

# **JUSTICE SPIKED**

**by REX BOLT**



**Chris Seely**  
**Vigilante Justice Book 8**



## **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

“What I don’t get,” Ned said, “is the women scream when they hit the ball, but the men don’t.”

“It’s not screaming, it’s grunting,” Chandler said.

“You’re being diplomatic,” Chris said.

“What you guys are,” Marlene said, “is a bunch of chauvinist pigs.”

Chris noticed at least she was smiling slightly, so hopefully it wasn’t going to turn into World War 3.

“The technique stems from martial arts,” Dr. Stride said. “It’s quite productive actually, the effect of intra-abdominal pressure on strength patterns is noteworthy.”

“Okay, you need to knock it off,” Chris said.

“The one on the right, though,” Ned said. “She *really* lets you know who’s boss.”

“What’s wrong with *that*?” Stacy said.

“Everything,” Chris said, but it was an argument you weren’t going to win, you had to pick your spots with these people . . . plus who cares?

They were sitting in the stands at Indian Wells, the whole herd of them, which included himself and Ned Mancuso, Chandler and his wife Mallory--probably the nicest one of the whole bunch--Stacy and Doctor Stride, otherwise known as Bruce.

Plus you had Marlene. And of course Ken, who was mostly sulking, Chris recognizing the act by now, likely on account of a latest relationship going south.

So . . . the unlikely total of 8 taking in this women’s pro tennis match together, which featured a couple of Amazonian Eastern Europeans battling each other into the third set now, Chris with no idea how to pronounce

either one's last name based on the scoreboard alone, and it was fine that the public address announcer was helping with that.

The others seemed to be enjoying themselves okay, so Chris didn't want to say anything, but the tennis was boring.

You could certainly appreciate the skills, but every point looked the same. They'd bang the ball into one of the corners and wait for the opponent to cough up a short return, and then then they'd move in and hammer it into the other corner for the winner.

Or else the opposite, they *try* to hammer it for the winner but they'd miss, and there went the point to the opponent.

Little or no creativity out there, and maybe it was the scoring system that was bad too, since there weren't many points where you felt like both players *had to have* them . . . and shouldn't that be what competition is all about?

There'd been a men's match before this one, and that was a bit more watchable, it had its moments, but bottom line, a couple games in, okay, you had the idea, and you were ready to do something else.

Chris almost blurted out a reasonable question, which is what happened to *volleying* the ball in tennis?--and that meant coming in to the net and taking it in the air--but no point opening yourself up for a lecture from Chandler on the subtleties of the sport that he obviously didn't understand.

Back to Ned Mancuso though for a moment.

This being the second weekend in February . . . and he'd known him since October . . . so, 4 months roughly?

For the first 2 and a half of those Chris was pretty dang sure--in some way, shape or form--he'd end up having to kill that guy.

It wasn't anything concrete, it was just the tenor that Ned gave off.



That it likely came down to Chip . . . meaning Ned happening to run into Chris on the beach that time had *zero* to do with Chris having flung some doofus's bicycle off the pier into the ocean.

And *everything* to do with his having baseball-batted Chip into submission over in Hermosa last March.

Chip of course, being connected to Ned--who was anyone kidding on *that*-- going back to their days in Vegas and whatever scams they were gleefully running *out there*.

So yeah, Ned sat him down that first time in the *Crowe's Nest*, introduced him around, took care of him, all smiles. Real smooth.

Laying it out there after a while, not in the exact words, but does Chris have the right stuff?

The thinking *there* . . . could Chris help him? Could he be an asset?

At least that was how Chris interpreted the slightly bizarre encounter--until twenty minutes later, halfway up Manhattan Beach Boulevard toward his new home, the *Cheater Five Apartments*, when he thought, *nah*.

The conclusion being Mancuso was messing with him . . . on the dark side . . . and it might very well come down to whoever struck first.

So right out of the gate, Chris had his guard up with Ned . . . and the guy *reminded* him of Chip, frankly--meaning . . . you assumed you had a logical reason not to care for this guy at all.

Slowly that changed. Part of it was a little time going by, Ned never wavering, always friendly enough, inviting him down to the Strand house--Jeez, even offering him a job, if you could call it that.

Then the time when Ned stopped by the *Cheater Five*, and they sat around the pool and Marlene made an appearance as well--the guy seemed okay.

At least to the point where you didn't need to worry about doing away with him any more, hopefully.

Then of course, the assisting you with Harrison. For a long time Chris tossed it around--why'd the guy do that, what's in it for him--what's he gonna expect me to do in return? Especially given that Ned paid the price, having to lay low in Minnesota for a month while Chris was doing likewise in Eclipse.

There still might be an answer to that, but for now you had to turn the corner and stick Ned Mancuso in the *pretty good guy after all* category.

And typical Ned . . . coming out here to Indian Wells, which was past Palm Springs, 2 and a half hours from Manhattan Beach . . . the guy rents a limo that seats 8, and he piles everyone in and takes care of all the driving, and of course won't hear of anyone trying to chip in a few bucks.

A modern-type limo actually, not all that fancy, more like an extended Chevy Suburban--plus you figured Ned had a connection--but still, dang that's pretty nice.

The cynic in Chris, which he could never seem to control, said that guys like Ned who walked around like they were *Mr. Popularity*, actually didn't have the greatest self-esteem, and slinging money and power and connections around like this gave them the temporary boost they needed.

Chris told himself to shut up with those thoughts.

Bottom line, here they were, you could be doing worse--Chris could think of *several* ways, based on recent events, where you really *could*.

The two women with the complicated Eastern European names went into a 3rd set tiebreaker, and since Chris figured this was it--make or break it time--the screaming got louder.

He and Ned were at the end of the row and Chris said quietly, "I know better, and I'm *way* out of line, politically-correct-wise . . . but it sure sounds like she's orgasming."

"No, you're fine," Ned said. "I didn't need to wait for the tiebreaker for that to cross my mind. I mean how could it not?"

Chris was going to ask, *do you think they're straight, these gals . . .* but he felt like a jerk and caught himself and instead said, "How 'bout Stacy and Stride? That have legs, do you think?"

And of course Stride was Chris's once and possibly future--though probably not--psychiatrist, or therapist or whatever title it was. He was youthful and energetic and fit--the kind of guy who you picture doing a bunch of push ups, sit ups and crunches first thing out of bed, before coffee--but Cripes, the guy had to be at least 50, while Stacy, Ken's one-time girlfriend, was all of 25.

Ned held his hand up though, he was taking a phone call--and that alone was kind of out of character. It was a nice quality actually, when you were socializing with the guy he typically shut the sucker off and gave you his full attention.

"What?" Chris said, when Ned finished. "You look a little diminished, you don't mind my saying."

Chris was halfway kidding, and yeah Ned did seem preoccupied now, but you would assume it was something irritating but routine--such as the crew chief calling him from the Strand house, saying the power went out and they can't film the next porno scene until it comes back.

Ned said, "Sorry about that. What now? Bruce and Stacy you're asking about?"

And you were back to normal, though hard to know for sure, since if there was something really wrong Ned was the kind of guy who could fool you, easy.

Chris said yeah, isn't that too big an age gap?

Ned smiled. "That would have been my instinct. They're getting along though, so God bless 'em."

"I know."

"What I'm surmising," Ned said, "is you're a bit envious of the situation."

“Get out here.”

“Fine.” Ned gave him a little shot, a grin that knew something.

And Jeez, on some level maybe that made sense. Chris, in the limited time he’d spent with Stacy, had tried to be a benevolent uncle figure. It seemed she was making poor choices and she respected his viewpoint, so he embraced the role.

Still, when you thought of it now, he was, what, maybe 16, 17 years older than she . . . but this doofus Bruce had at least 25 on her . . . a quarter century for God sake’s.

“You’re probably right,” Chris said, “who am I fooling?”

“Good to be honest about it,” Ned said. “We’re all human around here. Plus, by comparison, there’s a benefit to a mature woman.”

“Yeah, well, I kind of tried that a couple times recently. Big KO’s.”

Of course he was thinking about Pat, but also Emma. Marlene too, more of an even keel there, but who knew what was up with that.

“How so?” Ned said.

“I guess I was a little lonely out in Arizona, and I dove into something I shouldn’t. You ever talk to anyone on the internet, like one of those old chat rooms they had on AOL?”

“No.”

“Smart. The deal out there reminded me of that.”

“Ah. Even though you were talking to her in person.”

“I’m not making sense . . . Just that impressions are deceptive . . . Shifting it back to the here and now: Marlene gay, do you think?”

Ned had the amused look again. “First of all she’s a great cook, not to mention real easy on the eyes. *You* should know, I would think.”

“You might be giving her a tad too much credit. Pretty sure that was Costco that time, which she re-heated.”

“Either way you gotta get to the bottom of it, know what you’re dealing with,” Ned said, and he called over to Marlene and motioned for her to come here.

“You *have* to be kidding,” Chris said, but right away, like on cue, Marlene popped up and worked her way down the row and cheerfully sat down between them.

“What a finish,” she said. “Thank you so much for making this happen.” Saying it to Ned, which was true to an extent, the limo and so forth, though it was actually Chandler who brainstormed the whole thing.

“Who won?” Ned said. That was a fair question, they’d been caught up in the pros and cons of mature women and neither one noticed the match actually concluded.

“Pavlyuchenkova obviously,” Marlene said. “What match were you fellows watching?”

“We *were* watching,” Ned said.

“No you weren’t. I mean you were *looking*, but you weren’t *interpreting*.”

Ned said, “So, you a gay lady? Swing both ways? What’s the deal, exactly?”

“I explained it to Chris in the beginning,” she said. “It’s complicated.”

Chris said, “Like I may have told you before, I give you credit for not backing away from the question.”

“Except she’s not answering it,” Ned said.

“You’ll have to figure it out then, if it’s so important,” Marlene said, and with that she stood up and worked her way back to her seat.

“Was she wiggling her rear end around just then, or was it my imagination?” Chris said.

“Oh no, she definitely was. For our benefit.”

“So where were we?” Chris said.

“You tell me,” Ned said, but just then his phone beeped again and he took the call, already a little unusual, and then he stood up and continued it walking away, even more out of character.

When he came back Chris said, “I was thinking to myself, I appreciate how you don’t let the phone interrupt a social occasion . . . normally.”

“It’s okay,” Ned said.

“Yeah? Or else it’s not.” Chris giving *Ned* the look now. Waiting.

Ned started to say something a couple times and stopped, and then said, “Just some mope back east. I’m on it.”

“Doesn’t seem like it, honesty. Not that you’re asking my opinion.”

Ned didn’t respond to that but asked who the two guys were warming up for the next match.

Chris opened his program. “It says Busta from Spain, against Zverev from Germany . . . Gee, Zverev is ranked 3rd in the world. Never heard of the guy, have *you*?”

“Who’s first and second?”

“Nadal and Federer.”

“Okay those guys I have heard of.”

“And Busta’s no slouch himself, he’s ranked 12th,” Chris said, “so we’ve got ourselves a reasonable match here.”

Ned nodded, but absentmindedly, not the way you were used to seeing the guy.

Chris let it go for a while. If you asked any more questions you might very well be crossing a line. Involving yourself . . . and oh boy.

Chris knew it wasn’t always that cut and dry, but he suspected in this case it *was*.

He waited until the warm-up was over and the players had toweled off and were back on court, Zverev with the balls in his left hand getting ready to deliver a big first serve to open the match.

“*What* guy back east?” Chris said.

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The matches ran long, it was a lot more than Chris--or probably any of them except for Chandler--bargained for.

You had the German and the Spaniard currently, then two more women, then two more men.

Not one of them being American, and Chris supposed that said something about the state of US youth sports, though hard to know *what*.

At any rate, they stuck it out, everyone seeming cheerful enough to the end, and they found a Black Angus on the way home, and that hit the spot, as did the air conditioning, and you wouldn't think you'd be saying that in southern California in February but Chris had to admit it did get pretty dang hot in those stands and he was kicking himself now for not using the sunblock that someone offered.

It was late when they got back, close to 11, and by that point Stacy was curled up in a fetal position in Dr. Stride's right arm, looking awfully content--and wow, there were Ken and Marlene too, her head on *his* shoulder.

Chris was hoping she'd just konked out and angled that way, but who knows. Could there possibly be something in the developing stages between the two of *them*?

When you disappear without a word for 5, 6 weeks at a stretch, Chris supposed, all bets were off.

The two of *them would* be tough to wrap your head around--and it would resonate wrong for a whole host of reasons--but Chris had his hands in enough pots lately and you better stay out of the way and let nature take its course.

Whatever happened, you had Marlene as a friend, she wasn't (hopefully) headed off the deep end like Emma.

Something else from up north that Chris had been considering: He had plenty of fun with Gloria--including the impromptu Latin dancing

where she unfortunately sweated up the terry-cloth robe pretty bad--but the point being, there was nothing going on between them, so maybe you didn't have to *have* anything there . . . or were you just denying the inevitable?

When they hit the Rosekrans exit off the 405 Ned made an announcement, that he expected everyone to continue on to the *Crowe's Nest*, to culminate the day's activities properly, and it was on him, non-negotiable.

And see this was Ned. You could toy all you wanted with him having an ulterior motive for every action, and being dangerous and likely dishonest--but how could you hold this kind of generosity against the guy?

Plus there was admittedly a welcoming element to Ned, at least when he was in charge like now, and you felt like, yeah, you *should* take him up on it, that at least for a couple hours in there everything's going to be cozy and okay.

Naturally Chandler and Mallory didn't see it exactly that way, and they politely declined and Ned dropped them off.

"Anyone else?" he said, crooking his neck around in the extended SUV.

No one said anything, so when they rolled to a halt--and that was another thing, it was crowded down there at this hour, a block up from the beach, a nice clear Friday night, restaurants and bars still buzzing, and you couldn't park.

Ned without missing a beat put it in the red zone about two feet from the entrance to the *Crowe's Nest*, and when Dr. Stride started to question it Ned waved him off and ushered everyone inside.

By contrast, Chris had one time let Ken and one of his girlfriends off to go boogey boarding, and he had hadn't even *parked* in one, he'd just *idled* in a red zone for a *second* to let them get out--and boom, he gets a ticket.



So here the cops were, likely looking every week for some different way to arrest Ned . . . but yet the guy can park in red no problem.

Everyone had their spot by now, Ken and Marlene started off at a table near the door, Cindy saying hello pretty quick and setting them up with beverages . . . Dr. Stride and Stacy, if anything, looking *more* lovey-dovey by the hour, squared away at a corner table against the wall, under some deep-sea fishing memorabilia . . . and Chris following Ned back to his regular spot across from the end of the bar.

Chris said, “The nonchalance of your parking effort, that’s either impressive or real stupid.”

“Nah, I’m good,” Ned said, and here was Rory showing up a moment later, and oddly bending down and giving Chris a little peck on the cheek, along with a *how’ve you been stranger?*

Chris said fine thanks, but when she left he said to Ned, “Wasn’t I just in here, and she waited on us--like a week ago? Didn’t we go through the *long time no see* routine then?”

“Been a *couple* weeks, actually,” Ned said. “Speaking of which, what happened with your deadbeat up there?”

“Oh, the tenant? Yeah, I worked it out, thank God.”

“A meeting of the minds then? Everyone on the same page?”

“More or less. I pepper-sprayed the guy. Actually I take it back, I maced him. Some serious foreign shit.”

Ned barely blinked and you could see him thinking about it. “Yeah, that’d be a good way.”

“It was. Where I almost got in trouble was making extra sure I’d driven in the point.”

“Uh-oh.”

“I know, I can’t leave well enough alone anymore, it seems like. That’s why, like I was saying, I met once or twice with Bruce over there.”

“Good to hammer home the point though,” Ned said. “Beyond what the guy might expect.”

“Whatever . . . So I get him on the roof, dangle him to *make* that point . . . and then when I’m bringing him back, I *lose* his ass.”

“Jesus. He survive it?”

“Oh yeah. His fall got broken, and he took off running--if you could call it that.”

“Internal injuries?”

“Man, I never thought of that. Hopefully not.”

“Where’d you procure the high-end mace?”

“Some weird dude. Brainy guy though. Claims he can hack into computers, if you need it.”

“You never know,” Ned said, and meanwhile his phone rang again, but this time he ignored it . . . but you could tell it got his attention.

“I don’t mean to keep bringing it *up*,” Chris said, “but that’s three times now--at least--that I’m watching you being jerked around by that hunk of plastic.”

Ned hadn’t answered the question, hadn’t wanted to talk about it, when Chris pressed him at Indian Wells on the mysterious business with the guy back east, and he was doing the same thing now.

And let’s face it, it probably wasn’t mysterious at all--in Ned’s circle, guys got ticked off.

Ned said, “So LeBron, you know he’s a free agent right? After the playoffs? What are the odds he ends up with the Lakers?”

And here he was, back to shooting the shit, talking NBA basketball now, a regular Friday night at the *Crowe’s Nest*, and Chris rolled with it and took a look around, and everyone else in the joint seemed in good shape at the moment, including the 4 they came in with . . . so what could you do.

## Chapter 2

“I really must be out of it,” Chris said. “They changed some stuff, I didn’t even notice.”

“Well you were away,” Tammy said.

“Except I’ve been back a week . . . Yeah, this patio furniture is new. I’m thinking those flowering plants weren’t there either, in the big round bowls? And the inside of the pool, the color looks different. More vivid. Is it possible they drained the thing and repainted it? Would that be a major job?”

