that weighed about 20 pounds.

“We better call it a night,” Chris said, “forget the one more dance.”

“Aww,” she said, not happy about that, but Chris was getting nervous now and he guided her out the door into the fresh air, and she didn’t look great out here, pretty darn pale, a little wobbly on her feet to go with it.

“You’re not gonna . . . have something weird happen on me, are you now?” he said.

She said no, but her tone was thin, unconvincing, and frankly a bit alarming--and on top of that Chris had read a report, also in Gloria’s Sunday paper, of a race in Albuquerque, an annual February event, but this one was unseasonably hot and five people at the finish line had to be airlifted to hospitals.

“Were you drinking enough water in there?” he said. But she didn’t answer clearly, and this was one hell of a red flag all of a sudden, and Chris scooped her up, basket style, and hustled to the car, and he got her keys and started driving like a madman up Columbus to Broadway, where they had to wait for a stop light.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“SF General. Unless we can come up with a closer ER. You’re freaking me out here.”

“All’s I need,” she said, still more dreamily than you were comfortable with, but sounding a little better. “Some soup. Let’s go to Chinatown.”

Chris took a deep breath. Wow. You go out for some dancing is all, harmless enough, leave it all behind . . . but not quite.

No point correcting her that they didn’t need to *go to* Chinatown, since they were *in* Chinatown, and he remembered a noodle place on Sacramento that was open late, maybe even 24 hours, and the waiter looked at Gloria a little funny in the outfit for a second--but you figure they were used to substantially odder get-ups than that, especially on the late side--this being San Francisco after all.

They got served quickly and halfway into her *geng*--which Chris realized he should have gotten as well, more robust than what he ordered--Gloria seemed entirely back to normal.

“Woof,” Chris said. “I’m not gonna say *that was close*, but you get the idea.”

“Oh nonsense,” she said. “This has been just terrific tonight.”

“I will admit,” he said, “the actual dancing part, that blew the high school reunion business away.”

“You’re right,” she said, thinking about it, scrunching up her face a bit . . . and of course she’d been the head of the reunion committee.

Chris said, “Okay now don’t go overboard here. I mean we got four years to improve the quality of the music--rather *you* have four years. I already declared, you won’t see me at one of those things again until the 50th.”

“That is so *obnoxious*, how you keep bringing that up. If I have to put a gun to your head--you will be on hand in ‘22.”

“You’re already abbreviating it. No need for that.”

“Let’s go home,” she said. “We’ll get comfy. I’ll make some popcorn. We’ll find a movie.”

“You going to leave that same robe on?” Chris said, thinking about her sitting on the couch, which was fine, but still all drenched.

“I have another one,” she said. “In fact I have five. Different colors.”

Chris said in that case, that should work, but he typically dozed off in home movies.

“I have the remedy. Double espresso, up. Palermo style. You ever had?”

Chris said no, but he was game . . . and she wasn’t kidding, they watched a triple feature, wide awake, and when he finally went to bed at 4:45 all he could do for a couple more hours was lay there, he didn’t have a chance.

Chapter 9

So Tuesday morning was a bit of a late start, needless to say. Meaning he woke up around 1.

Gloria was gone, there was a note, she had appointments all day--and Chris was slightly embarrassed that he didn't know quite what she *did*--and she definitely did something, at least part time, and it may have been largely charity work, volunteer stuff . . . but you should at least be interested enough to ask--and if she told you already, keep it *straight*, for crying out loud.

On a separate piece of note paper was the usual mention of what was available for breakfast, some instructions on which pan to use for what, if he felt like getting fancy . . . and if not, fresh brioches in the bread box, from God knows what amazing neighborhood bakery this time . . . along with a jar of fresh preserves in the pantry from a recent trip to Glen Ellen if he was so inclined.

After breakfast, he hated to do it, but he left his own note:

You're the best. I took care of my business, so back to Manhattan Beach it is. Don't worry about the music for the next reunion. The last one was fine. I was pulling your leg, which you probably knew.

Chris hated to lie, and especially to Gloria of all people.

But you had to hang around a little longer, and you had another place to stay now, where you didn't feel that twinge of guilt that you were putting her out.

It was going to be a little bit like down in Arizona though, where Chris kept worrying he was going to run into Floyd.

He grabbed an Uber, and as they crossed Lombard Street the guy said *where to* exactly--and Chris was intending all along to go to Broderick but took a glance at the time and said to the guy, "You know what? If you don't mind, let's go right on Chestnut, drop me up a block in from Fillmore."

Which of course was Weatherby's territory, a little early maybe, but what the hay.

"Good," Shep said, pouring him a beer. "We can converse more." Referring to Sunday, when the Superbowl became in the way. "What do we got shaking?"

"Well, I got my tenant out of there, so at least there's some good news. I mentioned that to you, right?"

Shep drew a blank and said no, and Chris thought that's what happens when you saddle people with your situations, you can't always remember *who you saddled*.

"My old apartment," Chris said. "We had a meeting of the minds."

"Sweet. So what are you gonna do with the place? My two cents would be move back in, I'll see more of you."

"That's a good question. In a perfect world, I'd keep it vacant, use it like a fancy pied a terre whenever I come back up north . . . Two rents going at once though, that's tough."

"I hear you brother."

"My crazy thing now, the reason I came over here first, to delay it--I was in there changing the lock and I got stuck. One of those points of no return. Had to leave the place wide open overnight."

Shep said, "You're talking just down the street, right?"

“Yeah, not far. Between Bay and Northpoint.”

“I’ll take care of it for you then,” Shep said.

“You’re kidding? What?”

“Let’s go over there, I mean take your time first, give the Anchor Steam Saison the respect it deserves.”

And son of a gun, there they were a half hour later, heading down Chestnut toward the apartment. Shep had not one but two toolboxes in his hands, and Chris couldn’t take it and insisted on at least carrying one.

“This is pretty dang heavy,” Chris said. “I got, like a little two-inch cylinder dealie, giving me the problem.”

“You never know,” Shep said. “I used to anticipate stuff, prepare accordingly, come up short. Now I bring it all, no matter what.”

“Man. Well thanks for giving it a try, really is very nice of you.”

Shep looked at him, wearing a different hat, so to speak, than behind the bar, and said he wasn’t intending on this being a *try*.

Which was fine to hear . . . and they got in the building and upstairs, and in about 90 seconds, literally, the cylinder was in and Shep was testing things out with the new key.

“You’re kind of blowing me away here,” Chris said. “You got a second? Sit down.”

Shep said he didn’t mind and they went inside.

“This your stuff then?” Shep said. “You been renting it furnished?”

“No, actually--his stuff.”

“Ah. Well in that case, he has pretty good taste in Egyptian art?”

“Huh?”

“Look at this figurine. I mean it’s a unique piece. I love renditions of King Rameses the 2nd, which this definitely is.”

Two surprises here. First, that the doofus Dixson had an appreciation for Egyptian art--but even more surprisingly, that *Shep* did.

“*Take* it,” Chris said.

“You’re putting me on.”

“Not in the least . . . We kind of worked it out this way.”

“Well damn, man, this thing’s gotta be worth hundreds--if not more.”

“Even better. It’s all yours. Anything else you see?”

“No. I mean yeah, of course, there always could be. But this makes my day.”

“Okay don’t be a nice guy,” Chris said. “I won’t even notice. Whatever else you might like, I’m telling ya--go for it.”

Shep laughed and let out a high pitched whistle, like *sheesh, how did today just happen to turn into Christmas*--and he took a few minutes navigating the apartment, including the bedroom, and when he came out he was still holding the Egyptian piece but now his pockets were bulging slightly as well.

“Good then,” Chris said. “The other thing, you got me curious . . . so you do the repairs for Weatherby’s? As well as your standard social-director duties?”

“I guess you could say they drafted me. They found out I live on a houseboat. We had a staff party there once. It was pretty windy that day, the boat is temperamental *anyhow*--I’m not talking about *taking it out*, but just *living* on it requires some TLC. I had to pull out the tools a couple times at the party, and ever since then I’m the back up mechanic at the bar, yeah.”

“Wow. A houseboat, where then?”

“Sausalito.”

“Dang Shep. I had you pegged a lot of things before I can picture this one.”

What Chris really had him pegged for, was he’d suspected for a while now that Shep *owned* Weatherby’s, but played the role of a slightly crotchety employee. Which Chris could understand, better that way.

And obviously it wasn't something you were ever going to ask him about--he'd have to bring it up.

"It works both ways," Shep said now, as he was leaving. "And I believe you know what I mean *there*." And he winked at Chris, and rumbled down the stairs and was gone, and Chris looked around, trying hard to get used to being officially back in his old stomping ground once more.