“Anything’s possible,” Tammy said, “but pools tend to be the same color.”

“Either way,” Chris said, “why don’t you help yourself and go in, before we get started. Then I can size up the contrast too, see if I was mixed up on the repainting.”

“Or not,” Tammy said.

“You even *bring* a bikini? Or that’s not part of the deal today?”

“I wasn’t planning on it. I do appreciate you giving me the time though.”

“Of *course* . . . why *wouldn’t* I?” Chris said.

Admittedly watching Tammy, his one-time surfing instructor, bob around the little *Cheater Five* pool would have been a nice touch. The reason they were here though, Tammy was following up, from when she found out Chris had once been a journalist, on the blog she was developing on women’s surfing.

“Women’s *pro* surfing?” Chris said now. “Or just the generic kind?”

“Yes, I’d like to focus on the professional game, with plenty of linkage to the *everyday* female in the water.”

“You’re losing me already. *What* game?”

“It’s a term. But yes the sport is competitive, often fiercely so.”

“Let me side track you for a second. Does a woman really need to . . . scream out, in competition? Or is that a myth?”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost *me*. You mean after a great ride, in celebration? Before she paddles back out?”

“Forget it,” Chris said. “We were at a tennis thing yesterday, and I’ve seen it on TV, but dang, in the flesh they really bellow it out.”

“Actually,” Tammy said, “I know a little something *about* that. I played junior tennis, and our coach, he had ground rules. He felt you were unfairly interfering with your opponent by making the noise.”

“Wow. That guy still around? He should get an award or something.”

“They ran him off. Some of the parents. They felt he was too dogmatic. Last I heard he’d moved to the Fiji Islands.”

“The lesson there,” Chris said, “let the coach *coach*. High school where I taught English for a while, they had a JV coach, he was 30-0 in league--this is basketball--and the parents got him fired. The principal caved in.”

“Let me guess,” Tammy said, “playing-time was a factor.”

“You’re kind of a genius,” Chris said. “What sports *don’t* you know something about?”

“Well I’m not a great swimmer.”

“Now *that*, you gotta be kidding me.”

“I know, you’d think. The ocean and all. I mean I’m not going to drown out there, but I won’t beat many folks in a 50 yard freestyle . . . I was on a swim team when I was a teenager, briefly, but the flip turn got me. It threw off my equilibrium. I’ve kind of resisted the activity ever since.”

“*Activity*, that’s kinda funny. I was on swim team too as a kid, not a superstar swimmer either, but I did drown a guy once.”

Tammy’s mouth dropped open.

“Not that big a deal,” Chris said, “I mean there were circumstances involved. But don’t tell anyone.”

It occurred to Chris that he really didn’t *know* Tammy, but that if she *did* tell someone, he’d just pass it off as a joke. After all, they weren’t going to pin Damirko on him at this point, he was confident of that . . . The Dale idiot though, out in Eclipse, that *could* have been problematic . . . in which case he wouldn’t be sitting here in MB with Tammy at the moment, but it *didn’t* go south, so no point getting carried away.

You might as well throw her a change-up here though. This is what played out in their other get-together too, Chris happening to bring up the fact that Ray got him a gun once.

That got Tammy off her surf instructor high horse, changed the tone of the rest of the meal. Today she wasn’t in the same role exactly, since she was looking to him to help her *out*--but still, shake things up a little, it never hurts.

“You’re putting me on,” she said now about the drowning business. “I *think* . . . Aren’t you?”

“Like I said, you live long enough things happen. It’s not always anyone’s fault . . . Your blog though, why not make YouTube videos instead?”

“Gosh. Pardon?”

“My thought lately is people don’t read. Or at least their eyes don’t move when they try, so they only pick up the words directly in front of them. At *most* . . . I mean, what blogs are popular anymore? *Name* a couple.”

“Are you just saying that,” Tammy said, “because you don’t feel like helping me today? In which case, that’s fine, we can reschedule.”

Chris was going to answer but the side gate rattled and someone came into the pool area. It was Betty, the flight attendant for Southwest. She swam laps occasionally, looked pretty good in doing so.

In fact it was Betty in the pool when Detective Hamm and the other guy came by that time, and they were preoccupied for a minute *watching* her swim up and down, before they unleashed their barrage on him.

Chris had tried to put a little bit of a move on Betty once, early on, before Marlene showed up at the *Cheater Five*, and he got the polite but firm rejection.

Now she was joining them actually, sitting down, more talkative than ever. Chris wondered what *this* was all about . . . but he'd been through enough that you positively *couldn't* explain about women, to assume that it was about *anything*.

The good part, Tammy opened up right away with Betty, all Chris had to do was introduce them--and after a few minutes Tammy divulged why she was here, and wouldn't you know Betty was a literature major in her day and in fact loved editing.

"With all due respect," Chris said, "you *edit*?"

"Golly, he was listening after all," Tammy said to Betty. "The vibe I was getting, before you came along, was that his interest pertained largely to me stripping down and going in the water."

"Tell me about it," Betty said, and when Chris scanned them both, neither one was doing much smiling.

So yeah, he really better cut back on the fraternity boy nonsense, there really *was* a point where you wear out your welcome.

"But I'm serious," Chris said, "you didn't answer the question."

"Yes I *do* edit, for your information," Betty said. "I help friends who write things on Amazon. I'm their set of eyes, you might say."

"What *kind* of things?" Chris said.

“Cooking tips, gardening books, a few memoirs. Is there a *problem* with that?”

“Not at all. In fact more power to you. 95 percent of the self-published stuff on Amazon is bad, if you don’t mind my opinion. None of it should have been inflicted on the world.”

“I beg to differ,” Tammy said. “I’ve found plenty of good stories on there.”

“Like what?” Chris said.

“Well, for starters, do you like mysteries?”

Chris said that depends.

“There’s this one series,” Tammy continued, “I’m hooked, I gobble up every new book in it.”

“Ah Jeez,” Chris said.

“The main character, you might say she’s a Renaissance woman. She’s multiply talented, but her focus in the books is she solves cold cases for the police.”

“Oh,” Chris said. “Sounds a little simplistic though, they need to throw a couple more subplots in there, spice it up a bit. Don’t you think?”

“Not at all. I love the character. I’m happy to read about her doing a *crossword puzzle*.”

“One question on that,” Chris said, “how do they handle the sex scenes?”

“What do you *mean*?” Tammy said.

“I mean, does your gal . . . get down in the trenches, and if she does, how is that described? . . . Or it’s not styled that way.”

“What a chauvinist pig question,” Tammy said. “Out of everything you could ask about the series.”

“That’s for sure,” Betty said.

Chris had had the chauvinist expression thrown at him recently, and thought it must be making a comeback. Gee, in fact it was just yesterday, by

Marlene at the Indian Wells tennis. Though Marlene was semi-joking. These women didn't seem to be.

But he thought it *was* a fair question for a couple of reasons. A) he was curious, why *not*, plus *she* brought up the particular mystery series that she liked, and b) he wouldn't admit this to anyone but he was toying with writing a mystery novel of his own.

He even had a bit of an outline. It was actually based on Shep, the bartender at Weatherby's.

The idea had been stewing for a while, but last week up there in San Francisco, Shep changing that lock for him and opening up a little more about himself--though leaving plenty of mystery in the oven too, which was fine--it got Chris thinking:

You could have a bartender, good-looking guy, bachelor, lives on a houseboat across the bay. The guy has a colorfully uneven past that may or may not reveal itself.

He listens to people's problems sometimes, especially when they're on their second or third round, and he gets getting hooked by a particular thing he hears and ends up doing a little detective work to solve it.

Then he gets a bit of an underground reputation and people start coming to him and he picks and chooses, a case here, a case there. Sort of a modern day Sam Spade operating part time out of a bar.

Chris wasn't convinced so far that the story sounded any good, which was why he didn't dare run it by someone. Such as Chandler, for example, who, yes might have a good suggestion or two, but meanwhile his overall reaction could ruin your confidence, and your author career is over before it even starts.

The other part of that though, what Tammy was rambling on about with her series--Chris perked up when she talked about the hero-gal solving cold cases.



The reason being, driving back from San Francisco last weekend after depositing Errol at Truckee . . . and what he did, he kept the rental car and returned it down here in Torrance--huge drop off fee unfortunately for not bringing it back where you rented it, but probably still the smart move . . . the point being, on the way down Highway 5 Chris reevaluated his life's direction.

He reminded himself you were into February . . . and Holy Smokes, right around Harris Ranch was where it dawned on him that son of a gun, he had passed the one year mark.

There'd been a couple of false starts on celebrating this pretty darn monumental occasion, as Chris had gotten his dates mixed up, but this was for real.

It was a Monday afternoon, February 6th, 2017, when Chris staggered like a zombie out of Steiner's office into the sunshine after being told he had between 6 and 18 months to live.

With Steiner of course recommending experimental therapies as part of his announcement--and when you're down to *those* you're *really* cooked, since none of that's going to work anyway and the odds are that them turning you into a guinea pig will speed up your decline substantially.

Chris on Highway 5 was counting backwards on his fingers and boom, the magic date, the one year anniversary, was four days earlier, Tuesday, when he left Gloria the fake note in the morning that he was headed back to Manhattan Beach but instead moved into Dixson's apartment in the Marina and started hunting down Errol.

The idiot in Chris thought for a second, that too bad it wasn't a day earlier, since that's when he and Gloria had fun going dancing, and that would have a fitting celebration . . . but forget that.

Chris had of course been increasingly optimistic that there was a mistake with his diagnosis, for going on the last 6 months or so--but there

was something awful sweet and definitive about putting a check mark on a specific *date*, indicating you got through a full year.

Not that he wanted to know for sure, even now--meaning go back and get re-tested . . . and Jeez, he'd forgotten all about Bethany calling up out of the blue on Christmas, urging him to do exactly that . . . although that phone call hadn't been the greatest for a few reasons, so he figured he probably blocked it out.

At any rate, Chris decided the reason you don't get re-tested hadn't changed, ever since that first time in the bar, a couple months in, when Shep remarked that he looked pretty good, and couldn't someone have fucked up in the medical chain.

An hour further down Highway 5 there was a large cluster of restaurants on the left side of the freeway, including oddly not 1 but 2 Indian all-you-could-eat buffets, and Chris loved that stuff and was tempted, but figured it would make you groggy, all that *ghee* they threw into the dishes.

So Chris found a ribs place, fairly authentic actually, with the charcoal pit out front and the grill that they raised up and down with a hand crank, and he was hungrier than he thought once he smelled everything, and went with a full rack.

He sat there digesting a while and made a couple of notes.

**Cold cases**

**Mt Tam killer?**

**DJ stalker**

He was going to add to each of them, some subtext, but they were all going to require a little more thinking over.

The main breakthrough concept that had formulated itself today on Highway 5 being:

*Yeah, you're going to live.*

*Yeah, you're already in deep, and you can't reverse that fact.*

*Yeah, it's not easy to go cold turkey and retire, even though it sounds logical.*

The compromise, Chris was thinking, was if you *need* to continue, don't be going local.

Meaning *in and out*.

There was a speaker once at a seminar Chris attended on real estate, a veteran investor who'd also been in the army. His philosophy had always been conservative--buy shit and hold onto it--but lately with increased lawsuits and environmental regulations and red tape, the guy had shifted to *Ranger Investing*--which was get in, and get the hell out.

Chris figured, his *own* deal, the safest way to do *that* was show up somewhere like Dubuque, and work a case that disturbed you enough to *be* there. Something the cops put on the back burner perhaps, or underestimated.

Dubuque was just a hypothetical, but there was a case he read about while screwing around on Dixson's computer in the apartment, in some little town out in Iowa that went cold on 'em 20 years ago. There was renewed interest now with DNA--naturally--which is why it made the news. They were using a new system called an M-Vac to try to pull the bad guy's DNA off a rope.

But the point being, there were a lot of these around the country, more than you could ever tackle--and likely more than *modern DNA* could

ever tackle--and Chris figured if he could assist on any of them he'd be bringing his little bit of goodness to the world--not to mention some at least bittersweet closure for those affected.

So there you had it, getting back in the car and starting up the Grapevine over the mountain to LA . . . not exactly a new leaf, but another shift of gears, this time precipitated by the realization--not quite a giddy one, but close--that he'd made it through a year.

Back poolside on this 76 degree February Saturday afternoon at the *Cheater Five*, Tammy had her laptop open and she and Betty were studying the screen intently together.

"If I use WordPress," Tammy was saying, "then I believe I can set up a forum as well."

"I'd agree with that," Betty said. "Always a plus to offer the readers opportunity to interact."

Chris cleared his throat. "With all due respect, I'll make this announcement one more time. Go with YouTube."

"I'm sorry?" Betty said.

"What I was starting to *tell* her," Chris said, "people like to watch and and listen. No *readers* out there anymore, too dull and time consuming. Also hard work."

"Well we'll concede you your opinion," Betty said, "and leave it at that. I'm surprised actually Tammy would be consulting with you in the first place."

Tammy said, "Chris doesn't look like it, he could fool you a million ways, but he was a journalist."

"You're overdoing it," Chris said. "Newspaper writer. Leave it at that."

"Now I'm *impressed*," Betty said. "I had no idea."

It dawned on Chris that maybe he'd have better luck with some of these women if he laid more of his past on the table, upfront, emphasizing

his strong points . . . though probably it wouldn't make a stitch of difference.

“What you do,” he said, “you show yourself surfing--and ideally not in a bulky wetsuit, but that's up to you. Then you come out of the water onto the beach and you conduct the rest of your brief lecture--and I mean that, people's attention spans are *shot*--but you give 'em the one or two points you want to make that day on women's surfing and then you click off.”

“Oh brother,” Tammy said, and Betty was reacting with a bit of a cringe as well.

The side gate jiggled again, and Jesus Christ who was coming through it now but Mancuso.

“Hey gang,” Ned said. Chris noticed right away, the upbeat facial act was the same as always, but he didn't have quite the normal bounce in his step.

Ned came over and bent down and gave Tammy a peck on the cheek, likely confirming Chris's suspicion that day at lunch when he ran Ned by Tammy, and she responded that she was pretty sure she *knew* who he *was* from the *Crowe's Nest*.

Chris didn't quite buy that then, the innocence of it, and he definitely wasn't buying it now, especially with Tammy holding Ned's hand while he was leaning over, and taking a second too long to let go.

None of Chris's business of course.

Then Ned, without missing a beat, introduces himself to Betty, and leans in and gives *her* a healthy and rather lengthy peck on the cheek as well . . . Chris thinking there you go, Ned with whatever enigmatic trait you need, to pull that shit off, and everyone's thrilled all around . . . whereas if he, *Chris* tried it, someone'd be liable to call the police, or at the very least slap him.

“Well now that we're all unexpectedly here,” Chris said, “can I offer anyone anything? Food? Beverage?”

The three of them indicated that would be fine, and Ned sat down and it was suddenly like old-home week around the pool, and Chris felt like the odd man out and wished he hadn't offered anything but he had, so he went upstairs to try to put something together.

It took Chris a few minutes, and he filled a couple trays and a mini ice chest, and when he got back down there they were huddled around the computer again, this time Ned in the middle, pretty much running the show.

No one particularly acknowledged Chris's return until he pointedly started passing out stuff, and Tammy said, "Ned thinks *videos* are a good promotional tool, for *my* idea."

Saying this like it was a brand new brainstorm, not *Ned thinks so too*, just throwing it out there like nothing Chris had ever brought up. What a surprise.

"Well that'd be one way, yeah," Chris said. "I thought they were into blogging though."

"That could work too," Ned said. "I always like visuals, though. You're caught up in it right away."

No point taking it any further and broaching the subject again, but if *Ned* suggested Tammy surf on the videos in more minimal attire than a full body gray wetsuit, she'd say sure and probably go buck naked.

Anyhow . . . you had to seriously wonder what Ned was doing here.

He'd been by here that once, but that was part of an ongoing project, which morphed into Harrison that night . . . actually he'd been here *twice* if you got technical--the second time being the middle of the night when he'd had the decency to knock on the door and alert Chris to seriously consider getting out of town.

Based on the tennis matches yesterday and the *Nest* last night--specifically the phone calls Ned kept coming away from with a momentary

long face, until he turned the act back on--you had to assume this was about that *guy back east*.

Ned hadn't answered Chris's question at Indian Wells--the *what* guy?--but you'd assume something changed overnight . . . unless this was about a pair of Lakers tickets Ned couldn't use this evening and dropped by to ask Chris if he wanted them . . . but you wouldn't bet the house in Vegas that *that's* why he's here.

If he did say so himself, Chris pulled together a pretty nice spread. Worked a little Costco magic with the microwave, and after a few minutes Tammy closed the laptop and everyone was stuffing their faces.

When they'd more or less devoured everything Tammy said, "Chris, you wouldn't happen to have a tad of something sweet, would you, to finish things off?"

"I know," Betty said. "A little coffee and a tid-bit would work wonderfully about now."

"Coffee yes," Chris said, "but unfortunately nothing dessert-like at the moment." Which was a semi-lie, there was an unopened box of these frozen cream puffs up there, dang good, Chris had sampled that brand before, but he was afraid these might belong to Ken's recent girlfriend Michelle--likely out of the picture now but you never knew, and she was a feisty customer who you didn't want mad at you.

"I've got some Oreo's," Betty said, and for whatever reason that prompted the two women to huddle for a minute, and then Tammy announced that were headed into town, to Peet's, and did anyone want to join them?

There was *zero* conviction in the *joining them* offer, and Chris declined right away, which he would have done anyway, and Ned shook his head thanks, and Tammy and Betty, without much more fanfare, picked up and left.

"That was some huddle," Chris said.

“Intense,” Ned said. “Like they were gearing for a middle eastern summit.”

“Sounds like they’re craving sweets though,” Chris said. “Particularly Tammy.”

“Big-time.”

“She always like that, in your experience, or just particular times of the month?”

“Particular times,” Ned said, clearly not concerned about disguising the fact the he really *did* know Tammy pretty well.

Chris said, “That’s one place the male species can’t win. You have to admit. If they’re acting different--*more* strange than just craving *sweets*, I’m talking--but if you even *raise the possibility* that it could have to do with the time of the month . . . they’ll flat out want to butcher you.”

“Oh yeah. You bring *that* up, if they had a machete handy they’d use it. I’m *convinced* of that.”

“So,” Chris said. “I’d pull out the old line, *you’re probably wondering why I’ve called you all here*. Except it’s just you and me, and I didn’t call *anybody* here--and I’m telling you the *third* time now, you don’t look too great.”

Ned sat there fingering his temples, staring at the pool, not saying anything for a while, which is how Chris figured it would play out. The guy had a burden, likely an insurmountable one at this point, but he also had his pride.

Chris said, “Let me break the ice here . . . And what I’m saying is straight from the hip, so you want to be offended . . . that’s *your* business.”

Ned looked away from pool and locked on Chris.

Chris continued, “You’re not the most trustworthy guy, you got a sleaze bag element to you--and I have to side 100 percent with my brother on that one--and honestly? Since day-one I’ve felt like I gotta watch my back. And that concern has *evolved*, but at the core it hasn’t *changed*.”



Ned managed a weak smile. “Anything *else*?” he said.

“Yeah,” Chris said. “You have a good heart.”

Ned looked at him a little longer and then swiveled his head back toward the pool.

Chris said, “And the only reason I say all this . . . is *Man*, *talk* to me. I’ve *been* there . . . You’re a proud son of a bitch and underneath that act of yours you’re every bit as stubborn as I am . . . but God *damn*.”

Ned spoke softly, and it wasn’t the volume that was different but the resignation in Ned’s voice that Chris didn’t like at all, the unfamiliar timbre.

“Yeah okay it’s the guy,” Ned said. “*Still* the guy. What do you want me to say?”

“Who is he?” Chris said.

“Paul Albanese. The name won’t mean anything, but you asked.”

“*Where* back east?”

“Yonkers.”

“Is he a business partner?”

“At one time. Possibly.”

“You’re pissing me off,” Chris said. “Let’s not fuck around here, being coy.”

“He’s been helping me distribute some stuff. But that’s only part of it.”

“The porn flicks.”

Ned shook his head, and Chris suspected it still might *be* that.

“And now, just like that, he’s *not* helping you,” Chris said.

“It’s a little more complex,” Ned said. “We go back.”

Chris *was* getting ticked off by these responses, and he considering hammering Ned, peppering him with interrogative questions, Ned being uncharacteristically broken down right now and coughing up the answers, albeit brief ones.

But did you need to go *through* all that?

“Get me to the bottom line,” Chris said. “What’s he so mad about that you’re so rattled on the phone . . . not to mention reaching out . . . You know that’s what you’re doing, right?”

“Actually, no,” Ned said. “There’s a restaurant opened up--today’s the grand opening in fact--buddy of mine, down PCH, he’s got this concept, the burgers and brew shit in front, and a mini-golf place in back?”

“Jeez. Indoor?”

“Yeah. Year round action. You can putt every night until 2.”

“That’s ringing a bell,” Chris said, “I heard some Millenials talking about one of those up north, in the Mission.”

“Oh. How they making out?”

“Sounded busy. Of course that type thing, tastes can change quick.”

“Mini golf’s been around a while though.” Ned said.

“That’s true,” Chris said. “When I was a kid, used to go down to my cousin’s in San Mateo, they had a huge complex down there, 4 18-hole courses. What we used to do, you remember that 19th hole deal, where you shoot to see if you win a free game?”

“Yeah.”

“One of the courses, you could get close to the hole, except you had to lay down in a little artificial pond and stretch out your arm under this screen, but you then you could persuade the ball into it.”

“So you’d get wet but win free games?”

“Oh yeah. *All* day long. Those were good times.”

Chris was going to add *innocent ones as well*, but there was no need, he and Ned both past the pleasant diversion and back in the reality of the moment.

“So you were kidding,” Chris said.

“Bout what now?”

“The reason you’re here . . . because your happy-go-lucky act is so thick, you can’t turn it off if your life depends on it.”

Ned narrowed his eyes. “Who said *that*?”

“*You* just did,” Chris said, and left it hanging.

Ken showed up now, not coming into the pool area but heading up the stairs to the apartment. Chris called over to him, and they had a *what are you up to today* conversation, nothing important there but not the worst way to break the tension with Ned.

A couple minutes later when Ken disappeared into the apartment, Ned said, “He’s a fine young man, you’re not going to run across anyone better.”

Chris would have to agree, even though things had been more uneven with Ken of late, but every time Chris wanted to get mad at him for something petty, he remembered back to being 25 himself, that you rarely woke up the same way two days in a row.

“Popular at work as well,” Ned said. “Trustworthy. Dependable.”

“Yeah, well,” Chris said.

Ned took a deep breath. “*Bottom*, bottom line?” he said. “I’m not here for the mini golf bullshit . . . but I’m not here to ask your help either.”

“I never said you were.”

“Oh.”

This was one of those crossroads moments, and Chris took a second and then spit it out.

“Good,” he said, “we got that out of the way . . . So, you need help?”

## Chapter 3

Where Chris wouldn't have put money on being headed again this soon was the Sacramento bypass for the Sierras, meaning East on Highway 80 again and climbing.

Ned had set him up with a jet-black Chrysler 300, essentially brand new, the deluxe version for sure, bells and whistles all over the place, and Chris seemed to hurt Ned's feelings slightly when he asked if he had something a little more modest.

Ned went back to work on it and came up with a Subaru, a hundred thousand miles on the thing, a few dings in the exterior, and much more Chris's kind of vehicle.

You never knew what might happen, and one thing you didn't want to do was stand out.

Of course the overriding concept was, these were--according to Ned--untraceable vehicles. Not connected with Ned, Chris, or anyone that could link back to them . . . Always questionable that last part, but you had to trust the guy.

What it meant for Chris was a cross-country trip. For better or worse. But the best part, zero *bus* involvement. The second best part, as he was approaching the foothills of the Sierras now and it was snowing out there like a mother--was that this thing was rock-solid 4-wheel drive, you couldn't beat it in nasty weather--at least that's what you heard people bragging about with Subarus.

Chris always dreaded, in a non 4 wheel drive vehicle, running into a situation where you had to put on chains halfway up a mountain pass, and this was one of those today for sure.

It hadn't taken long to get a move on. Ned showed up at the pool on Saturday, the business with Tammy and the website, and Tuesday Chris was on the road. He debated making a pit stop in San Francisco first, and that was a tough call . . . if you forgot about it you ran 5 to Sacramento and turned east and you were golden, where this way you to had to cut off at Tracy and backtrack.

Chris was at one of those stages, based on recent water under the bridge, where backtracking was one of the more distasteful experiences you could be having . . . but he went to San Francisco anyway. Figuring you might be glad you did, later on.

So to change it up, he took 101 all the way up there, and fine, you had the scenic route, plenty of oceanfront miles around Santa Barbara, yada yada, except the sucker took almost 11 hours for reasons not worth going into, and Chris vowed never again.

The justification for going to San Francisco first was to check back in with Mark, Booker's guy over on Douglass Street at the foot of Twin Peaks, who Chris ran the potential DNA computer hacking effort by--and on the way out, almost as an afterthought, Mark had handed him that can of Russian military mace, which, wouldn't you know, *did* end up coming in handy on Dixon.

"You got that zip file?" was the first thing Mark said when Chris was in the door.

It took Chris a second, since his mind was on weaponry, that's why he was here, and he realized Mark was referring to his DNA profile.

"I found a lab in Hawthorne, got tested yesterday," Chris said. "They told me 2 weeks."

"Fine. What else we got?"

Chris wasn't sure if he exactly *liked* Mark, but he liked *working* with him, the guy no-nonsense and sharp, and treating his situation with respect.

Meaning, Mark hadn't forgotten about the DNA business, was concerned about not wasting time--maybe even more concerned than *Chris* was on that, even though *he* absolutely should be as well.

The idea was Chris would fork over the DNA profile, Mark would enter it into the open source database Gedmatch, which was becoming the go-to site for the cops suddenly, and Mark--with cunning and guile and a lot of luck--would hopefully clean out any and all family-tree relatives of Chris whose DNA was on file.

Chris wouldn't exactly live happily ever after at that point, but he'd sleep a lot better.

So at least you had the ball rolling with the lab on that, and you weren't God, it was going to take a couple weeks.

"To answer your follow up," Chris said, "What *else* we got, is I need something to . . . you know . . . do a job . . . Not that I'm planning on one, more like on the off-chance I got into a point of no-return situation, I'd have a way out."

Mark shook his head, indicating Chris was rambling. "Like I told you last time, it stays here, whatever a client tells me. I'm not a judgemental person."

"Ah," Chris said, "good to hear . . . Not that there'd be any reason for it *having* to stay here."

"Shut *up* already, you're giving me a headache," Mark said.

"Fine then. What I'm looking for . . . that'd be some way to eliminate someone, if it came to that."

"I'm gonna spit out where I think you're going," Mark said. "We're talking unconventional, correct?"

"Something like that, yeah," Chris said, "different than the usual means you hear about or see in the movies, such as gun, baseball bat, hammer, bailing wire . . . that type thing." Of course the reason he was

familiar with those rudimentary methods was because, one time or another, he'd used them all.

Come to think of it, while he was on his *own* deal, he'd left out *bowling ball*, which was an odd one admittedly, but in that situation luckily the ball had been too small for his fingers, meaning the holes, and therefore when he did squeeze them in, the ball stayed on nice and solid.

For that matter, now that he'd conjured up the bowling ball incident north of Phoenix, you could throw in a field maintenance machine as well . . . but this was getting way sidetracked.

Mark said, "How comfortable are you with chemicals?"

"Not very," Chris said, "they scare the shit out of me, to tell you the truth."

"Well you handled the mace, right?" Mark sticking strictly clinical, not snooping in on the details of what may or may not have happened with the tenant--just did he handle *that* chemical okay?

Chris said, "Nothing to do with it, but I like it that you're all business."

"Well it goes without saying, you must have taken care of it. Otherwise you wouldn't be here for a *new* reason."

"Lotta guys *would* have been curious though. There was a radio show I used to listen to, people calling in with problems, but the host would always press for the gory details that had nothing to do with the person's issue."

"Like what?" Mark said.

"Jeez, just an example, I didn't expect to have to back it up . . . Okay, well like a guy calls up--and this host, she's some kind of professional therapist, that's the idea of the show--but the guy might say he accidentally discovered evidence on the computer that his wife is being unfaithful. He wants to know how to handle it from here."

"Sounds okay so far."

“So then the host, she’ll say, well did she reach a climax with the new person?”

“Jesus.”

“Now you see what I mean?”

“Although,” Mark said, “the bedroom satiation or lack thereof could be important to her evaluation of what the person was calling for.”

“Give me a break. She’s getting her jollies, the host, pretending it *could* be important but just wanting the down and dirty details.”

“That’s your opinion . . . Guy I grew up with, something similar happened.”

“Oh boy,” Chris said, regretting opening this unnecessary can of worms.

“First mistake,” Mark said, “they got married too young. Guy had gotten clefted a couple years before, in a high school baseball game, freak play, was putting on a tag at third base, had to have a ball removed.”

“You mean . . . *real* ball . . . as in *testicle*?” Chris was afraid he knew the answer, and this getting awful distasteful now.

“The one and only. So he was somewhat impotent from then on. It came and went. He never knew how a session would unfold, if I understood him right.”

“Ho-ly Toledo. So you’re saying, the loss of *one* . . .”

“Nah, it shouldn’t affect anything. That’s what the doctors told him. It was like a mental hiccup. You ever play ball?”

“Dang, you have to keep using that word by itself?”

“*Base-ball*.”

“Some.”

“You know you run across these guys, every so often, catchers? Who develop an affliction, they can’t throw the ball back to the pitcher?”

“You mean they can *throw* it back, but they might not always be accurate.”



“Yeah. Some guy on base, and the pitcher deals, the catcher throws it back wide of the mound, and the guy on base advances. Or scores, if he’s on third.”

“I got you. He psyches himself out. Happens in tennis too, people choke on second serves when it’s an important point. They call it the yips.”

“Not following *that*, but whatever.”

“Forget all that. Cut to the chase here. Your guy you grew up with, who lost the testicle--*what?*”

“All right the point is, the young wife strayed once or twice. I knew her too, nice kid, I guess you couldn’t blame her. But then she announces it at a wedding.”

“Huh?”

“Not *at* the wedding, not even the reception, that’s misleading--it was one of those spill over parties later that night after the whole works.”

“Those typically aren’t good.”

“No. Everyone totally plastered. She thinks some girl has her eye on my friend, so I don’t know if she’s jealous or what, but she stands up and gets everyone’s attention and describes how my friend is inadequate.”

“Ooh no.”

“And what’s worse, she compares him to this other dude, who happens to be in the room as well, who she says floated her boat once beyond belief.”

Chris said, “Dicey sounding scenario, especially when you factor in the booze.”

“Exactly. So like on script, my guy gets in the other dude’s face, and there’s the usual macho posturing and tough-guy talk . . . except my guy finds a pair of scissors and jams one of the blades into the other guy’s ear.”

“You’re *kidding*. Sheesh.”

“Anyhow,” Mark said. “I’m all over the place, but you see what I’m driving at? That radio host of yours?”

“Gee. What was my point *anyway*, after all this?”

“You were saying you liked it that I didn’t ask irrelevant questions.”

“Yeah . . . except now you got *me* doing it . . . so what was the end *result?*”

“The scissors? It was touch and go for a while, the other guy. You’re in the ear, don’t forget, you’re messing with the brain. *My* guy though, 2 and a half years hard time.”

“Jeeminy. That’s it then, last you saw him?”

“Oh no, he’s around. She is too. They tried it again in fact for a while, when he got out, but same bad result.”

“Well, tough story then.”

“It is. You want to know the kicker? The ironic part? This guy, he’s abnormally well-endowed. Intimidatingly so. But he can’t put it to use that great.”

This was a *lot* more information than Chris was looking for, not to mention it hit him in the face with his own situation, the performance envy and anxiety that *he’d* been experiencing ever since that entirely misguided visit to Mancuso’s Strand house operation.

Chris was thinking though, wasn’t there a book they made you read in high school, Hemingway, that had that theme? As he remembered it they were in Paris, after World War 1, good-looking main guy, normal life ahead--except he had a war injury that screwed everything up, meaning *down there*.

Not a bad set-up when you think about it, since authors tend to give their main character a flaw, except Hemingway takes it to a whole new level.

Chris thought he should go back and re-read that, plus a few other classics, since he basically hated the stuff in high school and raced through it all and absorbed about 10 percent . . . But later.

“Okay,” he said. “You were saying? With chemicals?”

“I wasn’t yet,” Mark said. “Just sizing up whether you’re comfortable with ‘em.”

“Well what are my options?”

“I can get detailed or cut to the chase.”

“Chase.”

“Fine. We have five choices, but I’m going narrow it down to three. Poison, nerve gas, or injection.”

“Wow. Wasn’t there another Russian guy in the news, a spy in England, and they found him poisoned? Just the other day?”

“Gassed.”

“I don’t know, it sounds messy. I could see my *self* making an error, doing something premature--and that’s it.”

“For *you*, you mean. Well, gas is relatively safe for the instigator, but yes, there’s a learning curve.”

“Which could be a *dead* learning curve,” Chris said, “so forget that shit.”

Mark started explaining the pros and cons of poison and Chris interrupted him. “You know what, give me the injection thingamajig.”

“You sure you don’t want to hear me out on the poison?”

“No. I’m going with default mode.”

Mark got up and started for the back room, but said, “What’s wrong with an old-fashioned firearm though, if I might ask?”

“Everything,” Chris said. “I know when you factor it all together that’s the most effective way, probably. Never been comfortable with one though. In fact I’m always afraid someone’s going to grab it and use it on me . . . Plus did you know, I read something, they’re pulling *touch DNA* off bullets now.”

“I did see that,” Mark said.

“Just like I was concerned with a while back. In fact your friend Booker and another guy, in the *Lounge*--a year ago--I ask can they trace

*bullets* on you, and the both of them start laughing like it's a Robin Williams gig."

"Things *are* evolving quickly. But thinking a little more clearly, you're leaving *plenty* of DNA at the scene, regardless . . . Okay not *you*, cause you don't like me talking that way . . . but the *bad guys*."

"Unless you wear a hazmat suit, I guess, right?"

"Probably even *then*," Mark said. This time he did go in back and he returned with a couple of vials and some syringes, and he packed it all up neat and tidy, not that different than they might do it with lipstick or some shit in the cosmetics section of a high end department store like Nordstrom's.

Mark told him there are detailed instructions with the syringes on how to set everything up, and 'administer the medication'.

Chris paid him and thanked him, and was going to go into the baloney spiel again about how he'd never really be needing this stuff, it was just a security blanket. But instead he said, "If I hit someone this way, I'm definitely good?"