So Chris took a shower, what the heck, and he found a fresh towel, and that was a little like being at Gloria's, both her and Dixson apparently not worrying about pinching pennies in the *plush* department.

The other interesting thing, the guy's shoes seemed to fit him, 11 and a half's--and Jeez, the idiot had about 20 pairs--and while you were at it, try a couple shirts, and they worked too, and slacks now too? Yeah why not, and those were a little tight unfortunately, which ticked Chris off, since when he was living here full time and still in his running routine--out the door first thing every morning before coffee, Fort Point and back--the slacks would have fit like a dream.

But you couldn't ask for everything--and now, wow, sportcoats too, pretty glitzy ones, definitely high-end goods--and those fit fine as well.

He went in the kitchen and raided the guy's fridge--not bad, an assortment of cheeses from France, and in the cabinet a choice of crackers, all imported as well, with funny names, and Chris found one that worked and sat down at the table.

Then he did a double take for a moment.

Did what just happen really *happen*?

I commandeered some guy's place, gave a bunch of his stuff away, and have planted my ass here for the foreseeable future?

With no fallout?

Chris tried to think hard how that could *be*, running it a *few* different ways, and, once again, he felt comfortable that there wouldn't be any.

He wouldn't call himself a veteran of this kind of business--the one Shep was referring to when he said *it works both ways* that people surprise you, what they're really up to.

But Chris *had* been in enough situations by now, he had to admit, that you get a feel for stuff. For a guy. For an endgame.

And this guy wasn't coming back for more.

Yeah he could call the police in a heartbeat, but that'd be dubious, since then you'd have to worry about Chris getting bailed out in an hour, or maybe even not charged in the first place--but either way finding you and then *really* throwing you off a roof.

That was an important tool Chris had picked up. If you demonstrate, right from the get-go, that you're not worried about the consequences, that can alarm them for sure . . .

If you add to that, coming across as *somewhat fucking insane*, that can help to.

So enough already, forget this guy. The day was getting on, it was almost four, and Chris fiddled around in his wallet for a scrap of paper Rich gave him with his number, and he couldn't find it, and this was getting irritating how he lost track of simple stuff. And he checked his phone, but it wasn't in there either.

But . . . you're in the neighborhood anyhow . . . you might as well drag yourself over to the Booker Lounge, this typically being Rich's time slot there . . . though based on Rich not looking his best last time, Chris was afraid that time slot was all over the place these days.

So that's what he did, but Rich wasn't there, at least not at either of his normal spots, and Chris peeked around a little back area they had as well, but came up empty.

Booker said, "Always enjoy observing you Seely. No telling what's on your mind."

"Ah, no big thing, I was hoping to run into Rich Tomlinson."

“I could tell. You was bobbing your head around like a bird, an urgency to your activity.”

“Booker you got a number for the guy or something?”

“Fraid I don’t. I keep enough track of him right *here*, most days.”

“Okay then. Can I get a coke please?”

“See what I’m saying?”

“Oh. Not drinking you mean? I feel I should *work* on something tonight, I don’t want to dull my brain yet.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Oh. By the way. Thank you for the referral on Mark.”

“It suit your needs?”

“He’s good. I’m on track now, I think, what I was concerned about. I need a lab test I guess, but not going to worry about that until I get back to LA.”

Though on the other hand, Chris was thinking, what are you waiting for? More physical evidence to pile up? Still, he relaxed enough to convince himself that, considering all the other ways they could conceivably apprehend him, a couple more days on the DNA thing wouldn’t kill anyone.

Booker said, “Dude’s little dog is cute, unh?”

“Wait a second . . . you said you don’t know the guy personally, only through word of mouth. He said the same thing.”

“That’s *mostly* the case, yeah,” Booker said, smiling.

“Jeez. So Mark does . . . do direct work for you. I’m pretty naive sometimes, that should have been obvious.”

“Hey, we all need our support group,” Booker said, still smiling big. “Anything else he help you with?”

“Now you’re giving me that look. Like I’m a two-bit comedian, here to entertain you.”

“You *is*.” Booker lowered his voice. “Mild-mannered white boy fretting about untraceable firearms and such . . . now you walking out of my

boy's crib, carrying with you some serious-ass Russian shit." Big grin back again, anticipating.

Chris thought of the incident that time in the Kosher restaurant in New York, no one supposed to be eating shellfish apparently, entirely off limits in the culture, but they were sneaking a lobster, the staff, in back, and when Chris asked about it the waiter looked him right in the eye and deadpanned, "What lobster?" . . . and that seemed a good way to handle it with Booker now too . . . and Booker didn't press the issue beyond that, and told Chris leave *his* number and when he sees Rich he'll pass it on.

Chapter 10

Chris was starting to feel at home in the apartment, it didn't take long, and if the guy's bed wasn't quite as comfortable as Gloria's all-time award winner, it was close, only a couple degrees short, and needless to say he slept like a baby.

He did make a point of changing the guy's sheets--he wasn't going to go that far. The guy also had a couple of laptops laying around, not one but two Macbook Pros . . . and Chris thought why not?

This could give him the anonymity online that he was always worrying about--meaning leaving the tracks, and likely overthinking it by now, considering the significant *genetic material* tracks he no doubt *had* been leaving all over the place--but still a concern he couldn't shake, and it was nice not to have to go to the library.

So . . . first he googled the poor messenger girl directly: Hope Hungerford.

And this was why he typically didn't enjoy the internet. There was just too much.

First of all, all these directories popping up, more of them than ever, which supposedly help you search for people--their chain of addresses, age, relatives and so on . . . and every single one of these, whenever he'd tried them, there are added complications, plus fees. The fees would be fine, who cares--*if* you knew you were getting somewhere.

Chris supposed this is what the Millenials are referring to when they talk about click-bait. Maybe not, but the bottom line was, right now this nonsense was overwhelming.

You try the name in Facebook for example, you don't know *what* you're doing, who is *who*, some of them don't even have faces attached, a total morass . . . plus forgetting all that, you'd have to assume SFPD was all over the obvious stuff by now, and if there was anything significant in the *correct* Hope's Facebook page that you could actually find--they would have shut it down.

So yeah, you have to figure the authorities have been here first. While Hope's google results *were* being displayed though, you better make sure there were new developments--in case they miraculously caught the motherfucker and you didn't hear about it.

So Chris went through all that, the news articles, and there were essentially no updates since Sunday, three days ago, when he read the first accounting in Gloria's kitchen.

The only significant article since then was from the San Jose Mercury News, interestingly, and Chris couldn't help thinking the once-proud Chronicle was going further down the tubes if your crime stories are being scooped by San Jose now.

At any rate, that article was human-interest, they spoke to folks in her hometown of Wilton, Connecticut, everyone sad and shocked and painting a joyful picture of an adventurous young lady with everything in front of her--which was Chris's image of her too by now, after having seen and heard her spirit on display in those public service announcements from her community service work in Central America.

Chris thought back to his conversation with Verne, his old boss at Speed-King. The one thing that stood out, Verne said the Arrow guy, the owner, was kind of an ass. On his 4th wife if Chris had it straight. And moody.

Arrow was of course the messenger service where Hope worked. Chris remembered them back in the day, always more guys on the streets than

Speed-King, plus they also had messengers on these custom three-wheelers towing a big compartment which could handle oversized packages.

Chris had tried to prod Verne--was the atmosphere at Arrow toxic these days on account of the likely unhappy owner, and Verne didn't go that far, but told him his son would know better.

That'd be Errol of course, who Chris had always liked. Of the two of them together as bosses, Verne was the business guy and Errol was the people guy, and yeah, unfortunate that they had a falling out--but then again it *would* be tough to work day-in, day-out alongside a family member.

Chris had to make sure not to appear overly uninterested--nor overly informed--about the homicide, in that meeting with Verne, so he'd declined the offer of Errol's contact information.

Since Jeez, if you miraculously *did* find the scumbag--and especially if you then tried to do something about it--it wouldn't be the best look, that you'd been poking around asking questions.

On the other hand, Chris supposed you could get ahold of Errol and see if he wanted to get a bite to eat, just for old times sake. If you had to, you could justify it that the story piqued your interest, and you were putting your old journalist's hat back on, thinking of writing something about it.

Even better he was thinking though . . . use the premise that you heard he and his dad had a falling out, and you're trying to jumpstart them into re-connecting. Which was true, that's what you *did* want to see happen . . . and throw in a few casual questions while you're at it, does he know anything unusual about the company or anyone there. And does he have ideas what might have happened? . . . All carefully of course, that part.

So . . . a minute later, there he was on the computer screen: Errol Willig. With a Castro Valley street address . . . and a website now . . . DWILG Consulting. Smiling headshot right up front, definitely the guy. And a phone number, kind of buried in the Contact link, but still there.