"You can take it to the bank," Mark said. "Stay safe though."

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The Mark visit screwed things up to the extent that he had to spend a night in one of the motels on Lombard Street again. In the old days he would have hopped back in the car at Mark's and headed straight toward Utah, driving all night, still full of vim and vigor and going as long as he could before he absolutely had to stop.

But Chris figured at 43 you had to accept your limitations even though it was a slightly sour thought, and man that motel bed felt good when he finally got squared away.

He could have stayed in his own apartment of course, on Broderick, except Shep was helping him find a new tenant and the apartment was all spic and span to present itself nicely, so why fool around.

So now here you were, it was Wednesday morning--and the 21st of February, 2018, if anyone cared--and yep, it was a definite snowstorm outside of Auburn and you were glad you were tucked securely away in Ned's Subaru.

And it was slow going, up Donner Summit, and they *were* waving people off to the side to put on chains if they didn't have 4 wheel drive, and the Subaru also had satellite radio which Chris had never experienced, and he found a jazz station that hit the groove just right--not that *smooth* jazz crap but the true hard bop sound out of the 1960's, Coltrane it sounded like, and they followed it up with a full album of Jim Hall guitar beauties, backed by an all star quartet, and whoever the drummer was, was playing the *heck* out of that kit.

Soon enough you'd made it and were coming down the backside of the pass, Donner Lake off to your right and down below, the water sparkling against the forest of white pines surrounding it.

Any other time of year it would have been tempting not to go this way, but instead head up the California coast to where it meets the Klamath River, and then swing onto that road he always loved, Highway 96, one of the scenic drives in the world.

Then you'd wiggle your way through the top little bit of California, and then eastern Oregon into Idaho, and then across the state that way, the back roads, to Pocatello.

That would connect you with the Grand Tetons, and after that Yellowstone.

What country.

Then you're into South Dakota, the Badlands and the Black Hills, very underrated state.

Minnesota, Wisconsin. Plenty of rural beauty there, the dairy farms and landscape reminiscent of Vermont.

Then up the northern tip and you squeeze into Michigan, or you short-cut it and take the ferry across. Then you're into Ohio and Pennsylvania--or better yet, you forget Ohio, go into Canada and cross through southern Ontario--although you'd need to provide ID for that.

Either way, then you've got New York State or else you cut through East Jersey, and soon enough you're in the Big Apple.

What a drive that *was*, Chris thinking back, a lot of years ago now, one of those snap decisions, he helped his friend Dart move cross country, and that's how they handled it, the backroads.

Of course it was in the middle of summer, nothing snowed in, everything wide open.

The only downside being Dart insisted on doing most of the driving because it was her car . . . and she wasn't the greatest driver, so Chris's passenger seat experience was white-knuckled at times.

Dart was athletic and had good reflexes, that wasn't it--in fact she played on a women's rugby team in Concord--but she didn't focus on the matter at hand, which was the dang *road*--and there were a few times Chris had to yell, "Watch it!" or "Did you SEE that?", and each time she'd roll her eyes at him like he was an idiot.

But they managed to navigate the whole shebang, coast to coast, without getting on one major highway--even coming in to Manhattan, that final homestretch, Dart insisted on going into Rockland County and crossing the Hudson up there, and using North Broadway to enter the city.

It was an eye-opener as well, that most of the United States was wide open space, with a few cities and towns filling in the blanks. That sounded simplistic but it wasn't.

And it was fun, good times, there were a lot of laughs, stories were flying around, and they had plenty of interesting, and largely friendly, encounters with locals in small-town cafes.

Looking back on it now, Chris came back to the theme again, that maybe it *was* such a good trip because there was nothing between them, everything platonic. And when you re-factored in the similar fun he'd been having with Gloria, those were starting to add up now, weren't they. Maybe there was a message in there somewhere . . . though he doubted he could parlay the concept *into* anything, since for better or worse he was resigned to allow his libido to lead the way.

Chris had helped Dart get settled in an apartment she had rented in Williamsburg, sight-unseen. Williamsburg was one of those sections of Brooklyn that was gentrifying, and the college educated white kids were moving in.

Though Chris never had the greatest feeling about the apartment or the neighborhood, it was like it hadn't gentrified nearly *enough* yet, and Chris tried not to think about Dart having to go out late at night to get a quart of milk.

In fact that was it with Dart, he never did follow up to see how it unfolded for her back there--and Chris admitted that part of the reason why was because he didn't want to find *out* if something bad *had* happened.

Anyhow . . . finishing off Donner Lake now and picking up the Truckee River, following it as it zig-zagged its way out of the Sierras toward Reno, the snow still driving, the Subaru handling it nicely, but you didn't want to push your luck . . . and Chris decided no need to be a hero, and that it'd be fine to shut it down for the day in Winnemucca.

Which was 2 and a half hours past Reno, and Chris pulled in around 3, picked the first casino hotel that came into view, and twenty minutes later was stretched out pretty nice watching Judge Judy.

And not a bad one actually, though they were mostly variations on the same theme, this one involving a typical dispute between two neighbors where one guy put a sport court in his backyard but, according to the neighbor, was using different, meaning *louder*, paddles than he stated

when he got his approval--so that whenever they played out there instead of a *tick*, every time they hit the ball it was a *thwap*, and the neighbor said his wife was going slightly insane . . . and it was to the point they were either going to have to move, or kill the guy. He made sure to immediately let Judge Judy know he was joking about *that* part, but simply wanted to emphasize the stress the constant *thwaps* were putting him under . . . though Chris could understand exactly where the guy was coming from about maybe having to deal unorthodox-wise with the neighbor if you were at your wit's end.

Chris tried not to think about his last time in Winnemucca but you couldn't avoid it, on the road with Allison and Monica, to try to figure out Thad in Pocatello.

That day he *had* wanted to push it hard, go as long as they could, but his left leg was killing him an hour past Reno, too much clutch work in the Camry, and unfortunately neither of the females could drive a stick, or admitted to be able to, and they were stuck stopping here by default.

Now he had the whole night ahead of him, so what could you do, an early run through the casino couldn't hurt, this one a big roomy place called the *Nugget Z*, and it didn't take long to find the lounge--no music yet but a pleasant enough bar at the far end, the lounge titled the *Ace-Hole*--and Jeez, what a name, but that first whiskey sour tasted real friendly and the bartender was equally so, and like a lot of these casino set-ups, you really could choose a worse way to kill a couple hours.

Then of course you ate, and this was cattle country, in fact you couldn't miss the rodeo grounds as you pulled into town, and the rib-eye was better than any he could remember recently . . . and then at 8 the music started up, different than Terri and her band and the other ones too, out in Bingham, which were more mainstream--these guys on stage tonight were straight-up no frills country out of the 1970's, and there was a good crowd



as well, and Chris realized this was a local show essentially, whereas Bingham was set up for the travellers.

Here was the continued appeal of a casino hotel, you didn't have to go outside for any reason, all your needs were taken care of, and the *Nugget Z* had a coffee lounge in the center of the main floor and it was open-air to the casino, no walls or doors, and you could sit and people-watch to your heart's content.

Which is where Chris ended up after a while, the music solid, and heartfelt and well-performed but eventually running its course, and there was a guy at the next table who had a steaming coffee in front of him too, but who looked deep in thought.

Chris figured let it alone, or break a little ice . . . and what the hay, so he said to the guy, "Hopefully you didn't leave it all at the tables, but you kind of have that look." Putting a pleasant enough smile behind it, in case the guy really *had* lost his rear end in there and might turn on him.

"Nah," the guy said. "Sorry to be wearing my emotions on my sleeve."

"Meaning what?" Chris said. This was another thing he had learned about casinos--you could let it fly more casually than in other situations, because you'd almost certainly never see the person again. Even a place like Peet's on Chestnut, for example, when you were up there now once in a while, as an out-of-towner, you start up with a guy you've never seen and you have to rein it in a bit, because in the back of your mind you still *might* run into him again.

"Kids," the guy said, looking grim. "You have 'em?"

"For better or worse, no," Chris said.

"I'd say you're lucky then."

"Except it's not that cut and dry, is where I feel you going with it."

"Shit never *is*. There's plenty of reward to it, I won't deny it. The flip side, you're always worrying."

Chris wasn't quite ready to etch himself into the category of childless adults, but it was getting tough to see it happening. He'd never thought about it too much, the idea of a little Chris bopping around and cuddling up to him. That'd be nice, for sure, if you could isolate that aspect. Maybe it was being a guy, and the fact that there was no biological clock that ran out . . . but if it didn't happen it wasn't going to weigh on him.

"Well *don't* worry," Chris said. "I mean Jeez, you're on vacation, or whatever."

The guy cracked a half smile and said, "You're supposed to ask what I'm worried about."

"I didn't want to butt in," Chris said.

"*Butt* in. That's *why* I worry, so I can *kvetch*."

"That sounded like a Jewish word. I can guess the meaning from the sound."

"Yiddish. Don't be scared of it."

"I was?"

"Hard to tell with people. In my experience, it's almost less threatening to speak a foreign language than throw in the occasional foreign *word*."

"I can see your point," Chris said. "You spoke it at home, or what?"

"Some. My grandparents were immigrants, both sides, barely made it out of Czechoslovakia. The language filtered down to my parents, and they only spoke it to *us* when they got mad."

"And that's when *you* dip into it, it sounds like."

"Well I try to keep it alive. At one time 85 percent of Jews were Yiddish speakers. Now it's pretty much down to the Hassids, only ones who still speak it every day."

"The guys all in black?"

“Yeah, the fanatics . . . at any rate, my grandpa, I had to give him credit, he came here with nothing, started as a bellhop at the Biltmore Hotel in LA.”

“And I’m guessing worked his way up from there,” Chris said, “as resourceful immigrants do.”

“Big-time. By the time my dad was born they were living in Beverly Hills. Which didn’t last. Grandpa Nate was one of those guys, made and lost several fortunes before he was through.”

“Not a bad way to go, marching to your own drum. Beats playing it safe.”

“Yeah well,” the guy said, “*I* play it a lot safer. That’s why I’m worried about two things. Every time I get on my fucking phone, they hit me like a ton of bricks.”

Chris didn’t want to proselytize, much less beat a dead horse on the subject, meaning tell the guy that’s why *he* prefers to stay *off* the phone *and* computer--not that it’s possible. But yeah, kind of like the notion that nothing good happens after midnight?--No matter how you spin it, the fact is every time you log in there’s at least something in your browsing experience that makes you wish you *hadn’t*.

Chris said, “You keep coming *back* to that, so what do you got?”

“First thing,” the guy said, not missing a beat once Chris gave him the okay, “my son. Check out this idiotic picture.” He passed his phone to Chris, and there were four guys, early 20’s, 3 girls linked into the shot, all wearing bikinis, and they were all 7 of them in what looked like the ocean, though it could have been a bay or something, but posing for the camera with cocktails in their hands.

“Well it looks pleasant enough,” Chris said. “Definitely tropical.”

“Tahiti, they’re over there now, this is from today. But you see my son in the middle? Goofy grin?”

“Yeah, good looking kid. Kind of movie-starish actually, at least in that setting.”

“He is a handsome kid, and that’s gotten him in trouble as well. But this is something else now, look at him boozing. And that smile, that’s not normal *him*, that’s a booze smile.”

Chris could see the guy’s limited point there, that people’s facial expressions can change when they’re getting blitzed, something a parent would be acutely tuned into. But so what?

He said, “He’s on a holiday, it looks like, and they’re all getting sloshed. That’s what 25-year-old kids do in those places. What’s the big deal?”

“Couple things there,” the guy said. “My name’s Marty by the way.” And Chris got up and shook hands, almost introducing himself as George instead--and Jeez, where did *that* come from, he’d barely needed it in Eclipse, but it must have been a subconscious response to being back on the road, that you didn’t fork over your real name these days.

“First,” Marty continued, “I feel like he’s reaching out, sending me that photo. He doesn’t drink, and neither do I.”

“Oh,” Chris said.

“I have my reasons, I gave it up 19 years ago when the kids were young. It made me a better family man, and I never looked back.”

Chris tried to show the guy some sympathy, but he had to say, “*Marty*. Let the kid have some fun.”

“I know you’re right intellectually,” Marty said. “But Tiger and I, we’ve had an unwritten pact.”

“Wait--that’s his name, Tiger?”

“Real one, yeah . . . I know, I get that from people.”

“You’re not telling me, after the golfer?”

“Yep. He was dominating the amateur circuit when my son was born, like no one before or since. It seemed like a good omen.”

“Ah . . . But what I’m really hearing, your son has avoided drinking because he’s afraid *you* might start again. Sorry for being blunt, but is that in the ballpark?”

Marty took a moment. “Fine,” he said, “close enough. I guess you nailed me . . . So you think my indigestion and *tsuris* over this is unreasonable?”

“Oh yeah,” Chris said. “You sound like a worry-wart.” He didn’t know what *tsuris* meant but he assumed it was Yiddish creeping in again, something definitely in the *aggravation* family.

“You’re a straight shooter,” Marty said. “I like that. If you ever need a job, let me know.” Marty pulled out a business card and handed it to him.

Chris wasn’t in the mood to study it but played along and said, “What would I be doing?”

“Little of this and that. I do property management in Atlanta.”

“Just a wild guess,” Chris said, “you look like kind of a bum, your shirt tail out, your haircut’s a little funky, like you don’t care. I’m not knocking it, I’m the same way. The point I’m making, we’re not talking about a mom and pop operation, taking care of tenants and toilets, *are we*.”

“No, *that* we’re not. Corporate towers and so forth.”

“What I figured. So what’s a big player like you happen to be doing in Winnemucca, Nevada?”

“Ah, they’re talking a Vegas-style spread, east of town. State 49 they got a major parcel earmarked. They brought me in to consult.”

“See there you go,” Chris said, “you’re already a bigger piece than you’re letting on.”

Though the *State 49 east of town* part rang a bell . . . and if that was Jungo Road, yeah that’s where he ended up at the brothel that time, pretty nice gal--what the devil was her name?--she concluding that it was good he finally let his guard down.

“What about you?” Marty said.

“I’m going back east. Taking it slow, the old fashioned way. Sort of celebrating while I’m at it, meaning stop and smell the roses . . . I hit a milestone a couple weeks ago, I don’t mind saying, I beat a diagnosis.”

Marty nodded his head but that was about it.

Chris said, “It was clear there, you weren’t dialed into my answer. A normal guy would have asked at least one follow up question for sure.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Marty said. “We went over my son, and I’ve put that on that back burner for now, thank you.”

“But?”

“My daughter.”

“Not more with the booze,” Chris said, meaning it as a joke, but unfortunately Marty said that’s exactly what it was.

“You have to pick a different subject,” Chris said, “this is getting old now.”

“She’s the sweetest. If anything ever *happened* to her . . .” Marty’s voice trailed off.

“Take it easy. Nothing’s happening to anyone. Get a hold of yourself.”

“I know,” Marty said, dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief. “Okay, you want to hear? What’s got me so bent out of shape *there*?”

“I don’t think so,” Chris said, “except the alternative would be staring out into the casino, listening to the slot machine bells ring.”

“I’m providing entertainment, you’re saying,” Marty said, lightening up for just a second.

“Yeah . . . hey, come to think of it, they’ve toned down those bells. Jeez, they sound like a device now, some alert on your phone. I hadn’t even registered that.”

“Oh yeah, totally dumb,” Marty said. “The money clanging into the bottom pan too, when someone hit a jackpot. The silver dollars. Even the fake ones, they made noise, and you had the big bell ringing that was synonymous with success. Now you win a paper ticket, no more official

dough pouring out, and, and as you say, they buzz you like you got a text message.”

Chris was trying to picture the casino in Bingham, pretty sure they still gave you the big noisy treatment when you hit a jackpot--but you figured that would change too soon enough.

Chris said, “They should consult with you on the psychology of gaming, as well.”

“Don’t get me started. They’ve already fucked over Vegas to where they’ll never recover. I apologize.”

“None needed . . . all right, so *what’s* the big deal with your daughter?”

“3 DUI’s. That’s what keeps me awake.”

“Dang. Gee, now you *do* have me feeling bad, making fun of your alcohol obsession.”

“Not my daughter with the problem,” Marty said. “Her husband.”

For a moment Chris thought this meant the husband was suffering because of the wife’s addiction, but he realized that wasn’t it.

“They have kids?” he said.

“On the way. Twins, if you can believe it. They went the fertility route.”

“You’re telling me, your *son-in-law*--he’s been arrested three times for drunk driving.”

Marty nodded. He’s eight years younger than she is. Sometimes I think I’d like to kill him with my bare hands. Other than that, he’s a pretty good guy.”

“He still driving?”

“Oh yeah.”

“When was the last one, most recent?”

“Christmastime,” Marty said.

Chris said, "Forgive my ignorance. How can someone have *three* DUI's, and still be allowed to stick his ass behind the *wheel*?"

"There's been organizations for decades trying to change that. MADD. Mothers of poor kids who've been cut down by drunks. The fact it, it's a state by state thing."

"I'm guessing, what you're getting to . . . they're in a bad state."

"The worst. South Dakota. The first two offenses they don't do a thing, they don't even blink. The third one's technically a felony, but that's all window dressing--no license suspension, no impound, no mandatory ignition-lock device--nothing."

"Is he seeking help? Your son-in-law?"

"Oh, the usual 8 step crap in a church basement. It ain't gonna help. Again, pardon my language."

This didn't sound good, admittedly. You couldn't be bringing infants into the world and worrying every second that at some point there's going to be a wrong driving situation with their dad.

Chris said, "So can she leave? Just get her out of there."

"I've tried, believe me . . . You saw my son, right, *he* got the good visual genes in the family, I'm afraid. Bertha's always been overweight--and what can you say, kind of dumpy looking. I'm quite sure, at 35, she feels this is her catch, and she needs to make it work."

"*Fuck* that shit," Chris said, "I'd kidnap her ass then." He felt himself getting worked up, taking on some of the guy's pain, though it did feel good to blow off a little steam.

"Listen, I appreciate your concern," Marty said. "In a perfect world, if I could I would."

"One other question. How the heck did they up in South Dakota?"

"Well they met in Florida, but he's *from* there, Jeff . . . *Pierre*, the state capital. Not a bad town truly, when you go out there, give it an open-minded week, develop the feel for it."



It was getting reasonably late and Chris was starting to think about a hot shower and an early start in the morning. "So what are you going do?" he said.

"All I can," Marty said. "Which is stand by."

## Chapter 4

The rest of the trip was pretty smooth. Not as much snow as you expected to deal with in mid-February. It was a little dicey climbing Sherman Summit in Wyoming, near Buford, where you rose to 9,000 feet, and it wasn't blizzarding on you but it was coming down steady and you did worry about the ice patches on the back side.

Other than that, dustings in the mid-western farm states, and finally one heavy storm, but not until you got to Pennsylvania, and Chris's experience with *that* state was there was always something *up* there, nothing you could pinpoint, but one place he wouldn't want to live.

A few hours after leaving Winnemucca and the Marty guy from the night before, Chris did pass right by Bingham, two exits for it, the first on a service road west of town and the second smack dab in the middle of the little casino strip . . . and it all looked familiar, and inviting enough too.

He'd had an okay time there, considering the circumstances, and he genuinely liked the locals he got to know at that one blackjack table. As he'd done a few times, he wondered again how the dealer was getting on with her life, and part of him was tempted to at least wander back into the joint and have a look around, maybe grab a bite, he wasn't worried at this point about being ID'd for the thing in the park . . . but nah.

Ned had given him 5 grand cash for the road on Monday. Then Tuesday morning at the Cheater Five, Chris all packed up and sitting around the pool waiting until 9 before plunging into traffic--though he already learned the hard way that trying to out-think LA traffic typically

backfired--and meanwhile here comes Ned, pulling up in that original next-to-new Chrysler 300 that he wanted Chris to use for the trip.

Ned was all smiles like nothing was going on, and wouldn't you know he'd brought coffee and pastries, and not a little white bag with a couple scones like a regular person would bring, but three sizable bakery boxes, full, and man, there must have been 50 pastries all told, and Chris resigned himself to not getting on the road quite yet.

And he supposed it was a blessing, because Ken came down and joined them, and maybe it was having Ned there with all his energy but at least Ken seemed to loosen up a little. He really hadn't been himself since Chris returned from Arizona, plenty of money in his pocket now obviously from his work at the Strand house, but the revolving-door girlfriend business still beating him down--not to mention likely some irritation toward Chris for helping screw it up with Michelle.

"Your Boss is doing me a huge favor," Ned said to Ken.

"Whoa, not sure about that," Chris said, "the *Boss* business. You too now?"

"Why not?" Ned said. "I like the expression."

"What kind of favor?" Ken said.

"Back my old stomping ground," Ned said. "Saving me a trip. Since he's semi-retired." Winking at Chris.

"No way," Ken said, "that you answered my question."

"It's a negotiation," Ned said. "Working out a percentage of a deal. In fact everything I've heard--*your* negotiating skills--I'd be liable to send *you* instead, except you're too valuable at the moment right here." Winking at Ken now.

"A negotiation with who?" Ken said.

"Bert Zigguno," Ned said. "Why, you know him?" Giving it the million dollar smile, and lying so effortlessly that for a moment Chris thought *he*

was mixed up on who *he* was supposed to see, which he reminded himself was the Paul Albanese fellow.

At any rate Ken said he had to get going and thanks for breakfast, those were great, and he'd see everyone later . . . though he realized Chris was taking off again for what could be a while, and he gave him one of the old-fashioned hugs he'd showered on him before--more so in the beginning than lately--but it was a nice enough moment and Chris hoped they'd pull things back the way they were.

When Ken was gone Chris said, "My guy back there, you keep calling him Paulie." Which Ned had, not the first time he laid it out, but in subsequent conversations, referring to the guy like he's an old buddy you're inviting over for poker night.

"Don't let that fool you," Ned said, and now he was a *lot* more serious, his eyes cold, and he didn't expand on it.

"Anyhow," Chris said, polishing off what was left of his third pastry. "I have to agree with the kid . . . Dang, I lost my train of thought."

"Wanting to know the guy's name you mean? And not believing me, the one I gave him?"

"No . . . oh I know what I was thinking. That the kid's wise not to hang around us too long."

"Now why is that?"

"Because nothing good comes out of it, typically . . . The other point he was making--indirectly--is, there's really going to be a negotiation?"

"Of course there is," Ned said. "That's what the 25 grand's for." Ned had given Chris two envelopes yesterday. One with the 5 thousand for the travel expenses--which Chris tried not to accept but Ned wasn't taking no for an answer and shoved it into the front pocket of one of the new short sleeve summer shirts Chris had picked up at Target.

The other envelope, a bigger one, brown manila, sealed and rubber-banded, Ned explaining to Chris there were 250 \$100 dollar bills in there, and to use them as he saw fit, and there'd be no questions asked later.

The idea was to find this Paulie, and hopefully before *he* decided to come out *here* and 'negotiate' with Ned locally--and you hated to think of the movie term 'make him an offer he can't refuse', but that was essentially it.

That whatever had happened between that guy and Ned, you show up as a polite and sensible mediator, and you ease the tension by way of a pile of cash. Maybe not cure anything, but at least put enough of a lid on it so the guy stops obsessing.

Which Chris could only assume was close to the truth.

The other assumption being, there was a good chance Ned was the *screw*er here, as opposed to the *screw*ee.

That's normally what precipitated it if someone wants to chain you up and throw you in a river or whatever.

But Chris didn't see a need to pin Ned down. Bottom line was, whatever the details may or not be, the guy was in trouble, and you were going to try to help out. What could *that* hurt?

Chris of course knew the answer, which was *everything*--otherwise who was he kidding debating making the pain in the ass detour to San Francisco to consult with Mark on a recommended selection.

"Anything else though?" Ned was saying. "One more time--you got where to go, right? And you'll get a hold of me any time, 24/7, if you need *any-thing*?"

Chris nodded but said, "Normally when I hit the road, I don't *enjoy* checking back in. I more or less like to disappear out there."

Ned took a moment and said, "Well don't disappear on *me*." And he tapped Chris three times on the chest and looked him in the eye for a second and then left . . . Chris thinking this was odd behavior just then, and

he supposed Ned was blessing him with good luck or something, or maybe it was a simple appreciation, which was fine . . . though it reinforced his suspicion that this little road trip back to Yonkers may not be a picnic.

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The five grand in travel money was down now a little short of \$4500, but one thing Chris had to admit, he was a frugal traveler and gave you your money's worth if you were bankrolling him.

The overnight stops after Winnemucca had been Evanston Wyoming, Cozad Nebraska, Newton Iowa, Angola Indiana, and Brookville Pennsylvania.

Jeez, *double* the stops, now that he thought about it, compared to when he once did the thing in three days, but good enough, he was here, right around Paramus, New Jersey, 3:30 in the afternoon, traffic flowing decently at the moment, headed to the George Washington bridge.

GPS told you 5 hours and 5 minutes from Brookville, PA into Manhattan, and just like in LA Chris was wondering should he *time* it--meaning stop off somewhere and kill a couple hours before risking being in the city too early with a vehicle.

And this was the thing, 3200 miles coast to coast, and for 3190 of them you don't even think about traffic--and then the outside 10 miles, both coasts, that's *all* you think about.

It was a Monday and he decided to go with his instinct and keep moving until proven otherwise, meaning just get there, and for tonight at least he wouldn't deal with Yonkers and he had a hotel lined up on the west side, a La Quinta, which *Chandler* of all people said wasn't bad and was priced fair.

What could ruin things in a hurry in New York City of course, was if you had a vehicle you needed to park--*any* time for that matter, but especially overnight.

Ned had the solution to that, no problem he'd said, *I got a guy*.

Chris had rolled his eyes and Ned said what's the matter, and insisted he see Joe on 11th Avenue and 49th Street, and Chris said he wasn't sure if that was the greatest idea, visibility-wise . . . and Ned caught on, meaning would someone in Yonkers put two and two together through the guy on 11th Avenue . . . and Ned explained that no, one hand doesn't know what the other's doing here . . . and like with a lot of things lately with Ned, you had to trust the guy.

So sure enough, when Chris exits the Henry Hudson Parkway and pulls up on the West Side at 49th, a narrow but relatively deep outdoor parking lot right where Ned said to go, there is Joe out front, though at the moment arguing with a customer about something, both guys looking like they might punch the other one, but then it's over and the guy drives away and Joe says, "Can I help you?"

"I just get into the city," Chris said, "big drive, finishing it off, haven't been here in probably 10 years--and already we got fireworks."

"You know what that mope keeps trying to pull?" Joe said. "He claims we scratched his car last Thursday, shuffling 'em around. He won't let it go."

"Did you?"

"A little. So? You got a problem now too?" The guy luckily not a hundred percent serious.

"Not at all," Chris said. "Listen, I'm intending to stay over at the La Quinta for a few nights, but my buddy out west, Ned, he told me to see you about leaving it here, if that's okay."

"Who?"

This wasn't a good start, but Ned didn't make this stuff up, and then Chris remembered Ned's other name *Lou*, which they probably knew him by back *here* . . . and Joe *did* recognize that, and son of a gun, sticks out his hand and says "How you doing?"

Chris told Joe he felt bad taking advantage, seeing the tight spacing and issues that can cause, but Joe right away says he doesn't want to hear *nothing* about it, and furthermore he's putting Chris in the number one slot, right next to the attendant hut, so no one'll ever be blocking him and he can come and go all hours . . . and if you can believe it, Joe finishes it off with a "and welcome to the Big Apple!"

Dang.

Chris thanked the guy and parked where Joe told him, and fortunately he'd learned to travel light, and all he had was the one shoulder bag, and the La Quinta was on 32nd, not that far down, the street blocks pretty short--but all way over past 6th Avenue, those blocks long . . . but it didn't matter, you bundled up and hoofed it and it gave you a chance to work out the nerve issue in your leg from the drive, and do a little thinking.

A guy like Ned, you always wanted to make sense of stuff, but Chris had resigned himself, even those first couple times in the *Crowe's Nest*, that that wasn't fully rational.

This guy Joe, for example, Ned's explanation would be "yeah Joey, he's good people, we go back a long time" or alternately, "don't worry about it, it's all good, one hand washes the other Chrissie, you know that."

Ned had used up both lines with Chris by now, various discussions, and Chris figured the truth was somewhere in between but you don't ask.

The hotel was fine, Chandler had it pegged right, and Jeez, mid-town Manhattan and \$104 a night--that was a third cheaper than the dives on Lombard Street for God sakes.

Chris got cleaned up and was pretty relaxed by that point, could have plopped down for the night, but this was New York and there was a buzz like nowhere else, so he figured head down to Tribeca, see what that was all about since they gentrified it, and he tried to get a cab for a couple minutes, and maybe he was out of practice and wasn't signalling quite right, but either way he couldn't make one stop so he walked.



He found a hole in the wall bistro on Duane Street, beat up tables and non-matching chairs, though the prices were first class, but what could you do . . . and the food was pretty special actually, every bite bursting with a heavy mix of flavors, and what he'd done--since the guy and his girlfriend at the next table were each eating the same thing and seemed to be enjoying the heck out of it--was tell the waiter he'll have what they've got.

You finished it off with a peruse around the neighborhood, all art galleries and ritzy boutiques and high-end fitness and yoga studios, and Chris sure felt like a good cigar to conclude matters but that was something they didn't sell around here apparently, but he did find a convenience store on one of the corners, out of place but doing the job, and he got a pack of cigarettes and lit one up.

Down the block from that was an espresso place, everyone huddled indoors, despite the option of the heat lamps outside, but yeah this was wintertime back east after all and the needle had dipped for sure in the last couple hours.

You were sort of pinned in the place, jammed up against each other at these skinny wooden counters, but the espresso hit the spot and Chris kept right on with the cigarettes, chain smoking them actually, and no one cared--whereas in California if you tried that, he was thinking, 8 people would have you down on the ground and would be making a citizen's arrest.

After a while it thinned out, and it was kind of just him and a dark skinned young woman, opposite ends of the little counter, angling in toward the center because that's where they had another suspended heater, and she moved closer rubbing her hands toward the thing and so did Chris.

Chris's idea was to have a little quiet time in a place like this, some stimulation from the nicotine and caffeine, and get a handle on Ned's issue up in Yonkers, and what a good approach might be.

But the woman came closer, and Chris soon enough learned her name was Rosalie, and that she was full-blooded Puerto Rican and never too proud to admit it, and did he need a date.

“You tapped in to a critical resource there,” Chris said. “Which I commend you for. Except I was hoping you were for real. But that’s unrealistic, middle aged white guy like me taking up space in here.”

“I *like* middle-aged white guys,” Rosalie said, and of course it was a line, but there was an energy and earnestness to the way she delivered it, that Chris, without thinking too hard, offered the fact that he was staying at the LaQuinta.

Rosalie took his arm and they hung around a while longer, and it was fake but it did feel good, and Chris asked her a couple personal questions and she said let’s wait on those until after, and Chris said fair enough, and when they got to the hotel he asked if she felt like a little room service and she said no thank you she was doing fine.

It turned out Rosalie lived on 148th and Broadway, and later when they were laying back Chris said, “Obviously you know what you’re doing, but do you *have* to go back there this late? I don’t like the concept at all.”

Rosalie smiled. “I’m a city girl. But you have something else in mind?”

“Not really,” Chris said, “at least nothing I can pinpoint. I’m just thinking--if there’s a way you can work it--don’t go, wait until the morning.”

Rosalie laughed. “You say you’re from California, what part?”

“Southern.”

“What part of southern?”

“South bay, beach town.”

“This is what I’m getting to,” she said, “you’re a little naive. I don’t mean to say anything, but you have that look, that someone might prey on you here.”

“What, you mean rob me on the street or something?”

“Oh yeah, that could happen. My suggestion, carry a hundred with you, so they don’t get angry they came up short--but no more.”

Chris was thinking of Mancuso’s 25 grand, laying at the bottom of his shoulder bag in the manila envelope at the moment, and that maybe Rosalie had a point, he should at least see about the hotel safekeeping that they strongly suggested when he checked in, which he let go in one ear and out the other.

“I look that wimpy, though?” Chris said. “It’s fine, you can be honest.” He ran his fingers along her shoulders and through her hair, and she seemed at ease with it.

“*Nerdy* would be the word I’d pick. Which is good, mostly. I mean, okay, you may not be the most macho man of all time. But you’re not going to hurt anybody either . . . We need more of that wholesome spirit projected in the world.”

“Jesus. Here you are out of Spanish Harlem or wherever, and you’re sounding like the New Age folks in California.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just being honest.”

“White guys don’t look macho though, as a rule,” Chris said. “Especially when they don’t pump iron.”

“Some do,” she said, which rubbed it in worse, but at the same time she didn’t seem to be in a big rush to get out of here.

“How old are you? These days?” Chris said.

“You’re funny. 26.”

“And what’s your . . . marital or relationship situation?”

“You’ll laugh, but there isn’t one.”

“Why would that be funny?”

“I know what you’re thinking, that I’m dating strangers all night. That’s simply not true.”

“Oh. So it’s, like a sidelight? A part time gig?”

“You can make fun, but that’s exactly what it is. I’m working on my AA degree if you don’t mind. At Lehman College.”

Chris said, “And you’re in the middle of the semester now?”

“Not in the middle, but we’ve started the spring term, yes.”

“How far in?”

“What *questions* . . . This is the third week.”

“Can you get your money back? A refund on the semester?”

“You know something? You *were* sort of funny. Now you’re starting to be a crazy person . . . Why would I do *that*?”

“If you were coming out to California with me instead,” Chris said.

Rosalie was pretty smooth, and just like it was a regular question she said casually, “And what would I do out *there*?”

Chris said they could talk about it more in the morning, that she’ll have to excuse him, the drive and the rest of it really was catching up to him now . . . and he wasn’t making it up, he literally couldn’t keep his eyes open and a minute later he was out like a light.

Rosalie wasn’t there in the morning when he woke up fully and actually got out of bed, but Chris had heard her leaving a couple hours before that, meaning she at least stuck around until it got light.

## Chapter 5

The funny thing was, when Chris first met Ned last fall, after listening to--and admittedly being entertained by--his act, Chris left the *Crowe's Nest* that night picturing Ned in his past life leaning up against the stoop of a three-family house in East Yonkers, on the lookout for trouble.

Driving up there now, to see this guy Paulie Albanese (hopefully), Chris couldn't help think life imitates art, or whatever the expression was.

Of course the reason Yonkers came into it, Chris having a little fun with it in his mind, trying to place Ned back then, was there was an episode of *The Sopranos*. The episode didn't exactly happen there, but it painted you the picture . . . as Chris remembered it Christopher (the character) sees some guy and can't place him, and then realizes he knew the guy from once-upon-a-time when they worked a deal together in Yonkers.