“It rings a bell,” Errol said, when he picked up and Chris identified himself. “Just give me another moment to jog my memory . . . yes of course, *Chris!* So nice of you to call! How have you been, my friend?”

“I’m well,” Chris said. “Do I still need to call you Mr. Willig?”

Errol laughed. “You *never* needed to. In fact that always embarrassed me, if anyone tried.” The way it worked, as Chris remembered it, was when they first hired you Verne said to address them both that way, adding Junior to Errol’s Mr. Willig. But in reality it never lasted, and almost every messenger called both guys by their first names.

“Let me buy you dinner or something,” Chris said. “I’m passing through the city for a couple days.”

“Well that’s awfully kind. And a little suspect, I might add. After all this time?”

Errol’s tone was playful. But you still had to be convincing. “I was taking a walk down the waterfront,” he said. “I debated it, and then said screw it, go say hello . . . Which was great, catching up with your dad . . . Made me realize it’d be good to see you *too*, talk a little old shop.”

“Well,” Errol said, seeming to be checking his calendar, “I’ll be in the city next Tuesday. Is that convenient?”

“Could be, but how about I come your way?” A bit apprehensive about offering that, maybe going *too* far now, except Tuesday seemed real far off.

“Oh yeah, if you’re willing--*any* time. I mostly work from home.”

“How’s tonight for instance?”

“*Fine*. You serious? You don’t mind coming out here?”

“Not at all,” Chris lied. So they made it for 7, Errol repeating the same address that Chris found online, and that was that.

Ooh boy. Pretty sure BART went out that far, didn’t it? Castro Valley? Hopefully that wasn’t past Livermore, was it? Chris a little shaky on his East Bay geography, mainly because he’d never cared for it over there. One

community running into the next, a good portion of your life governed by freeways and traffic lights. Reminded you of inland LA.

You'd figure it out. In the meantime . . . could you somehow stop in at Arrow? Have a look around? Chris remembered their headquarters being on 3rd and Folsom - and checking, it looked like they'd moved since those days, 2nd and Harrison now, but not far, around the corner.

But nah . . . you weren't going to pull that off, walking in there, were you? Way too much downside, and not enough *upside*, since what would you hope to find? You're going to have messengers going about their business, dispatchers taking care of orders--and who are *you*?

Which shouldn't matter, you're trying to get a feel for the place, maybe some *little element* you can latch onto, follow up with.

Not worth it.

So what Chris did--and what was it, 10:40, so you had time--he went downtown. Not *directly* of course, you had to pop into Peet's on Chestnut for a while first, which Chris long considered some of the best people watching in the Bay Area.

Not up to Manhattan Beach standards perhaps, since there you often had bikinis parading around in the mix, but here you could observe a healthy dose of humanity.

And generally strike up conversations if you felt like it.

Wouldn't you know, today Chris comes away from the counter with his Grande Latte, heads for his usual spot, about 5 tables in from the entrance, so you're nicely positioned to observe both inside and outside activity, and sits down.

Not noticing that the guy at the table next to him, his nose buried in the sports page, is a cop.

For about 3 seconds Chris experienced the irrational but irrepressible emotion that it was all over--his game was up.

That sooner or later they've got you pegged, and this is how they wrap it up, simply waiting for you.

Then the 3 seconds passed and Chris realized this was a beat guy, one of the two you'd see in the neighborhood, an older guy, nice fellow who was always telling people to call him Phil.

There was something sad about it in a way, this guy probably 5 years from retirement and still *walking* a beat, obviously never having elevated through the ranks.

But the flip side, sometimes a simple, career-2nd grade teacher does a lot more good for the world than a fancy university PhD person.

Still, it was pretty weird frankly, shmoozing with a cop--this wouldn't have been on Chris's list of any type--but he went ahead and said *how's your morning going so far?*

Phil looked up from the newspaper, gave Chris his full attention, and that was what a decent guy does, wasn't it, you don't have to be a jerk and have it bother you that someone just interrupted your routine.

"Just fine thanks," Phil said. "How is yours?"

"It's good," Chris said. "I'm up visiting . . . Don't move away from here, wouldn't be the worst advice."

Phil laughed. "That's what the wife is always harping on. Me, I wouldn't mind going somewhere where you're living in a resort."

"I tried that myself," Chris said. "It has its moments, but the concept can be overrated."

"Where was that," Phil said, "that you tried it?" Jesus. Ludicrous to think, but he felt like he opened himself up, just slightly, for an interrogation.

"Vegas," Chris said. "My conclusion, if you have everything simple--your needs, your routine--then it can be great."

"I hear you," the cop said. "If you want more, the action-quotient can drop off."

“Does drop off. In fact disappears on you,” and he laughed and Phil did too.

Phil said, “Well we’re in Novato. I supposed we’ll just keep an eye on the real estate market, make an educated decision when the time comes.”

“That’s the problem, you get tempted. Once it hits you over the head how much you can put away, if you cashed in and went to St. George, Utah, for example.”

“Funny you mention that. St. George’s one of the places on the wife’s list.”

“Anyhow,” Chris said, “the sad news you got around here, I’m having trouble shaking, the young gal on the bike.”

“Oh yeah, we all are,” Phil said. “What a tough deal.”

“Well what *happened*? I read they found her in the park, not a lot more to it.”

“No idea. Wish I did.”

“I know. You’d want to toss your uniform for a day, and take care of it, right? I’m sure we all feel that way.”

“Yeah, there’s been cases like that. They transcend the job.”

“So . . . like somebody just grabbed her or something? Off the bus? That’s how these things happen?”

“The word is they don’t think so.”

“Wait a second, you just said you had no idea.”

Phil smiled for a second, then he got serious again. “No ‘official’ idea. You look harmless enough, you’re not a media person or something are you?”

“Me?” Another one of those half-second panicky moments, since yes, Chris of course *had* been one of those.

“No, the guy over *there*,” the cop said, joking.

Chris said, “You remind me of guys I went to school with. I mean that as a positive . . . I know you’re a little older than me, but you go to Marina?”

“St. Vincent’s. Then Sacred Heart. My uncle taught at Marina though. Vince Denucci.”

“You gotta be kidding me . . . Mr. Denucci? Wood shop. He was our favorite teacher, top 3 at the very least.”

“I miss him,” Phil said.

“I saw Mr. Denucci right up the block, about 10 years ago. Sitting on a folding chair in front of Hunt’s Donuts.”

“Bunch of guys with him, right?”

“Oh yeah, that goes without saying.”

“He have his caddy too?”

“He did, as a matter of fact. He had it parked in red, didn’t seem the least bit worried about it.”

“Like I say,” Phil said, “Uncle Vince was good people . . . I gotta go. I’ll give you a bone on the homicide. The way they’re working it, it was an inside job.”

“Jesus . . . the . . . boyfriend you mean? Didn’t it say she was living with a guy, and they were windsurfers or something?”

“*Regular* surfers, yeah. Ocean Beach. But not him, they’re looking inside the *bicycle* outfit.”

“Oh man,” Chris said. “That makes it even worse, in a way . . . that came out wrong, it *can’t* be worse.”

“I know what you’re saying. Poor thing should be able go to *work*, for Criminy Sakes. I mean if you can’t do *that* and stay safe . . . Listen, take care.”

Chris said you do the same, and he finished his coffee, and after the interesting bit of side-tracking just now, he got on the 30 Stockton bus and *did* head downtown.

The route wound around quite a bit and seemed to pick the worst intersections to get stuck in . . . and Jeez, Chris didn’t remember it being

this bad, and you finally, mercifully, went through the Stockton tunnel and were at Union Square, and Chris came spilling out the door of the thing not a moment too soon.

On the way he went back and forth with it, should you or should you *not* walk into Arrow--and the incentive seemed a little stronger, now that Phil had thrown him the bone about the inside job.

One way to work it would be the opposite of what he'd told Phil, that now he *was* a journalist, a freelance writer interested in the case, and he realized he even had his old press pass which he kept in his wallet, so you never know.

He cut down Pine Street, and just past Montgomery you had the Pacific Stock Exchange, in the classic building out of the 1930's, the facade made from Yule Marble, which Chris had been curious about once, and learned it was a type of old limestone, that came from a certain valley in Colorado.

At any rate, the stock exchange closed about 10 years ago, and what could you do . . . but only now did he realize it had been converted into an Equinox Fitness Club--which seemed sacreligious, just let the beautiful structure sit there, why not, but he knew he was being stupid.

The other thing about this block, when Chris was on a bike, it was the tail end of when pay phones were still useful, and there was a bank of them here, between the stock exchange and Montgomery, and they were known in the business as the Pine Phones, and sometimes the dispatcher told you to wait there and he had the numbers and he'd call you on one when he needed to discuss something too lengthy for the 2-way radio network.

For whatever reason, the Pine Phones became the hangout for messengers *period*, when it was slow and you were in between calls . . . and now as Chris walked up the block, the phones were long gone, but son of a gun, there were 4 kids there straddling their bikes, so apparently the tradition lived on.

There were two guys from Arrow, pretty recognizable, the blue shirts and pants, and the others had no uniforms and didn't look as good--Chris thinking it was a no brainer if you were in an office and needed to send a package which guys you'd rather have walk in and pick it up . . . which pointed out very simply, why some companies do better than others.

Anyhow, Chris went up to the small herd of them and said, "Wow, that's some job you guys do. Could I ask you, was that gal . . . on the news . . . was she in your same line of work?"

They all nodded kind of grim, and then one of the non-Arrow guys got a call and took off, and the other guy was absorbed in his phone, but one of the Arrow kids said to Chris, "We're waiting to hear something. It's been tough. We worked with her."

"You mean you *knew* her?" Chris said. "Your same company and all?"

"He dated her," the other Arrow guy said now, pointing with his head to the first guy, a very slight smile behind it, but not much. "In his dreams."

"Shut up," the first guy said. "I wish I could have protected her though. She was one of those people, nothing bad you could say about her. Not a fucking thing."

Chris said, "Who killed her then?"

Both messengers shook their heads.

"Well have the police talked to you guys or anything? It said she was at a club, right?"

"Yeah, Gucci's Trat," the first guy said.

"Is that . . . like a, messenger hangout then?"

"A little. Not the main one. That'd be Torke's."

"Waldo Way too," the other guy said.

"Wow," Chris said. "Very sorry you guys had to go through this. I can't imagine, a fellow employee, one day doesn't come in."

"I know it," the first guy said. "They've offered us some counseling. Not my thing though."

“You should consider it,” Chris said. “Something else comes to mind too--hate to even think about, but are there *many* females, in your line of work, around town?”

“There are,” the second guy said, “and I know where you’re going. I doubt they’re sleeping easy.”

“Hold on,” the first guy said. “Think who was in The Trat.”

“May-be,” the second guy said.

“Pardon me?” Chris said.

“What he’s saying,” the first guy said, “it don’t look like one of those wack-job serial things you see on TV.”

“I get you,” Chris said. “So who was in the bar?”

“Some bad people,” the first guy said. “Possibly.”

“And they . . . like followed your friend, or took her home?”

“We’re just guessing,” the second guy said. “No different than any outsider would be.”

“Slinging around shop talk,” Chris said.

“That’s it. I’m off,” the first guy said.

“Me to, I’m on it,” the second guy said, and Chris told them to stay safe.

Errol had said come by the house first, and then they’ll figure out a place.

Chris arrived at 7:20, not all that bad considering rush hour. And what he’d done--and maybe it was taking the 30 Stockton downtown that took the starch out of him as far as public transportation--but he went ahead and rented a car.

A place on Mission Street, little hole-in-the-wall Enterprise outlet that had about 2 vehicles, and Chris did it the old fashioned way, regular ID, regular credit card, just like with the plane, again bypassing what he’d typically been so paranoid about.

Errol looked great. No idea if *he* was Scandinavian, but maybe because he and Mark were tossing *Norway* around the other day, Chris pictured those guys up in the fjords, smooth, unlined skin deep into their senior years, not much in the way of stress . . . or Bruce Wayne, Batman's sidekick, who always looked raring to go. Of course minus the ascot around the neck, Errol wasn't wearing one of those.

"You're a good man to come out here," Errol said. "I'm not worth it."
Same old guy, great spirit, glass-half-full outlook.

"I never told you directly," Chris said, "but you were a damn good boss. I'd like to say I've taken a few cues from you, applied them to my own life--but that would be stretching it."

"And you," Errol said, "always had a good sense of humor . . . Come on, take a look around, the sooner we can eat . . . you hungry yet?"

"Don't even ask that question," Chris said.

And the guy had a great set-up, what more could you need. Yes, you were in Castro Valley, not a real interesting place on the surface, but Errol was up in the hills, small gated community, not *fancy* gated with a guard booth and so forth, but an electric gate, just right . . . and from the deck you could see a heck of a long way east, and also south, San Mateo and Palo Alto and beyond. Chris noticed a late model Mercedes, one of the sporty versions, in the garage as well.

Errol suggested a restaurant called Ivan's. And Chris discovered, yes, there actually was a main street in Castro Valley, though it wasn't hopping by any definition, the malls and strip malls having taken over out here, and the rest of the East Bay suburbs as well. But Ivan's was cozy and tasty, and they hit you over the head that they specialized in seafood, but Chris got a steak.

"Anyhow," Chris said, "I'm glad I got that off my chest. One of those life's too short things. I had a teacher in high school, guy taught English, I appreciated him a lot too, and I should have told him, he was the first

teacher who got me halfway interested in reading. Then I hear he had a stroke, is in a rest home.”

“So? Still go see him.” Errol said.

“He didn’t last long in there. Needless to say I never made it.”

“All right. We do our best. We make mistakes, fine. You can’t harbor guilt though.”

Chris took a moment. “Along those lines, I wasn’t going to bring it up, and shut me right down if it’s none of my business. But Gee Whiz, you and your dad.”

Errol took a big gulp of wine, and didn’t say anything.

“So,” Chris said, “on another note, what are you doing these days? Business-wise?”

“Little bit of consulting is all. My dad and I worked a buy-out on Speed-King. I’m kind of watching for the next opportunity that grabs me.”

“What kind of consulting?” Chris said. “And sorry to be a wise guy, but what does that *mean* anyway? You always hear guys, like in Manhattan Beach where I live, Starbucks, you’ll overhear someone say they’re doing management consulting. I must have a mental block.”

Errol laughed. “No, you’re exactly right. A lot of these jobs, they’re phrased to make them more important than they are.”

“Like *your* brand of consulting?”

“Oh yeah. Mine’s basically a joke. I sit down with a mid-level manager, typically, and I tell them what they already know. I just lay it *out* differently.”

“For what kind of companies?”

“Mostly tech, since what else *is* there? When my dad and I parted ways last year, I did a bit of outside work for another bike company. A friendly competitor.”

“I think your dad said something about that. How’d that go?”

“It was Arrow. You probably remember those guys, they’ve been around forever. In fact someone researched it, they’re the oldest messenger outfit in the city. Not the original, but the last one standing.”

“Uh-huh. So why’d they need you?”

“Ah, I came up with a billing-and-orders generating system at Speed-King that they wanted to emulate. I felt a little funny walking in there. But all in a day’s business, I guess. You get used to it, you can’t over-analyze every move.”

“What was it *like* in there? I remember the outside, passed by a million times, never went *inside* though.”

“Well they moved. But it feels the same. You know, the kids throw all their stuff in a pile, their backpacks and jackets, and you smell the sweat all day.”

“Yeah, that smell never leaves, does it,” Chris said, not thinking of backpacks and jackets so much in the case of Speed-King, but just guys coming and going, on and off the bikes, working hard on the streets, and the ventilation in the office never great. He said, “Who’s running things over there these days?”

“Guy named Steve Mays . . . by the way, you heard what happened, right?”

“What?”

“The girl? They found her body?”

“Oh Jesus . . . that was *Arrow*? That’s just the worst thing. What a nightmare for her family, it’s unimaginable.”

“I know. I’m having trouble with it. On top of everything else, it’s so close to home.”

Chris was quiet for a minute. “You remember that messenger from back in *my* day? Edie?”

“Oh absolutely. We were freaking out there as well, for a week or so, until she turned up.”

“No secret, her being an extremely rare female in the profession, and let’s face it, looking the way she did, and me being a 19-year-old idiot, pretty sure I’d be accused of having illicit thoughts about her, one time or another.”

“Hey, we all did.”

“I mean if she had a boyfriend, and I had a girlfriend on top of it--and she was interested in me, which of course was a pipe dream--but I don’t think I would have let anything get in the way.”

“You want dessert?” Errol said. “We can have it here, or go back to the house, that’s fine too.”

Chris said here was just great, and they ordered it, and he said, “But meanwhile, the current thing . . . my God, what do they think happened?”

“You never know. Could be a million reasons you run into some psychopath out there. The city’s a dangerous place.”

“That’s what I keep saying. Despite how loose everyone seems to play it.”

“Gets close to midnight,” Errol said, “unless you’re in Idaho Falls or somewhere, you need to watch your back. Period.”