Something like that.

The details weren't critical, but it gave you a feel for the place, which Chris always thought of as what the Bronx was probably like in the old days, before the poverty moved in and the crime level went up, and the Italians and Irish, to a large extent, moved north for greener pastures.

And that's where Yonkers was--directly above the Bronx, the Hudson River on the west, and the fancier parts of Westchester County to the east and north.

Paulie asked Chris to meet him in his office on lower Wakefield Avenue, and Chris got there on the dot at 5:30. It seemed a strange time to do business, but you weren't going to question the guy, all you wanted to do was pass some cash to him, as little as you could get away with--and if you

were convinced that worked, then spend a few more days sightseeing in Manhattan before reversing the whole process. In fact thinking ahead, Chris was thinking try I-70 back home, get a different view.

Paulie's office was upstairs, but like he'd told Chris on the phone this morning there was no name anywhere, he just had to buzz *Saperstein and Berg*, and that's what Chris did now, noticing it was a law firm.

Paulie opened the door like he was your best friend, and Gee, what *else* was new with these guys, the only surprising thing being he was older than Ned by quite a bit, you'd place him close to 60.

"Pleased to meet you," Chris said, "though funny time for an appointment."

"I hear you," Paulie said, ushering him into a back office, opening a full sized stainless steel fridge and asking if he's thirsty, and Chris waving him off, not yet thanks, and Paulie popping a couple of bottled beers and handing one to Chris anyway.

"The way I've worked it for years," Paulie continued, "Spend time with the wife in the morning. Roll in here at 1."

"And go late then?" Chris said. "That's not bad, it's definitely different. Quality time with your spouse, when you're fresh, first thing."

"Before the arguing starts, you mean, yeah. It ended up being overrated though, that part. The marriage didn't hold up . . . But I got in the habit, and been operating that way ever since . . . Sit down, you look stiff."

Chris had been standing, since that's what Paulie was doing, so he picked one of the old cracked leather chairs that were lined up facing the desk and sunk into it.

"Comfy, right?" Paulie said.

"I have to admit," Chris said.

"These come from the old New York Athletic Club down the city. They don't make 'em this way now . . . Where you're staying, you alright on that?"

Chris said he was. When he called Paulie this morning he told him he was at the East Side Marriott on Lex. Probably not a big deal, but it didn't seem like the best move to volunteer to the guy where you *were* actually staying.

"Meaning," Paulie said, "you had the day to knock around downtown and shit?"

"Oh yeah I love it. Can't get enough. I lived a year in Teaneck once, always had mixed feelings about not sticking around."

And it *had* been a good day today. There'd been Rosalie last night of course, leaving you this morning with a little extra bounce in your step, and then the hotel had a decent continental breakfast, and then it was off to the races essentially, Chris following his nose around the city non-stop until he had to get ready to come up here.

"New York does get the hooks into you," Paulie said. "I'm from Boston, my family. Actually Sommerville. Though we moved here when I was two, so I guess it don't count. So, Mr. Christopher . . . what do you got for me . . . all the way from sunny Cal-i-for-ni-a?" A grittier look to the guy, which is how it worked, Chris supposed, when matters shifted to business.

"Before we go there," Chris said, "out of curiosity, what kind of work do you *do* here?" He knew the question might be off-limits, but he was curious, and it wouldn't be the end of the world, Paulie could answer it honestly or else deflect it.

"You ask a lot of questions," Paulie said, "but I like that. Mainly real estate. Some flips, some conversion, some land grabs. South Yonkers and Mount Vernon . . . These dips in the real office, the attorneys--and that's not fair they're okay people--we work together on some of them."

"That makes sense. That way you can just wheel and deal, without having to *be* one."

"I *thought* about it years ago. Going to school, taking the bar. Seemed too far-fetched, I just said fuck it, find a couple guys."

“I keep forgetting how much you need lawyers back here. Out west it’s totally different. Two doofuses can close a multi-million dollar deal in Starbucks if they dare.”

“Yeah, one of them *non-judicial* states,” Paulie said, and he wasn’t stupid. He said, “Louie having his way out there then, cleaning up in Starbucks?”

The guy getting back to business here, eyes narrowing again, calling Ned *Louie*, but probably pissed at him for a variety of reasons, adding one *more* now, that the real estate game is less restricted in California.

Chris said he didn’t know about that, that Ned hadn’t really mentioned real estate in the time he’d known him.

“Whatever,” Paulie said. “My dips up front though, Saperstein and Berg, I threw so much business to the younger one last year that he bought a weekend place up in Copake. An old farmhouse, needs some work, but even so.” Paulie shook his head amused.

Chris said, “I’m guessing then, they don’t charge you for the space.”

Paulie smiled a little more. “I *try* to pay ‘em, but they won’t take it. What can you do? Listen, let’s go over to the strip club.”

Chris shrugged his shoulders and Paulie drained his bottle of beer was up a moment later turning off the lights, and he gave Chris the address. It was on Laconia Avenue, in between the Bronx River Parkway and Post Road--and Chris, by its reputation, had never liked straying too far into the Bronx, except maybe Riverdale, the very northwest tip, where he went to a party once in a highrise penthouse, and the little neighborhood felt like an extension of the Upper East Side.

So he tried to follow Paulie, but Paulie left him in the dust pretty quickly, in fact on the first corner of Wakefield Avenue down the block from the office, where Paulie made a right turn on a red light--like you can do it of course in California, but Chris thought you *couldn’t* back here--or maybe



laws had changed and it *was* okay, but either way that'd be the last type of thing a guy like Paulie would worry about.

Chris also assumed more was going on out of that modestly furnished little back office with the salvaged cracked-leather chairs than Paulie told you about, which Chris wasn't sure he *admired* the guy for, but you did have to give him credit for conducting what were likely wide-ranging entrepreneurial activities.

Chris got to the address and it was a tight block, pretty dang urban and no parking lot for the place that you could see, and there was Paulie double-parked and standing outside his vehicle, still good natured enough, but with his hands out, palms up, motioning what took you so long.

And Chris was thinking about the Subaru and he was glad again he hadn't taken Ned's fancier Chrysler if he was going to have to park around the corner and roll the dice, but Paulie came over and said leave the keys in it, you're good.

And Jeez, it was a nice place--somebody's *barn*, like *Dominic's Barn*, from the outside sign, but Chris hadn't paid too much attention to that and wasn't sure he picked it up right, though it didn't matter.

Everything was first class in the joint, including the women on stage at the moment, and this was early, cocktail hour, and you'd assume the quality didn't taper off as the night unfolded and the club got more crowded.

It didn't take long to figure out that Paulie was well-known in here, and by the looks of things--off-duty dancers coming over and leaning on him and making small talk, not to mention an assortment of what you could only label wise-guys, saying hello--you had to think, Jeez, maybe he owns the place . . . or at the very least he's got a heavy piece of the action.

"I'll throw one out there," Chris said, when the fanfare of Paulie's arrival died down. "Are any of the dancers Brazilian?"

“The more things you’re coming up with,” Paulie said, “you’re not bad. How’d you deduce *that*?”

Chris figured he better leave his brother Floyd out of it, since who knows if there was any kind of connected chain here . . . but you did have Floyd involved with Chip at one time, plus of course Ned and Floyd going at it not that long ago in the *Crowe’s Nest*, supposedly based on something that transpired in Vegas, or *didn’t* transpire to someone’s satisfaction.

So yeah, you had to assume this guy in his face now, Paulie, *would* know Chip and so forth, so Chris left out his brother and the state of Arizona, where Floyd had taken him--and Jeez, Allison too--to the club that time, in Tempe . . . and that was where Allison had bragged that she could identify the particular Brazilian dancers by the way they moved, except the light was artificial and Chris was convinced the one she did pick out as an example, was white as a sheet and hailed from Omaha, Nebraska.

So he said to Paulie, “Down in Albuquerque one time, dusty place where you’d least expect it, but one of the patrons informs me the particular gals we were studying hailed from Brazil.”

“Wouldn’t have known that,” Paulie said, “but the great southwest is foreign to me . . . Bottom line, used to be two good clubs in Yonkers, more or less pioneered the Brazilian angle around here--take it back, one, the other was Gramatan Avenue, technically Mount Vernon, right next door.”

“But not any more?”

“Nah. City councils change, owners can’t work with ‘em right. They shuttered Sue’s Rendezvous in MV, the other one near the old Yonkers raceway, they fucked up with regulations.”

“I remember that track. Harness racing, right? It still there?”

“Long gone. They stuck in a casino in the name of progress.”

“Wouldn’t that be a plus?” Chris said. “I mean . . . your line of work . . . the real estate and all?” Of course *not* meaning that, thinking more about mobsters feeding off gambling operations from a dozen angles.

“You’re in dreamland, right?” Paulie said, like he really couldn’t believe the question. “We made 10 times off the track what we pick up now. Scraps.”

“Oh,” Chris said.

“What’s Louie proposing?” Paulie said, the small talk finished apparently.

“Well . . . he said a few bucks should take care of it, whatever rift y’all have going and can’t see eye to eye on.”

“That how you talk, for real? *Y’all?*”

“No. It just popped out.”

“So what kind of rift is that?” Paulie said. “You tell *me.*”

You were relaxed in here, that was for sure, the women doing their thing, the music tempo early-evening slow, like a warm up for later, and Chris decided there was a laziness to their movements that was pretty dang sultry.

So Paulie was playing with him and he didn’t mind, and he almost said he assumed the rift was over the adult film stuff--and if you had to guess, Paulie was helping bankroll Ned’s operation on the Strand and Ned was shortchanging him on the return-on-investment.

Not the way *Ned* described it exactly, the problems he and Paulie were having, but of course you took Ned with a grain of salt.

But something told Chris not to bring that up, just in case, so he kept quiet and Paulie said, “I’ll answer it *for* you. I happen to be very good with dates. I’m a pretty fucking good record keeper too, in case you’re wondering. This bullshit with your Mancuso goes back to 2004. Except now it’s out of control.”

Chris was real glad now he *hadn’t* brought up the Strand operation, in case Paulie really did *not* know about it--and upon being informed by Chris’s big mouth, and not liking this at all, was liable to send a *bunch* of guys out to Manhattan Beach to find out what’s up with *that*.

“How’s 5 grand?” Chris said.

Paulie looked at him like he could have spit on him and said, “Talk to me son.”

“I don’t know, 8?”

“You know what you remind me of? A dog taking a leak on a fire hydrant. Little mutt type.”

“10 thousand *dollars*,” Chris said. “That’s the best we can come up with. Ned, I mean.”

“Who?”

“Lou. He swings both ways in LA, apparently.”

“For *real*, goes both ways? Or it’s just the names you’re bullshitting me about.”

“The names. What can I tell you, I know him as Ned.”

“Show me the cash, and we’ll think about it.”

“I don’t have it on me,” Chris said, “but when you say ‘think about it’, we have to have a handshake, something, a meeting of the minds.”

“Is that right.”

“I know Lou well enough that he’s got a good heart. He just wants some resolution here, everyone moving forward, positive momentum, no one hanging on to old grudges.”

Paulie seemed to actually be considering what Chris said. He said, “What else you doing here? Besides running some dough for your part-time buddy?”

“Jeez. What makes you say that?”

“I been around long enough. You owe *him* something, obviously. So you’re making the overture. You don’t give a crap if it works out, one way or another.”

Chris had to acknowledge that Paulie was mostly right. He did feel some indebtedness to Ned, no doubt, because of Harrison and the lion pit. And yeah, he *couldn’t* care less if it worked out--except admittedly you

weren't thrilled with the concept of Paulie showing up in Manhattan Beach, mad, ruffling the peace, even though that'd be mostly directed at Ned.

"What was your *other* question?" Chris said.

"If there's any other reason you came all the way here."

"No. Except I had the time, and I enjoy the open road. One thing I wish I hadn't run across though, back in Nevada, some guy with a problem son-in-law."

"Yeah? How so?"

"Ah, kid keeps getting DUI's. Now the daughter's pregnant . . . Not *his* daughter, the daughter of the guy telling me the *story*. The DUI scumbag's wife."

"Aw. That's not good," Paulie said, "I don't like hearing that myself, even third hand."

"I know. It's kind of eating at me . . . Like someone needs to step in."

"Well, you're always hearing about those family interventions. They all mass outside the guy's house and surprise him one morning when he's in the middle of his cornflakes."

"They work?"

"Sometimes, I guess. Depends on the moral character of the asshole. Does he want it *bad* enough."

"Yeah, kind of how I sized it up. I felt badly for the old man. Strange guy, but I feel like I should check in with him once in a while."

"I would," Paulie said. "Meanwhile, I'll see you at the office tomorrow, same time. You don't forget the cash, we should be okay."

There were some other people that had been waiting in the wings, Chris realized, to talk to Paulie, and he was giving them his attention now, and Chris figured that was *his* signal--not to leave, necessarily, but that their interaction was over for the night . . . and he did give it another 15 minutes, and was able to more fully appreciate the Brazilian dancers, and he thought if they switch shifts he might have to stick around longer, but

that didn't happen, which was just as well--and dang these road trips wore you out--and he went back to the hotel, parking the Subaru again on 11th Avenue first of course--and slept for 10 hours.

## Chapter 6

It was quarter to 11 when he came back to the room from the continental breakfast. This was a well-run operation, the hotel, the breakfast hours ran long, until 10:30, and even then they were lenient, they didn't try to shut you down.

Chris noticed several small Korean restaurants across the street, a couple of them nothing more than simple stands where you probably ended up with some of the best authentic cuisine around, and cheap, and this was the Korean couple of blocks after all, and that's the way New York tended to be, ethnic food and shopping grouped in specific areas.

He remembered from years back a number of similar cheap and amazingly tasty Indian places in the area of 29th and Lex, and it would be fun to get back down there too . . . but you could only do so much in one trip, and the thing now, that you'd seemed to work it out with Paulie, was don't screw *that* up first and foremost, meaning get back up there with the 10 grand and on time, before someone changes their mind, and leave the ethnic restaurant comparisons out of it for the time being.

Chris hadn't thought about it much when Paulie brought it up, but it *was* interesting he was latching on to something going back to 2004. Maybe you ask Ned about it at some point, pure curiosity, how the apparent same problem, after 15 years escalates to the point where the guy's tempted to come out from Yonkers and do a serious number on Ned.

Chris was getting ready to take a shower and there was a rapping on the door, and Chris said yes?, and a guy said "Maintenance."

"What *kind* of maintenance?" Chris said.

“Alls I know,” the guy said, “we’ve got a complaint of water, 6th floor, room right below yours. I just need to check, if it’s in the walls, or an active leak.”

“How long would you need?” Chris said.

“I don’t know, like 30 seconds? A minute tops? We’re sorry about this.”

Chris opened the door and the guy came in, followed by another guy, no one carrying any tools or flashlights, and they closed the door behind them, Chris with the sudden and acutely sick feeling that no one’s worried about the plumbing.

“I’d say ‘can I help you’,” Chris said, “except something tells me I got duped.”

“You did,” one of the guys said. “Don’t open up for strangers.”

“I’m losing my edge,” Chris said. “I mean don’t most hotel maintenance guys these days have a Spanish accent? That should have been a red flag.”

“Some, not all,” the second guy said. “Where’s your 10 grand at?”

“It’s around,” Chris said. “But if you don’t mind, I’d like to get the groundwork straight . . . I hand it over, then what?”

One guy, the first one, was starting to scour the room, turning stuff over, pulling Chris’s clothes out of the closet, and the other guy shook his head at him and told him no need for that. He said to Chris, “Answer your question, you’ll make Mr. Albanese happy, and we’ll have a settlement.”

“What kind of settlement?” Chris said, a slightly obnoxious question, under the circumstances, but he thought it was legitimate enough too, wanting to know if this was replacing the meeting he was supposed to have later in Yonkers--though he could have phrased that better.

Either way, it didn’t take long before something hit him in the back of the head, and he didn’t black out, it wasn’t quite that magnitude, but he did



go to all fours on the floor, and he tried to get his bearings while he prayed there wouldn't be a follow-up.

"Now that we have your attention," the first guy said, and they definitely had that, but at the same time it was a glimmer of relief, that they were apparently sending a message and weren't here--necessarily--to inflict significantly more damage.

"Well then," Chris said, standing up shaky, "I'm in the hotel safe, if you can give me a couple minutes."

"Take all the time you need," the first one said, at the same time grabbing Chris by the arm and marching him out the door toward the elevator.

"Give him his slippers," the other one said, and Chris and the first guy came back for a second, and Chris did what they said, switched from shoes to slippers, the second guy pointing out those should slow him down if gets any ideas about making a move, and the first guy adding for Chris's benefit that that wouldn't be a wise choice even if *had* shoes on and was Usain Bolt, the Olympic track star.

Chris waited his turn at the front desk and when he told the woman that it was safe-related she intercommed a manager from a back office and that guy greeted Chris, a - 'how *has* your stay with us been so far?' and he invited him around the counter and into the little side room where he'd made his initial deposit.

Guy number one was sitting in the lobby thumbing a magazine, Chris thinking not looking too worried about me pulling some funny business, and I can't blame him.

A couple minutes later Chris emerged and headed to the elevator and the guy followed him casually, and even when they got back in the room the two of them were in no big hurry, and the first guy asked him did he need a receipt?

Both idiots got a nice kick out of that, and somehow Chris felt they'd had occasion to use that line before, and Chris went along with it and said no, and pulled out the money.

"This is it," he said, "you cleaned me out." And guy number two counted it up, moving his lips, and announced there was \$13, 420 dollars here.