“My first thought, when I heard about it the other day, there’s a boyfriend right? Where was *he*? Should have been helping her.”

“In hindsight . . . of course.”

“You know anything about her? Any kind of dark side?”

“Apparently nothing of the sort. Exemplary employee, sunny disposition, never expected one iota of special treatment, from what I’m told.”

“Let me throw it to you another way, since we’re on the subject unfortunately.”

“Sure.”

“What do you think about a serial killer? An emerging one. You hate to even picture it.”

“Ah man,” Errol said, seeming to look past Chris for a moment.

“What happened?”

“Nah, nothing. Just the Warriors, they’re showing the highlights. They get blown out by *the 76ers* of all teams . . . Every year we have this lull. I’m telling you, we gotta get Curry back soon . . . but *I’m* sorry, where were we on this?”

“Just the serial killer thing.”

“Well it’s an angle you can’t dismiss. I’m sure the police are well aware of it. Some maniac looking to make his mark by knocking off female messengers.”

“Yeah. I’m told these psychopaths like to narrow down their victims, categorize them.”

“I’ve read that,” Errol said. “One of the traits of serial killers that the profilers come up with is ‘organized’.”

“Jeez. I’d never heard that. In those specific terms. I mean, it makes sense, I think.”

“I’m sort of a true crime buff,” Errol said. “I go on these forums, one of my favorites is the Zodiac. You remember that case, right?”

Chris said that yeah, he did.

“Bottom line though, what we’re talking about,” Errol said, “my hunch would be no, you’re not dealing with a serial person.”

“You mean . . . it was like an inside job?”

“Could have been. Or somewhere in between. But as we know, you hire some loose cannons in this business--not *many*, a tiny percentage hopefully, but you can’t help it.”

“I didn’t think of that back in the day,” Chris said. “Yeah, there were a few weird guys that showed up, but then they got on a bike and no one really stood out.”

“At one point we tried doing background checks,” Errol said. “But it was too much red tape, and then we’d end up ticking off some of the *good* candidates and losing them to other companies that *weren’t* doing checks.”

“So that’s still the way it is?”

“Yeah, doesn’t seem like anyone’s picked them back up. Just the typical application, you check a couple references. So it’s not a perfect industry. You’re going to get the occasional applicant slipping through who might have a drug problem, or an otherwise checkered history.”

Hard to argue with this. The turnover was huge, and you’d probably go out of business if you scrutinized these guys too hard. The reality was, any guy shows up for a job opening, if he has a bike and is under 30 and doesn’t weigh 300 pounds, he’s probably got it.

“You ever meet Hope?” Chris said. “That’s her name right, Hope Hungerford.”

“Never did, but I think I saw her there when I was consulting with Mays. This would have been, I’m thinking mid-November. They were all coming off their shift, 5:30, and she seemed to be the only female working. When I saw the picture in the paper, unfortunately I’m pretty sure it was the same girl.”

Chris said, “All the changes in male-female hierarchy--sounds like female messengers are about as scarce as 20 years ago.”

“Probably so.”

“But when you saw her that time . . . I mean, was there any strange interaction you might have picked up, like with one of the other messengers.”

“Didn’t observe enough to tell.”

“And why do you think, a weeknight, Jeez, you’ve got to get up and do it all again the next morning . . . I never would have been out drinking. Not on principle, just that I was too wasted from riding around for 8 hours.”

“I know,” Errol said. “Kids today are indestructible, or think they are. There’s a lot of behavior I scratch my head about.”

“Well,” Chris said. “Sorry to get sidetracked and a little long winded.”

“Not at all.”

“Living down south now, just picking up some cursory details on this, it hit a nerve. I appreciate you filling in a few blanks. I can at least come to grips with it a little better, if that’s possible.”

“It’s *not* possible,” Errol said, “but I know what you mean.”

Chapter 11

Chris checked his voice mails before he went to bed, and one had come in, from Rich Tomlinson.

Rich sounded like he was sloshed pretty good, but you could understand him okay, and he said he had a spot of information on the issue they were discussing.

Chris had run into this before with Rich, whether he'd been drinking or not, he was very measured on the phone, with a kind of military precision, which didn't make sense but you went along with it.

A little late to call him back now, plus you'd be into the drinking. You could count on Booker of course, he'd passed on Chris's number to Rich like he said.

Dixson had a couple nice pairs of running shoes in the closet, fancy ones, very little wear on either pair, and in the morning Chris figured what the hay, just *go* for it . . . and like old times he headed the three blocks over to the Marina Green and started slowly--*very* slowing--jogging along Chrissie Field toward the base of the bridge.

He got about a mile into it, decided that should do it, and turned around and walked back home. It did feel nice though, start your day with real exercise for a change, the way he'd done it for years when this was his *real* apartment.

Then of the course the shower was a nice reward, especially applying the various high-end shampoos and soaps and lotions that Dixson had on hand, and when you added the plush towels and even the guy's post-shower slippers, you could do worse.

Chris got ahold of Rich, and they agreed to meet at Booker's after lunch, and Chris had a couple hours to use his noggin, try to figure out where, if anyplace, to go from here on the Hope thing.

Yesterday was interesting, but you certainly didn't come away with any home run balls to work with. Something bugging him for a little while now, this gal's tragedy conjuring up those memories of Edie, disappearing that night and all that--and then resurfacing, at least according to the authorities.

Just for kicks, it would be good to find out what happened to her in the end--meaning right now, *today*--that she was still okay too.

The problem of course, sitting here at the moment on Dixson's Macbook Pro, Chris couldn't for the life of him think of her last name.

Or maybe he *never* knew it, there was a good chance of that, since how many of these guys he worked with over the years *did* he know the last names of? Some.

You could call Verne, maybe he would remember, or at least have a record of her--you could try Errol too--but maybe no one knew, and then had you just opened a can of worms? Put yourself out there looking for something that might raise someone's eyebrow?

On the one hand, what was the problem, a simple request . . . but right or wrong, something like that--unless it was absolutely necessary--didn't resonate great with Chris these days.

For instance, what if Law Enforcement happened to contact her--it would seem a heck of a stretch, but who knows, maybe they're looking for clues on the behavior patterns of female messengers--and she tells them by the way, a guy I used to work with just called asking questions.

Jesus . . . Chris thinking then they might start liking *him* for the murder . . . and of course *that* wouldn't pan out but now he's squarely on the radar, for other stuff that very well *might* pan out.

This is what happens when you have extra time on your hands, and Chris knew his mind was running away . . . but meanwhile, he thought of a couple messengers from back then, whose full names he did remember, and one of them might be showing up on Facebook.

Guy named Curt Terwilliger, not many of those around . . . and this guy lived in Santa Cruz and played music, according to his bio.

Chris remembered that about the guy, he went to City College, rode for Speed-King part time, and brought a guitar to work occasionally. Strummed a few tunes, nothing great, but you wouldn't be surprised if he pursued it.

When you scrolled through his Facebook postings, going back a couple years, there were a couple of linked videos from YouTube, and Chris checked them out. One he was playing and singing what the heading told you was an original song, and it wasn't bad, sort of an upbeat Caribbean flavor to it. The other was at a club somewhere in San Carlos, couple guys with him on stage, one of those guys singing the lead, and Curt playing guitar and doing an okay job on his solo.

Below that video was a link to the band's website, and when you clicked around a bit you found contacts for the members, and you had no idea if anything was up to date but Chris sent the guy a text.

And forgot about it, in fact stretched out and laid down for a few minutes, that little bit of jogging right out of the chute may have overdone it slightly--but 5 minutes later the phone buzzes and Chris pops up, and there's the guy.

"Buddy!" Chris said. "No emergency, no one died or anything."

"Good," Curt said, "you were reading my mind."

"I know. Too much time passes, we can't help think, *what the hell's this?*"

"Well you sound good. Still got a sense of humor. So life working out okay? You miss being on a bike?"

“I tell you, I do. It was kind of the perfect job. Except for the slave wages.”

“I could tell you enjoyed it. I never got as pumped as you. I hated that run from the SP to the wharf, detested it.”

“What was the problem with *that*? You just take Columbus . . . you had to watch out for the tracks, is all.”

“Yeah well, if you ever reprise your role, let me know. I’ll have to come up to the city and watch.”

“Listen, I don’t want to hold you, I was roaming around YouTube just now, not sure how the heck it happened, but I found your videos.”

“Oh really.”

“Dog, you’ve come a long way. Totally solid . . . On a whim, I wanted to tell you that. Not that my layman’s opinion means anything. But otherwise another 20 years go by, so I bit the bullet, and now you know.”

“Very considerate, Bud. And what I’ll do, I’ll add you to my mailing list. Whenever we play somewhere local, you’ll find out.”

“Sounds good all around, thanks . . . And something just occurred to me, shooting the shit with you dredging it up--you remember that girl Edie? What ever happened to her?”

“You’re joking right,” Curt said, “how can I *forget*? But yeah, there was the weird episode after the party, and then who knows.”

“She was one hot number, for sure. And she had an unusual last name--what the devil was it?”

“I know what you mean . . . not sure it was unusual . . . but what the heck *was* her last name?”

Oh boy.

Chris asked a couple more questions about the music, listened politely to Curt’s answers, and they both vowed not to let so much time go by, and that took care of it.

Rich was already set up with a gin and tonic and a bowl of olives when Chris got to the Booker Lounge. It wasn't crowded, and they had a side table along the back, plenty of privacy.

"I didn't take any liberties with yours," Rich said. "When I run into you here I never know if you're drinking on my account, or you *really* drink."

"Course I really drink," Chris said, signalling for the same thing. "I'm in the newspaper business, remember?"

"Was. Were," Rich said. It was true, news guys did drink, part of the culture, though not as much as the stereotype.

"Either way," Chris said, "while I can still think straight--what was that little piece of the puzzle?"

Before Rich could answer, Chris's phone buzzed, which it didn't do often, and Chris asked Rich to please hold the thought for a second.

The text was from Curt, and it said:

Saint. Kills me when got sthing on tip tongue. No relax til come up w it.

"What?" Rich said. "You look deep in thought."

"Nah, I'm good."

"My thing's not earth-shattering. A little odd though. Let's go with you first. I'm predicting you've been looking around, otherwise you wouldn't have so urgently needed to find me in here the other day."

"Okay let's not lose our perspective," Chris said, and you were always in a comfort zone with Rich, you were on the same page, and it was nice. "I got three things, I guess. One, it was an inside job, according to a street cop. Two, talked to a couple kids who ride for the company--Arrow--they don't know a lot, except that there are a few questionable guys working there. I also heard the owner is unpleasant, going through a rough stretch. The kids

did say also, the bar that night, it's not one of the regular messenger hang-outs. ”

“Uh-huh. Three?”

“More of the same, pretty much. Guy who used to be *my* boss, did some consulting at Arrow, he made a good case it's an inside job too. Hard to dismiss that, when you think of the job qualifications, which *are* none.”

“I can see that,” Rich said. “You could have some kid sleeping in a shelter somewhere, hitchhikes his way to San Francisco, steals a bike and is ready to go to work.”

“Then again,” Chris said, “and the way the odds are with these things, some fuck who had nothing to do with her, plucked her off the bus or talked her off it, or followed her.”

“Or got her before she got on,” Rich said. “The serial killer thing they're playing up, that's a bunch of garbage.”

“Playing *what* up?”

“Ah, the Chronicle ran a story today. There were three of these in Chicago, about two years ago. Female messengers.”

“Oh no.”

“But they caught *that* guy, and my source says they're barking up the wrong tree, speculating it's a copycat.”

“All right,” Chris said. “What's *your* news?”

“They got him wearing a Hazmat suit.”

“A what?”

“One of them environmental jobs. Nearly every body part covered up.”

Chris of course knew exactly what it is was but was shocked to hear this. Even though it essentially confirmed his suspicions for a while now, since the explosion of DNA breakthroughs--that informed murders would start doing this stuff.

“*Who* has him wearing that?” Chris said.

“A witness in the park. First they assumed it was a heavy duty construction guy. Then they heard about the murder, weren’t sure, and reported it.”

“Well maybe it *was*.”

Rich shook his head. “They recovered Hazmat fibers at the scene.”

“Ah.”

“Not Hazmat, what am I saying. The source corrected that. We’re talking . . .” Rich looked at his notes. “We’re talking more like a Tyvex suit. Couple levels down from the full-monte Hazmat. This doesn’t protect against chemical spills, gases and vapors, none of *that* shit.”

“But it protects against leaving yourself at the scene,” Chris said.

“There you go,” Rich said.

“A separate thought here, but dang, we’ve been out of the business for a while--you still got *sources*?”

“Speak for yourself. Most of them are dried up, or retired, I’ll give you that, but I still have two.”

That was impressive to hear actually. There’d been a big difference of course when they were both newspaperman, Rich working the crime beats, deep in the trenches, and Chris writing features, human interest, including some sports, all of it pretty lightweight. He’d never cultivated one source, honestly.

“So what I’m gathering,” Chris said, “they’re keeping the suit quiet.”

“Yep . . . So what else you got?”

“I just spilled it out. Some pieces of the puzzle, that frankly add up to jack shit.”

“But what *else* to you have? *Gun to your head*-type else.”

“Well . . . I feel funny even bringing this up.”

“Now you’re sounding like a cliché, out of a bad movie--what’s on your mind?”

“Okay. This is ridiculous . . . but if you had illicit feelings toward someone . . . what would that mean? Let me correct that, illicit *thoughts*.”

“Illegal. Suggestive of something bad. Amoral at the very least.”

“That’s what I’m thinking . . . What it was, I said to this guy, I had illicit thoughts 20 years ago toward a female messenger. I wasn’t sure of the meaning, exactly. I went home last night and looked it up. It was the wrong word, not what I meant.”

“What’d you mean?”

“*Sexual* thoughts, what can I tell you. I tried to give it a fancy spin, talking to the guy.”

“Unh-huh.”

“That would be the end of it, I learned to be more careful with my language. Except he agreed with me.”

“How so?”

“That he had them too. He said everyone did . . . this guy I’m referring to, he was my old boss--one of them--at the bike company. He would have been, I’m guessing 35.”

“And how old was she?”

“Like me. 19, 20. Definitely at least 18, if that’s what you’re thinking. But just, I don’t know, the way he agreed with me so effortlessly. It ended strange with this girl.”

“Tell me.”

“My guess is she was getting high. Dressing provocatively. Doing some hooking for all I know. Jeez, I hadn’t even thought of *that* possibility until now . . . She went missing for a few days, bizarre story of getting abducted. The cops checked it out, found her doing okay. That story was probably bullshit, when you put it in perspective.”

“Where is she now?”

“That’s not clear . . . Long story short--and I can’t believe I’m raising this tiny red flag . . . because this old boss of mine, he’s done some work for

Arrow, at least as recently as November . . . I'm telling you this is a good person, upstanding, the greatest guy to work for."

Rich swirled his drink around, picked up a couple olives. "He own a Hazmat suit?" Rich's eyes were cold now.

"Okay, I'm sorry I brought it up. It's such a *reach*, it's unfair to the guy, honestly, to be tossing those thoughts around."

"You're emotionally involved," Rich said, "which is understandable . . . *Lotta* surprises out there Chrissy. I'm sure I don't really have to tell you that." Giving him another very serious look.

"Oh man," Chris said. He was starting to feel sick to his stomach.

"You want to give his name to Homicide?" Rich said. "I'll take care of it for you. Nothing there, they'll figure it out pretty quick."

"But . . . if there *is* something . . . ?" Chris fought the words, it was killing him to go there.

"They'll bring him to justice. The American way. That'd be your goal?"

"Told you the other day . . . whoever mutilated Hope . . . they can't be walking around any more. Even in the yard at San Quentin."

"Like I said," Rich said, more gently this time. "Find out if he owns a Hazmat suit."

"I thought you said Tyvex," Chris said, and Rich realized he meant that too, and they both smiled for a second, and the tension rolled back just a notch.

"All right," Chris said, "before I do that. Which will hopefully clear the guy. I wouldn't mind talking to the girl from back then, the missing messenger."

"What's her name?" Rich said, pulling out his pad.

"Jesus. Just like that?"

Rich waited, and Chris said Edie Saint. No idea if that's her full first name, you'd tend to doubt it. Hard to speculate where she might be, what state she'd even--"

“Don’t worry about it,” Rich said.

“Only reason I wanted to catch up with her--”

“Don’t worry about that either.” Rich looked at his watch. “I gotta meet my sister. Pain in the ass, we have to move like 200 boxes. Don’t ask. I’ll get back to you.”

And a rarity, Rich bolted after apparently one drink, not even polishing *that* off actually, Jeez, it was like three-quarters full--and Chris decided reasonably quickly that *he* didn’t have to meet anyone or move boxes, and he took his time finishing *his* cocktail, and Rich’s as well.

It was a tough walk back to the apartment. Nothing festive about it, that’s for sure. You wanted to lay down and put on some old movies and check out.

Chris was thinking, this is just a bad dream right? A bump in the road. You could roll the dice 100 times, all manner of variations . . . and Errol Willig is not your man. He did *not* murder that girl. You’re talking the unthinkable, a scenario from another dimension.