"What I knew you were going to do," Chris said, "was tell me you know I have more than 10 grand. Which you'd be right about. So to avoid getting *hit* again, I pulled it all out, to the dollar."

"Very sweet of you," guy number 1 said, not convinced necessarily, but the wheels turning nonetheless.

"Unless," Chris said, "you fellas are on the heartless side, and you're going to lift me for the 3-4 hundreds bucks I have in my wallet, so I can make it home. I mean, that would be pretty low."

"Yeah, let's see the wallet," the first guy said.

Chris handed it over and the guy two-fingered the money out of the compartment without counting it. He looked at guy number two and there seemed to be an understanding, and they were at the door, the first guy explaining to Chris there's no need for them to get violent or even grab him by the collar to make a point, is there?

Chris said there wasn't, he'd be on his way and out of their hair, and the two pricks seemed satisfied, and that was that.

Wow.

This you had to take a minute and process, but first he better get some ice on the back of that head, and he went out in the hall looking for the ice machine, and some guy saw him weaving a little bit, having trouble, and wouldn't you know that guy *was* one of the hotel maintenance guys, with the grey work pants and big wad of heys attached to his belt.

That guy did seem concerned and Chris said all it was, bumped his head and was a little woozy, and the guy told him to go back to the room,

and he raced downstairs and returned with a couple aspirin and a huge bag of ice, the size of a pillow, plus a bottle of Gatorade in case that might help, and Chris thanked the guy and it was a little hard to get rid of him, the guy wanting to make sure, but he finally did.

Despite all this, the head never felt any better, and Chris figured he might as well get on with his day--and of course first you'd need to make another pit stop in the hotel vault.

The \$13,420 business worked, he supposed, to the extent that they didn't bilk him of Mancuso's full 25 grand, though they did get the wallet but that was sacrificial window dressing, since what he had left of the \$5K travel money, which was around \$3700 now, he'd been walking around with in his shoe, for whatever reason, and hadn't thrown it in the safe.

And of all things they make him take his shoes off, but they never bothered peeking inside.

In the *world according to Chris* though, second-guessing was part of the deal, and Chris wondered if he'd just come out of that side room with 10, if that would have worked.

Though admittedly, mopes number 1 and 2 now were going to deliver the 10 to Paulie and split the leftover balance . . . and what was that, \$1710 each? Plus the couple hundred bucks in the wallet. So when you chalk it all up, you probably did the right thing volunteering the extra dough to make the deal, since after all Ned had earmarked you the full 25 to make it happen.

The only thing being--was this a *deal* you just made?

Did this replace the second meeting you were supposed to have with Paulie in Yonkers at 5:30?

Was this a pre-emptive strike by that guy, all smiles last night at the strip club (mostly) and looking at you earnestly and getting where you're coming from, your offer, and giving you the impression that makes sense?

That Paulie was maybe thinking that Chris might skip, now that they'd established a number . . . and Chris would go back and report on it to Mancuso, who would say thank you, and that's interesting, and then do nothing?

Yeah, Chris was thinking he could see that side of it, perhaps.

That they came to an understanding last night, and the guy wants to make sure now, you can't blame him.

All sort of logical . . . except . . . it sure felt like what happened a half hour ago was he got his *ass* robbed--nothing more, nothing less.

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Chris felt himself proceeding in slow motion, every movement a little heavy, and he went in and out of thinking he was watching himself onstage in a play.

But he got his bag packed okay and went downstairs and checked out, and when he stepped outside onto West 32nd Street you had one of those stiff-wintery breezes that come off the river and whoosh across town, seemingly propelled and funnelled by all the high buildings . . . and that woke up the shit out of Chris.

And by the time he got to the corner of 6th Avenue he felt a lot better . . . and putting the whole episode in perspective, he figured you know what? I'm in one piece, and I may have actually, in a roundabout way, completed the job I was sent here to do . . . so don't go nuts over-analyzing, just suck it up and get on with your day.

To take it a step further, he liked the line: Like the best-intended plans . . . you throw away the script and let it rip.

Though he wasn't sure how he'd apply that right now, but you could either cruise around town, catch all the sights and sounds and spectacle that you weren't able to fit in yesterday in the Big Apple, and that process could take you about two weeks, but you could pick your spots for today . . . or . . . go get the car and head over to Jersey, maybe even Teaneck, look

around his old stomping ground. Stay overnight there why not, get a good early jump on traffic in the morning, and figure out how to pick up I-70 going back home, for a different route like he'd been thinking.

And it was a strange phenomenon, like Pavlov's Dog, but Chris already felt his mouth watering, thinking about food stops off the Interstate. The truth was they weren't typically great, not the kind of places you'd recommend, but you developed a unique appreciation of hunger and food and satisfaction thereof in the middle of nowhere, when you embarked on these long distance road trips. At least Chris did.

So yeah. Get the car.

He google-mapped it yesterday, the distance from the La Quinta to Joe's parking lot on 49th and 11th, and it wasn't surprising that it was a full two miles. Not what you'd picture the typical family of four doing, stay in a hotel on vacation and park two miles away--but hey, this wasn't Little Rock we're talking about, plus you had Ned's guy and the price was right--*plus*, the walk really did help, and by the time he turned the corner on 11th Avenue heading north, he almost felt back to normal.

And that's when the first thing happened that made you hesitate and think.

Joe was out front like normal, gesturing to a guy once again, not arguing like he had been the first time. They were animated though, that's for sure, and if you had to guess it was guys talking sports--or possibly politics, but less likely.

These were the kind of guys that listened to sports talk radio all day--in fact yesterday when he picked up the car to go to Yonkers he didn't see Joe but WFAN was blasting out of the little attendant-hut and Chris assumed Joe was in there, and you could pick up Mike Francesa's voice over the airwaves, since it was, after all, afternoon drive-time radio.

Now Joe was hamming it up with this guy through his car window, the guy poised to head into traffic but taking his time, the two of them likely

arguing about the state of the Knicks head coach and starting line-up . . . and Jeez, they really were getting worked up, both guys using their hands a lot, and then they shake like nothing ever happened and the guy drives off.

Then Joe noticed Chris, and it was almost imperceptible, but there was a little bobble and flinch to Joe's head when he did.

Chris said, "I keep forgetting that about New York, I don't have my sea legs back yet--that everything's cranked up *just* a notch, compared to the rest of the country . . . A lot of you guys argue like it's World War 3, except no one's mad, it's all for show."

Joe said that can happen, yeah.

"Not the worst thing," Chris said. "Blow off steam, so you don't have to for *real*." Letting that sit for a second.

"So how's your stay been?" Joe said, but it was a little hollow.

"Good. Wrapped it up, I think. Checked out of the La Quinta . . . I told you I was staying there, right?"

Joe twitched again, and Chris decided this guy really wouldn't be much of a poker player, and hopefully he stayed away from that activity.

"You might have," Joe said. "I know you said the west side someplace, right? Midtown?"

"Yeah . . . at any rate, I appreciate the hospitality. I'm heading to Teaneck for a night, see how much it's changed after all these years, then back on the road. You have a favorite long distance road trip?"

Joe said not really, he tended to stay local.

Chris said, "Here's a C-Note. It's not much, but thanks."

Joe pocketed it and said, "You're welcome, and if you need something in the future--you're back in town--happy to help."

"You mean if I need parking?"

"Well yeah."

"That's it?"

Joe rubbed his lower lip. "What else did you have in mind, exactly?"

“Well there might be one thing,” Chris said. “For future reference, since you never know, where’s Paul Albanese live?”

Joe looked like he was taking a body blow for a half-second, but he stiffened back up. “I’ve heard the name, if it’s who I’m thinking of. Can’t tell you more, beyond that.”

“Nice office up there,” Chris continued, “I mean kind of strange office-*hours*, but that’s fine too. Then the club, got a look at that, pretty dang snazzy . . . Paulie live up that way then, your guess?”

“Up *what* way?”

“My geography up there’s kind of shaky, but I’m calling it East Yonkers, North Bronx.”

Chris pulled out another hundred and handed it to Joe. Chris said, “You don’t have any information for me, then give it back.”

Joe did start to hand it back and Chris said keep it anyway, I’m playing with you.

They stood there and Joe turned as another car exited the lot, and he gave the guy a half-hearted wave.

“What would you be wanting,” Joe said, “with that guy you’re asking about.”

“Ah there’s a silly arrangement, supposed to be in place. Guy earlier today, wanted to take care of it, but I’m one of those guys--call me over-cautious--I like to make my drops in person.”

“That’s what offices are for,” Joe said.

“They can be. I wouldn’t mind going about it a little different. Between you and me, I didn’t trust that little back room. I’m a fan of being out in the open.” He pulled out another hundred dollar bill and the dipshit hesitated for a second, and took it.

“It’s gonna run you a little more,” Joe said, between his teeth now, like he was pretty darn sure he was doing the wrong thing, but at the same time clearly wondering how much more Chris had on him.

Chris pulled out a thousand dollars. He said, “Out of principle I don’t like going more than a grand. Seems unwise . . . In this case, what did I already give you, a couple, three?”

Joe said yeah, and Chris handed him the thousand--though at the same time he was thinking about that syringe that Mark had provided him--which currently sat in the trunk section of the Subaru, in an old leather shaving case--and that if this motherfucker pocketed the grand and still stayed quiet, he was going to stab him with it.

Fortunately, Joe said--though still in that muffled voice where you could tell he thought he shouldn’t be saying *anything*: “Alls I can tell you--and like I said I barely know who you’re even *referring* to--but there’s a guy by that name, I believe lives on City Island.”

Chris said sounds good, like I say you never know, and he reached his hand out, no money in it this time, and Joe shook it, though the guy sure felt limp at this point.

Here you started off a couple days ago pegging this guy as a semi-tough customer, and now the macho presence was seriously diminished.

Which is the way it worked, Chris supposed, when you were a *wannabee* big shot, and a snitch.

And of course Chris like an idiot the first time, assuming this Joe is a friend of Ned’s and all and everything’s hunky-dory . . . the guy hadn’t even asked and yet Chris *volunteers* the information that he happens to be checked in at the good old La Quinta.

Meaning . . . taking Ned’s word for it, *oh don’t worry about parking at Joe’s, the one hand doesn’t know what the other’s doing* . . . the implication being Paul Albanese runs in a different circle than a mope like that, and how Ned knew *him* had nothing to do with his relationship with Paulie.

Chris got in the Subaru and started it up, trying to decide what his exit route from Manhattan would be. You really *could* go to Jersey, play it



safe, count your blessings that in exchange for Mancuso's 13 grand--transacted the unorthodox way--all you came up with was a slightly dented-in back of the head.

Chris could see in his side-view mirror, Joe back in the attendant hut, kind of huddled to one side.

Chris worked it both ways for a minute in his head, what the guy might do . . . and he settled on *nah, he's not going to do anything*.

What would he tell someone, exactly? Who he might be inclined to call up when Chris hung the left turn onto 11th Avenue . . .

*Some guy just paid me off to tell him where Mr. Albanese lives?*

Nah.

Naturally, there's a chance the guy lives up in Bedford Hills or something, and Joe throws him City Island . . . but Chris's instinct was no, the guy's not that clever and didn't have enough backbone . . . and even if he did, he wasn't *thinking* all that cagey, with the thousand bucks overriding matters at that moment.

Chris checked the time, and right now, you were at 2:23 in the afternoon, this being a Wednesday.

So . . . he made the left on 11th, the right on West 48th . . . and . . . another left puts you in the Lincoln Tunnel, and that *would* be Jersey . . . or a right puts you back up in Westchester, Yonkers again to be exact, and the way Chris remembered it you hook up with the Cross County Parkway to the Hutch, get off the appropriate exit, and wind your way through some parkland and over the little bridge to City Island.

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Chris had only been to City Island once, which was technically part of the Bronx, and it had to be over 20 years ago, a short drop-down visit when he was doing something in Boston, and his friend Bob at the time lived in Pelham, and Bob was into bicycling and he set up a bike for Chris as well, and they pedalled from Bob's place to City Island and had lunch.

A clam shack, great place, right on the end, with views of Long Island Sound and the 5 Boroughs up the wazoo, and you could even pick up the Statue of Liberty in the distance . . . and Chris made a couple wrong moves this time, ended up coming too far down the Hutch--which was technically the Hutchinson River Parkway--and having to turn back around at Co-Op City . . . but here we were, the main drag looking different than he remembered it, more built-up for sure, but out here at the tip, if it wasn't the *exact* same place from way back then it sure *felt* the same, which was good enough . . . and who knows if the clams were really local, or they were frozen from Alaska, it didn't matter.

Though it was chilly, one of those deep to-the-bone late February jobs in the air . . . and there was no doubt when that sun dipped a little more and the wind picked up off the water, that you'd be highly uncomfortable if you tried to continue sitting at the outdoor tables, even if you *were* dressed for Alaska.

Anyhow it felt better to have a full stomach, and a beer to wash down all that admittedly pretty greasy batter they coated the clams with . . . and with a little more perspective now Chris figured Joe likely knew *exactly* where the guy lived, but you couldn't do anything about that, and the hopeful part, the island wasn't complicated--the main drag splitting matters down the middle, City Island Avenue, and then streets off to both sides, but not very lengthy ones, many of them no more than a block or two to the water and that was it.

So Chris started driving, keeping it comfortable, 15 miles an hour, and it was a bit of a long shot obviously, since even if Joe *wasn't* screwing with you, what would Albanese be doing at home right now?

But that was why Chris was here, *taking* the long shot chance--that the office part didn't sound right, the guy's story about coming in every day at 1 and working late--based originally on making time for his wife, but supposedly maintained after the marriage went south . . . and yada yada.

Chris was thinking the guy sure was happy to get out of there quick yesterday, wasn't he, head over to the strip club. And to Chris's untrained eye--no paperwork or related clutter anywhere--when you thought about it now, it *was* a little hard to picture Paulie doing much traditional work in there.

The story about working the real estate, bringing the lawyer guys in on deals when necessary, that sounded legit--and that after hours now and then, like yesterday, he used that back office to meet guys who were representing *other* guys--such as ones from Manhattan Beach--and pull a couple beers out of the fridge, and set things up to shake them down.

So worst scenario . . . you were driving around now taking a look.

Chris went at in systematic fashion. He started at the front end of the island, where the touristy restaurants were clustered, and he cruised the side streets one at a time, not sure what he was looking for, other than a likely house that Paulie might live in.

After ten minutes of this, he thought it through a little more, that if this guy *did* live here, he'd be in one of the primo houses on the island, meaning waterfront for sure . . . and that made it easier, start in the center of the island where the lots were bigger, since you figure a guy like that, even if the house was modest, he'd want some room between his neighbors.

Chris's instinct was good, you went half way back down the main drag toward the clam joint, and the side streets there *were* more luxurious, no doubt about it, and one house, the end of Early Street, now we're *talking*--modern, all glassed in on the water side, even a little strip of private beach it looked like.

Hard to tell if anyone was home, or who might live there . . . and admittedly nothing to go on.

One way, Jeez, you could just ring someone's bell and ask if the mope lived around here and *where* . . . and you might get the answer, but you might not, and you could open a can of worms too.

There were three similar blocks, all on the west side of the Avenue, all rounded at the end of the block with multi-million dollar waterfront homes . . . and the third one, Barnette Place, the vehicle parked on the street, closest to the last house . . . that sure looked like Paulie's.

Chris didn't even know what it *was* from last night when he was trying to follow the guy--he *still* couldn't tell--but the guess would be it was a scrunched up Cadillac.

Meaning a normal, new-model one, just head-scratching strange, when you thought of the real ones, the old-fashioned jobs . . . but *everything* was scrunched up these days, and what could you do.

Chris pulled in behind it and shut the engine and got organized.

There was a front door on the water side, with a little path, a formal entry, but you got the sense it wasn't used much, and there was a side entrance next to the garage, and Chris walked that way, not rushing it, and a high glass hanging sculpture caught his eye through one of the windows, and he was checking it out, admiring it, as he came around the corner to the door . . . and he almost ran into Paulie, who was tending an outdoor grill.

"What the fuck?" Paulie said.

"What you need," Chris said, "is a bell further back. With a gate. So visitors aren't stumbling around in the dark, no idea where to go."

"You got a lot of nerve kid," Paulie said, "which in another lifetime might be a good thing. Right now, I have to tell you, you're dancing on *very* thin ice."

"I can see your point," Chris said, "except it wasn't resolved today, what I'm supposed to tell my boss."

Paulie smiled very slightly. "Louie's your boss now, all of a sudden. That's funny."

"I'm a conscientious worker, what can I tell you. Either way, it never got resolved. This morning."

"Not following you. *What*, this morning?"

“Meaning one of your boys directed me here. I had to go to the bank for the rest of it.”

Paulie was off-balance for a mili-second, and then he recovered. “Don’t jerk me off son. Let’s see what you have.”

“Though I can see your logic. You come to *me* this morning. Conduct our business, save me another trip to Yonkers.”

“You catch on quick,” Paulie said, winking at him. “But now you *did* waste a trip . . . Unless, as you infer, you got a something more on you, which just might sweeten the pot.”

“The other part,” Chris said, “I need to know what to report to Lou, if I *do* sweeten the pot. *That* aspect not being entirely clarified . . . At the same time, sorry to impose upon you, but would you mind if I use a bathroom? The parkway was bad, jammed up.”

“What *else* is new?” Paulie said, and he took a careful look at Chris for a second and said help yourself, first door on the right, and Chris thanked him and went inside and was back pretty quick.