Yet . . . he had brought up Edie to Rich, hadn’t he? After being just a little stunned, when he thought about it later, on the way home from Castro Valley last night, by the ‘illicit’ remark.

But couldn’t Errol have casually agreed with him without thinking, and screwed up the language just like he had?

Of course that was possible.

But . . . let’s see what Rich comes up with, shall we . . . and then we can hopefully put this matter to rest.

Chris hadn’t explained why he wanted to speak to Edie, but Rich was sharp, he got it right away.

Chris did decide one thing--if Edie didn’t work out, either they *couldn’t* find her, or they *could* but nothing came of it--that he would not bother Errol any further.

You don't embarrass the guy by asking if he has one of those suits, he didn't do anything to justify that. And you move on, and let the chips fall where they may.

The selecting of a movie was not a problem, nor a new one, or *any* one . . . Dixon had subscriptions to every service up the wazoo, including about all the movie channels on cable, and about a 1000 movies on demand, conservatively.

No idea why he landed on it, but Chris went with the 'The Guns of Navarone'.

How could you beat Gregory Peck, David Niven, and Anthony Quinn?

While he watched it Chris was thinking, now that's how you do it when you're acting these adventure roles--larger than life, but always with the deft touch of class showing through.

At any rate, that ended and he put on *Argo*, which they told you won for Best Picture in 2012, George Clooney and Ben Affleck, and Jeez, that was much worse, the effects were over the top, the acting felt stiff and halfway through Chris was actually bored, and considering switching to Sports Center.

That's when Rich called.

"Yeah man," Chris said.

"I spoke to your girl," Rich said.

"Hunh?"

"Evelyn Saint. Just got off with her."

Chris was trying to get a handle on it. "I mean, just like that? . . . You *found* her? And then, *made contact*?"

"You know what you're doing?" Rich said. "You don't mean to be, but you're insulting me a little."

"I apologize."

"You're forgetting I was once an investigative reporter. I have my pride, I try to keep up. There are tricks, workarounds. You can pull some

amazing shit . . . this wasn't a blockbuster, took me twenty minutes to track her down. Goes by Jennifer Egan now, married last name and changed the first name for whatever reason."

"No way . . ."

"She lives in Branson, Missouri."

"That the . . . tourist town, where they have all the country music?"

"It is, now listen up. I asked her what she thought of your boy."

"And she talked to you? I mean answered that kind of thing?"

"Yeah. I was calling as Frank Burlingame, SFPD Homicide and she didn't have a problem with that . . . Stop interrupting me. She said he came on to her once, she rebuffed him, and he reacted scary-angry, and she feared him from then on. She couldn't pinpoint it, it wasn't like he put his hands on her, but his reaction shook her up. Couldn't sleep that night, she said. And kept it to herself."

"Ho-ly . . . Toledo . . . I'm not . . . believing this. Was that, did it have anything to do with her . . . disappearing that time? The story I told you, where she supposedly got abducted and let off in Jenner?"

"You *didn't* tell me she got let off in Jenner, but I asked the question, yeah. She was a little vague, said she was running with the wrong crowd, but nothing criminal happened . . . But no, she *was* clear that was a separate deal, nothing to do with your boy."

"But . . . do you think, part of her running out on the business, cold turkey . . . that could have been on account of *him*?"

"Didn't sound like it, necessarily."

"But you're telling me," Chris said, "when we strip it all away . . . my old boss . . . behind the scenes . . ."

"I know it's tough," Rich said. "The possibility. To wrap your head around. And obviously--certainly if we took it to a DA--we don't have jack crap."

“Maybe not,” Chris said, and he thanked Rich for all he’d been doing, and put down the phone, praying that he could be *inside* one of those movies he’d been watching, and none of this could be real.

There was a new restaurant on Chestnut he’d passed by 3 or 4 times now, grass fed burgers and English beer varietals on tap, and the good thing was--just like the place in MB last week--they weren’t doing great--hopefully that would change when they got discovered more--but the advantage being you could walk right in, no overflow like so many of the Chestnut eating establishments had, and again, Chris figured they aimed to please, which was accurate.

The waitress and the bartender were all over him, making sure every detail was okay, and the owner too came over once, a hearty looking guy with a rugby shirt and one of those extreme regional British accents that was tough to understand, and he was a colorful character, and Jeez, now Chris really *did* hope everything was going to work out.

When he finished he walked over to Funston Field, and you could plug in different generations and fancier equipment, but the core didn’t change, you had people throwing balls for dogs, a few dads playing catch with their kids, and a big crowd whooping it up at an adult league softball game, this one co-ed, you’d guess maybe one company against another, no one too skilled on either team, but it didn’t matter.

Overlooking it all was a bench outside the gym, the field house where Chris had played hours, probably *hundreds* of it hours if felt like, of basketball back in the day. It was right next to Marina Junior High, and guys gravitated there on the way home, and on the weekends too.

Thinking about it, this could be the exact same physical bench as back then. When you got beat in basketball, you’d typically go outside and sit on the bench for a while and cool off, since the gym got so damn hot, plus the winners stayed on the floor and losers were going to have to wait a while to get back on it.

You could overthink till the cows came home . . . and Chris tried to get comfortable, took a major deep breath, and called Errol.

“Yo, Bud, to what do I owe this occasion,” Errol said, clearly happy to hear from him again. “I don’t talk to you 15, 20, years--now it’s twice in 24 hours.”

“You don’t happen to own a Tyvek suit, do you?” Chris said.

There was a bad silence.

It turned Chris’s stomach inside-out, and he lowered the phone for a moment.

“A *what* now Dog?” you could hear Errol saying now.

“Yeah,” was all Chris could say.

“My man, I’m not following you now. Let’s start over.”

“That’s okay,” Chris said. “We’re good. You enjoy the rest of your day.”

Chapter 12

Neighborhood hardware stores were tougher to come by these days, but there was one on Lombard, run by a Chinese family, sort of a mixture of household goods, basic hardware items, along with a couple aisles of Asian food items, like what'd you see in a store on Clement Street.

It was Friday morning, a glistening bright day in the city for February 9th, though apparently they'd gotten a foot of snow overnight at Tahoe.

Chris found some decent wire, it reminded him of baling wire like they might use on hay, or to tie fencing together. The main thing, it was flexible enough that you could work it, and he had the guy cut him a nice three-foot length.

This time he didn't fool around in the glove department either, they had a brand that had extra heavy-duty padding, both on the palm and fingers, and even on the back--and they were a little bulky when you slipped them on, but well worth it.

And oh yeah . . . the roll of duct tape, don't forget that.

So there you were . . . he was all set, and nothing to do now except drive over to Castro Valley.

Fortunately Dixson's closet in the apartment was nicely stocked with cold-weather gear as well, when you poked around in the back, plus some LL Bean-like fleece lined boots, too hot for around here but Chris put them on anyway, for later.

The rental car he'd picked up Wednesday was a basic Honda Civic, but it seemed sufficient, and he threw the warm clothes in back and stuck the hardware supplies in the center console . . . and 40 minutes later he was

dealing with Errol's community gate again, the bottom of the hill, all the houses up above, where they had their views.

Chris of course had no idea if the guy'd be around. He was going by what Errol told him the other night, that he normally worked at home Monday Wednesday Friday and limited his out-of-office stuff to the other two days.

That was the schedule in place before last night's phone call, anyway.

Chris was thinking, if it were him, and *he* gets that call, he's out the door in 20 minutes and--brutal to even picture--but on the next Greyhound to wherever.

But that was him. He tended to be more paranoid than regular people.

And maybe Errol *was* alarmed by the phone call, who knows, but not alarmed enough to do anything--except maybe get rid of the Tyvek suit, if he hadn't already . . . The phone call was, after all, just some kid (Chris) who used to work for him, calling up and asking a question--based on some information the kid must have picked up somewhere.

But it wasn't like it was the authorities closing in.

So Chris leaned out the driver's window to where the console was, where visitors called up to the residents, and he took one of those healthy deep breaths and punched in Errol's code.

No answer. He gave it another 30 seconds and tried it again.

Errol's voice came on the intercom: "What do you need."

And Chris picked up the handset that was part of the intercom apparatus.

He said, "Dude I'm trying to *help* you here. Let me in." He hated the word dude but it just popped out.

There was no more conversation, and Chris was hanging onto the headset, hoping, and a good minute went by and then the buzzer sounded

and the heavy security gate swung open, and Chris drove up the hill and pulled into Errol's driveway.

Errol opened the door, no smiles today, more of the *what do you need* attitude, not like he was going to challenge or attack Chris, but making it pretty clear that he didn't belong here now.

Chris pointed inside and said, "You mind?"

"I *do*," Errol said, leaving it there.

"Here's the thing," Chris said. "I'm not your enemy. I can help you get rid of the suit and whatever else. If you ask me to . . . Where *is* it? Let's see if it's even what they're worried about."

And he brushed past Errol into the house, Errol only making a half-hearted effort to restrain him, and he followed Chris in and closed the door . . . and Chris smashed him over the head with the flashlight he pulled out of his rear pants pocket.

It was one of those heavy jobs, the kind the police used at one time, that took 6 full-sized batteries and could double as a night stick, or at least some kind of improvised weapon.

Another perk from Dixson, he had it in the kitchen drawer, and Chris did a test fit in the apartment, and first he couldn't get it into the back pocket, but he took some scissors, made a little cut, and it worked, though it was sticking halfway up his back.

Either way, Errol was in some trouble, but wobbling, trying to get up, and Chris smashed him with the thing again for good measure.

"Let's go," Chris said. "In the car."

Errol got back to a sitting position and Chris found a towel and brought it along. Let the guy at least dab his wounds, though frankly it was more an impact thing, the guy taking some blunt force for sure. One little cut was part of it, Chris could see now, but no real blood.

Errol did seem stunned, the way you see a fighter on TV staggering around when they don't know quite where they are or what just hit them,

and Chris was able to guide him by the arm, resistance free, into the passenger seat.

“Make sure you put your seatbelt on,” Chris said, and the guy made a small motion with one hand toward where you pulled the belt, and didn’t go any further with it.

Before he started the engine, Chris took the duct tape out of console, taped Errol’s wrists together, and it was a bit of a pain, but reached way down and got his ankles taped together as well.

“You can relax now for a while,” Chris said, easing it out of the driveway, onto Fox Ridge Drive, a right turn on Strobridge to the 580 ramp, then picking up the 680 business through the Walnut Creek-Concord corridor, and connecting with I-80 at Fairfield.

“So far so good,” Chris said. “I’m turning into a grumpy old man, but I can’t tolerate traffic any more. How about you?”

Errol was staring straight ahead. He’d come around a bit, his eyes were showing more recognition.

Chris had to take a leak by the time they hit the Sacramento bypass toward Reno, and he considered stopping somewhere real quick, you could probably work it . . . but he better not fool around.

It wasn’t until around Colfax that Errol initiated his first bit of conversation.

He said, “If I might ask, where are we going?”

“And the second part of that?” Chris said, “*and what are you doing with me?*”

Errol didn’t say anything.

“You ever a boy scout?” Chris said.

Errol shook his head very slightly.

“You’re gonna require some winter survival skills. Snow-type ones. What I’ll be doing, is letting you off in the mountains. You’re going to need to keep your wits about you, and it’s up to you, how bad you want it.”

Errol was looking at Chris slightly wide-eyed now.

Chris continued. "You've always been good to me. And that's why I'm giving you a chance . . . Jeez, good thing it's not snowing, currently, otherwise we'd need chains right now."

Which was true, he hadn't thought of that. Meanwhile, dang, there was a fair amount of snow this winter, it was up pretty high already on the sides of the road from the snowplow, and you still had 45 minutes and a couple thousand feet of elevation before you got to Donner Summit.

Chris said, "But you let me down. An old colleague from the newspaper business laid a tip on me, and I put it together . . . Inconceivable as it was . . . I wished I never asked him about the case, honestly."

Errol said, "Please Chris. I can't expect you to understand. Everything just . . . got away from me that night."

"I understand. Like a perfect storm."

Errol didn't say anything, you could tell he thought Chris was probably mocking him.

Chris supposed it *was* good to hear the guy confess, in actual words. In fact he wasn't sure if he could go through with it if he didn't get that out of him just now.

What he meant by *it*--no, he *wasn't* going to be *dropping* the guy off in the woods, letting him test his winter survival skills.

Not all. He was going to be *finishing* the guy off.

The bogus nonsense he was feeding the guy, that he better be ready to pull out his boy scout skills, that was to relax him--or at least as much as that was possible--but enough so he wouldn't fight Chris for his life on the way into the woods.

Which he likely *would* if he knew Chris was driving him in there to use an axe on him or something.

So it's like you're medicating the guy. Keeping him under reasonable control. So you can take the necessary action, with a minimum of peripheral disturbance.

At least until you get the wire around his throat, then yeah, he'll put up a fight for a little while.

Chris exited Highway 80 onto Soda Springs Road. He was somewhat familiar with the area. He'd been coming up here since he was a kid, here and there, a little skiing, a little summer stuff. There'd been a couple of rental cabins he'd gone in on, about 10 people paying their share, though it normally worked about okay because only a few of them were ever up here at the same time.

The human activity was on the south side of Highway 80. That's where you had the Sugar Bowl ski resort, plus a couple smaller ones, and if you stayed on Soda Springs Road that direction you'd eventually wind your way down to Donner Lake.

If you crossed over though, the north side of I-80, there wasn't much, it got pretty remote in a hurry. Chris had some good memories over here, doing mountain biking, though once in perfect conditions, the middle of summer, he took an inadvertent wrong turn off the trail, and realized it a couple hundred yards in--and he had a heckuva time finding that trail again, and plenty of crazy thoughts swirled around in his head before he got there.

After a few minutes Chris turned onto a side road. This was going to be tricky, since they'd plowed the main road, but not this one. This is when you wish you'd thought ahead, rented a Subaru--or at least something with front wheel drive.

Though the Honda was handling it okay, actually, and maybe Chris was mixed up, and he said to Errol, "This thing got front wheel drive? Do you know?"

"I believe it does," Errol said, very faintly.

So that was good then, and you couldn't have laid out better timing actually, the afternoon was getting on, and it felt like it was starting to get a little dark, which it tended to do real early in the mountains.

No one around, no houses, no cabins, no vehicles in the distance . . . nothing.

So Chris turned off the engine.

Errol sat there rigid, facing forward.

It occurred to Chris who am I kidding, this guy sees right through my bullshit, and is expecting the worst.

We'll find out.

Off to the right was a cut-through in a stand of pines, and then it closed in again on you and opened up in back, and you could see just a bit of light filtering into the spot back there, which looked clean and simple and logical. The snow was thick along the way, but you could handle it.

Chris got out and opened Errol's door, and he had to help the guy out, on account of the wrists and ankles being locked together with the duct tape . . . and Errol started hopping ahead, as though he knew where Chris wanted to go.

Chris thought back to an incident from one day on the job at Speed-King. He was a pretty conscientious messenger, and he didn't screw up a delivery very often.

On this one day, he did. He was supposed to pick something up at Number Two Embarcadero Center, and take it to the 38th floor of the Bank of America building, on California and Kearny.

But his brain wasn't working right, and instead he dropped the package on the 38th floor of the Transamerica Building. They didn't seem to be expecting it there, but Chris didn't think much of it, and they signed for it and that was that.

The shift ended and Chris was back in the Speed-King offices on Pier 7, checking out for the day, and Errol is on the phone and puts his hand up toward Chris.

The woman from the Bank of America building company is on the line, and it wasn't *any* company, it was Roche, Winston and Meyer, one of the most respected law firms in the city, and needless to say, a huge account for Speed-King. And apparently the package Chris screwed up was a legal document that had to be filed that day in court.

Errol asked Chris about it, Chris realized his mistake and explained what happened, and for a minute or so Errol stood there with the receiver held out to the side, and you could hear the woman screaming.

Finally the conversation concluded, and Errol winked at Chris and told him don't worry about it. Chris found out later, through the grapevine, that the woman insisted the messenger be fired, if Speed-King ever wanted any more business from them, and Errol had calmly informed her that that wasn't going to happen.

Chris looked at the guy ahead in the woods now, and told him to come back.

They drove out to Highway 80 again, Chris got back on it headed east, toward Reno, and five minutes later he took the downtown Truckee exit.

He went south on old Brockway Road, and it felt like they were heading out into *different* wilderness now, except Chris veered onto North Shore, and then a little left turn, and the Honda came to a stop in front of the Truckee Police Department.

Chris cut off the tape on Errol's hands, then his feet.

"Take care of it," he said, and he watched Errol slowly go inside.

After a couple minutes, it seemed okay to leave. You could head right back down, probably get most of the way to Sacramento before dark.

Then again you had the town of Truckee, with an old main street, some character to it, a few establishments. A little bit of a bar scene.

Chris was thinking, maybe there's a game on, you get into a conversation with someone. He could use that now.

THE END

If you enjoyed 'Justice Redux' and feel like leaving a review on Amazon, that is always appreciated!

Chris Seely returns in Book 8:

'Justice Spiked'

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