“But another question,” Chris said, “you grill when it’s this cold?”

“Oh, best time,” Paulie said. “Though, see, most guys that do, they cheat, they go with the shortcut version. Either your natural gas, or the propane canister if they have to . . . Myself, I go the old fashioned way, rain or shine.”

Chris had to admit, he agreed with the guy. Nothing beat a steak, or even a hamburger, over real charcoal. Which Paulie was in the middle of, that mound of coals that you separate and spread out, once the whole shebang starts to glow. Paulie’s weren’t quite there yet, Chris figured from his own experience, you give it twenty minutes, spread ‘em out, you’re ready to grill in a half hour.

Paulie said, “I got a couple people coming over. No offense, not asking you to stick around.”

And Paulie turned his full attention back to the grill, putting on the glove and picking up the long tongs that let you make adjustments to the coals--similar to last night in the strip club, when he didn't announce anything but it was clear the conversation was over . . . and there was another barbeque implement hanging on the fence which Paulie hadn't required yet, and wouldn't until the meat went on--and it was a long fork with a gnarly end, and Chris picked it up and slashed it into Paulie's right eye.

Paulie stumbled backward away from the barbeque, though he didn't fall down, and he grabbed his face with one hand, and curiously, his throat with the other . . . and that was odd, maybe there was a breathing reflex that was affected momentarily . . . but you weren't going to sit around trying to figure that out right now, the crux of the matter being this guy probably had a gun on him, or at least don't bet against it . . . and Chris managed to get up behind him pretty quick and pin his arms in an awkward but effective enough full-nelson, and he was able to persuade Paulie--not terribly resistant at this point, luckily--back toward the grill.

The reason Chris wanted to go inside a minute ago, other than yeah he did have use the bathroom, was to get a lay of the land--meaning was there anyone else *home*.

It didn't seem like it, and you had the old *nothing certain except death and taxes*, but Chris was reasonably confident that loud temporary screams wouldn't cause a big problem, plenty of distance between the neighbors, the way Paulie no doubt wanted it . . . and Chris slid his hands out of the nelson and stuffed Paulie's face into the orange coals.

There was actually some sizzling, and pretty soon the smell of burning meat--and why wouldn't there be, when it came down to it--and Chris kept Paulie inside the grill but varied the degree of pressure, kind of the way a short order cook presses down on a burger patty and gets that sizzle, and then lets it go normal for a while.

The good thing, in case the neighbors *were* closer than they seemed, or sound traveled strong around here--or the off chance some guy was walking his dog nearby--was Paulie screamed very little, in fact just the one time really, the initial contact, and you wouldn't classify it a scream because there wasn't enough pitch behind it.

You had a significant chance Paulie wasn't going to *make* it after all this, and Chris let go completely to see what would happen, and Paulie didn't move a muscle to try to lift up out of the coals.

Chris felt around the guy's torso, and sure enough above the waist, near the left armpit, a holster containing a firearm--nothing major, a snub-nosed 38 revolver possibly, from the little Chris knew about guns, and Chris debated it for a second and figured you better make sure, don't be driving cross-country wondering . . . and he stepped back and took aim and steadied himself and shot Paulie in the head.

When Chris first surveyed the block, before he parked, he noticed a rowboat on the little patch of beach in front of Paulie's house, and he had an idea to drag Paulie over there--since you could access the beach from the barbeque area without going into public view--and the follow-up being, you remove the heavy chain currently attached to the rowboat and you somehow use it on the *guy*, getting him into the water with it wrapped around him, and if you're lucky he goes to the bottom and maybe doesn't come back up . . . and Chris decided that was a terrible idea, no way was it going to work, plus Paulie had informed you he had people coming over for dinner.

That reminder motivated Chris, though he did pocket Paulie's weapon, why not, and as casually as he could he got back in the Subaru--and he took a quick look up and down the block, and it was dark and *dang* cold, that stiff breeze from earlier now really picking it up, no one out walking a dog, that was for sure, and little if any sign of life from any neighbors period.

So he relaxed as much as you could under those circumstances, and found his way back to the Hutch.

You're in traffic, the end of rush hour, people going north toward Connecticut, and Chris was thinking this was a rare time you didn't mind it, that you blended in fine . . . and around White Plains things loosened up and there were options, one of which was 95, where you could *really* get lost, that thing running Canada to Florida . . . but Chris opted for 287 which a few minutes later put you on the Tappan Zee Bridge . . . and Jeez, they did something to it since last time, spiffed it up, you're flying across it . . . and across the river you had to make another decision, and Chris took the Palisades Parkway 10 miles north to a place he'd never been called Mount Ivy, and where he wanted to stay, the Holiday Inn Express, was full for the night, and that seemed crazy, but Chris settled for the Motel 6 and that was good enough.



## Chapter 7

He slept well, no big scares startling him awake in the middle of the night.

The reality was, you were here to pass the peace pipe to this guy Paulie, but you had the underlying sense from the start--meaning shooting the breeze around the *Cheater Five* pool with Ned, where Chris remarked that Ned didn't look too great, and Ned told him what was going on--that you were going to have to assert yourself.

Guys like Paulie had their brain wired a certain way--and Chris supposed you could say the same for Ned, but maybe not, maybe he *was* a little different, which is why he opted out of the lifestyle and ended up in Manhattan Beach.

Maybe you were being generous to Ned with the assessment, who knows.

But the bottom line--keeping it logical--you were doing a favor for a guy who's a friend--until proven otherwise--and you weren't joking when you told Paulie you approach these tasks conscientiously.

And it wasn't payback for the guys in the hotel room, that you made the trip to City Island for. It was simply that it became clear a guy like Paulie had his own rules, and if you abided by them, he'd keep changing them.

Obviously there could be fallout from doing a number on a very-likely Mob guy.

Meaning someone might show up in MB asking questions, and worse.

The other side of it though . . . if you *didn't* bother with City Island, and the mopes hit you for the 13 grand and you left it at *that* . . . you know what, someone might easily *still* show in MB asking questions or worse.

And frankly, Chris wasn't real worried about it. On the chance someone would turn up . . . well, you deal with it *then*.

Not a heck of a lot different than the multitude of issues you've *been* dealing with these past 12 months.

Chris didn't check his messages last night, and he was taking care of that now, looking out the window of the Motel 6 at a guy vigorously addressing his frozen morning windshield with an ice scraper.

There was one message from Rosalie:

### **D U wanna get together?**

She'd been referring to last night of course, and obviously the getting together part meant doing business again . . . but Chris called her anyway.

"Listen," he said, "I'm heading back to California, like I said. You might as well come with me."

Rosalie took a little more time with it than Chris might have expected. "You're a big joker," she said.

"Change is good sometimes . . . You don't like it, just fly back. I'll take care of it."

"You're saying I'll have adventures," she said.

"Let's not go that far, maybe. But I got a pool, where I live. And I checked the air temperature, they're looking at a high today of an easy 79."

"You're trying to bribe me with weather? And what would I *do* out there?"

"You asked that before. I'm thinking now, go to school. UCLA."

“That’s so funny I forgot to laugh,” she said, though it occurred to Chris that Chandler, who was always bragging about being a UCLA alum, maybe really *could* work something like that.

“The only wrinkle,” Chris said, “driving home, cross country--I may have to make a quick stop off in Pierre, South Dakota. Check on something.”

There was about 30 seconds of silence.

“That’d be fine,” she said.

“Jeez,” Chris said. “*All* of it? The *stop off and* the conclusion, you’re saying?”

Rosalie said he understood her correctly, and to give her until noon, at which time she’d be outside, and she gave him the address on 148th Street, between Broadway and Amsterdam.

This was an unexpected twist, and yeah, you’d have to backtrack, which Chris never liked, and into New York City again no less--but something told him it wouldn’t be all that rough.

# Part Two

## Chapter 8

Around Hershey, Pennsylvania, Rosalie told Chris to just call her Rosie, everyone else did.

“Sounds a little suspicious,” Chris said, “since you introduced yourself the formal way. But if you say so.”

“Rosalie’s my business name,” she said, “is there a problem with that approach?”

She was having fun, at least you hoped, the passenger seat-back adjusted halfway flat, and her bare feet up on the dash, wiggling her toes around.

Chris said, “So I’m in the inner circle? The *everyone else*? Or I’m still a poor sap client.”

“I don’t know *what* you are, as a matter of fact. That’s a good question.”

“Hmm,” Chris said. “If you let me sleep with you tonight--for example--I’m still a client, right? I mean that’s obvious.”

“You might not be,” Rosie said, reaching over and pinching him on the cheek.

“Either way, I got it. It’s on me, the financial part. That goes without saying.”

“So why’d you ask?”

“I’m testing you . . . plus out of 3200-some-odd miles we’re embarking on--and having knocked off a whopping total of 190 so far, you need to come up with stuff, to kill time.”

“I don’t mind,” Rosie said, “come up with more.”

This girl was awful cheerful, Chris had to admit, under these relatively strange circumstances.

Chris had met her Monday night at an espresso bar in Tribeca. He supposed the place had to do it to attract business, but the front door was wide open and it was like 30 degrees outside by that point and everyone was huddling around one of these cheap electric heaters they had suspended on the wall above where you add the creme and sugar.

When it thinned out he and Rosalie said hello, the small talk morphing pretty quickly into *would you like a date*, and Chris taking her up on it and Rosie coming back to the La Quinta hotel with him and spending the night.

It wasn’t something Chris would have sought out or planned, and as it was he had second thoughts agreeing to it, but it was the companionship more than the act that sounded good.

Then of course he finds out Rosie is trying to get ahead, she’s at least taking some classes at a community college in the Bronx, and dating guys like him, as a part-time gig, to supposedly help with the expenses.

And Chris tosses it out there--more or less a joke the first time--why not ride back cross-country with me, see what might transpire . . . and Jeez, here you were.

“You think you’ll be turning tricks in LA?” Chris said.

“How should *I* know,” she said, “I’ve never even *been* to California.”

You didn’t get an answer, but it was sure an honest and unhesitating response, and Chris was guessing there weren’t many questions you could fire at Rosie that would throw her off.

He said, “I can see your point, start by getting your equilibrium . . . but shifting gears on you for a second--have you ever acted in an adult film?”

“No. Why?”

“How would you feel if the opportunity presented itself?”

“Man, Seely--you’re all over the place. What’s your problem?” But smiling, playing along like it was *no* problem.

“Don’t worry,” Chris said, “I’m not intending to bring you to sunny Manhattan Beach with the adult film business as part of the equation.”

And obviously that *was* part of the thinking--at least the *backup* concept--that if things didn’t work out there otherwise, or if she needed a boost--especially income-wise--it might be an opportunity.

Even if Mancuso *didn’t* owe Chris--which let’s face it, he *did* now--Ned would hire Rosalie on the spot. Sculpted cheekbones, perfect body, and radiant.

So you had an option to present to her, that was all.

Chris couldn’t remember what Ned said about the hourly wages . . . but Ken hadn’t been complaining about his, that was for sure, and Ned had mentioned the women earning at a higher pay-scale than the men.

It was a goofy thought, out of left field, but yeah, Chandler, who was connected up the wazoo--he likely *could* get Rosie into some program at UCLA if she were so inclined . . . and could you be going for that degree and meanwhile doing a little part-time gigging as a porn star? Chris figured if it all fit into your comfort zone, why not.

Either way, Chris decided he wouldn’t feel guilty about laying the film option on the table, if it came to that. It wasn’t like he’d be corrupting her, since you’d have to think of it as a step up--not to mention a whole lot safer--than what she’d had going in New York.

“Did you even have a pimp?” he said. You were seeing signs now for Harrisburg, and there were more side roads and strip malls, increased human activity all over.

“I had my Uncle Willie if I needed him,” she said.

“So *no*, that means.”

“Seely, you’re a tough interrogator. I already told you, I’m a city girl. Barrio born and raised.”

“So you said. You’re street smart, and you exercise good judgment . . . You carry anything?”

“Little bitty pistol, the bottom of my bag. It’s never been an issue.”

“You have it with you now?”

“Yes, I have it back there. Didn’t think to remove it. I should have?”

“No, that’s fine,” Chris said, and the truth is it *was*, since you never know. If anything *happened*--not that you were expecting it--but all he did have, in the hatchback trunk of the Subaru, was that syringe-deal Mark set him up with, that supposedly puts someone away more or less on contact . . . And a baseball bat, he’d thrown one of those in too. He hadn’t intended to, but it was a last minute addition, part of the comfort zone, going all the way back to the beginning, when he’d had to bat Donny.

Chris said, “I always thought the way it worked, you had your . . . *boss* involved at all times, and you checked in with him when you were going somewhere with a client.”

“It *can* work that way. But then you have a lot more overhead. And complications.”

“Okay,” Chris said, “you’re making me nervous, even being on hiatus from the business . . . So many variables . . . The clients though, what’s the *real* name for them?”

Rosie was laughing. “The guys like *you*? We call them Johns.”

“That’s right. I was watching one of those true crime things on *Dateline NBC*? And I remember even the cops called them that.”

“What was it about?”

What it was *about*, was a serial killer on the loose in south Texas, preying on prostitutes. And Chris saw no reason to put *that* out there right now, so he tried to make something up on the fly, and he said, “One of the

clients--johns--played hardball with a call girl . . . at least that was *one* story . . . and she shot him.”

“Oh. Where did it happen?”

“Columbus, Ohio.”

“What was the other side of the story?”

“Pretty far-fetched . . . That she’d been a high school girlfriend of a buddy of his . . . that he knew in the army, and he visited her as a good samaritan to try to talk her back home, and out of the profession . . . and that discussion got out of hand.”

Rosie was considering that one. “Could be,” she said. “Was there a third story?”

This was getting hard, to keep making shit up, but what else did you have going on really, being at least a couple days away from your possible unpleasant business in Pierre, South Dakota. So Chris said, “The final possibility they raised, she was a serial killer herself, had done it before-- though that was only speculation, they had nothing to pin on her.”

“Hard to know then. Sounds good. I’ll look it up, I got all those shows on demand.”

“You hungry?” Chris said.

“Not really. But I like making stops, if that’s what you’re asking.”

There’d been signs for a few miles for a Bob’s Big Boy, coming up at a particular numbered exit, this being Interstate 76 currently, and Chris was starting to salivate just a bit at the thought of viewing the next sign. “What’s the furthest west you’ve been?” he said.

“Me? Okay, I’m trying to get my geography in order . . . I’m gonna say Trenton, New Jersey? We did a high school field trip there, we took the train.”

“Well . . .” Chris said, “this experience’ll be different. A lot whiter, for one.”

“I try to be color blind,” Rosie said.



Jeez . . . pretty refreshing, Chris was thinking, next to what's going in the world these days.

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Chris didn't ask Rosie if she wanted to take over some of the driving, since she looked pretty at ease, doing a little dozing on and off, and why rock the boat.

Plus his energy level was good, her presence no doubt having something to do with that, injecting a bounce in his step.

They stopped the first night in Zanesville, Ohio, Chris thinking not bad, 8 hours on the road, plus a couple more lazy ones pulling off a few places--and that just to get started he didn't pick Rosie up on West 148th Street until noon.

And that pick-up hadn't been quite as smooth as you'd like, a couple rough-looking dark-skinned dudes given Chris the evil eye as he was helping Rosie with her suitcase, and he mentioned it as they were driving away and she said those guys are harmless, he was projecting unnecessarily . . . and Chris said fine and they got out of there, but he couldn't help thinking if he ran into those two guys in a different situation, things might turn hairy fast.

It was always an adjustment, driving the highways in the east, the way you could buzz through a bunch of states in a few hours. Chris noticed Zanesville was only 55 miles from Columbus, Ohio, of all places, where he'd set the fake story he told Rosie.

Still you didn't equate Zanesville with the New York metropolitan area, that was for sure, whole different universe--and yet if you jump in the car after breakfast in one of the two places, boom, you're at the other one by dinnertime.

When they pulled in to Zanesville Chris told Rosie he always liked Super 8's, especially the last couple years after they'd renovated the whole

chain, and Rosie shrugged her shoulders and said, “No need to stay anywhere fancy on my account.”

He couldn't tell if she was serious or not--but maybe, not having much experience with road trips, she thought this *was* a fancy option.

Chris said, “I learned my lesson. You stick to the chains, and preferably the chains right near where you get off the Interstate. You start fooling around, looking for more internal stuff, that's how you get in trouble. The mom and pop places, they can be a real crapshoot.”

“I like mom and pop places,” she said, and Chris told her she might have *one* point, that the chains admittedly had no character at all, but sorry, this part of the adventure wasn't going to involve a democratic decision.

“You're stubborn,” she said. “What kind of jobs do stubborn people do?”

“That's a strange question. I guess ones where you don't have a boss, would be the most obvious thought.”

“And what ones would *those* be? In your case.”

“Well, one that I was thinking about lately in fact, since I kind of reunited with a couple guys--was riding a bike around San Francisco, delivering packages.”

“Like we have in New York? Those people?”

Chris didn't want to get into the minutia, the distinctions between the bicycle messengers in Manhattan and the ones in San Francisco, since you probably had to have been a messenger to care, but the New York experience was pretty different, the way he understood it--long routes spread out, a lot less deliveries, and likely much more unpleasant riding conditions.

Also not the walkie-talkie messenger network going all day, which was the best part of it.

“Similar,” he said, “though San Francisco, geographically--and business-wise too, at least back then--was a natural backdrop for someone to *be* one.”

“I see,” she said. “So it attracted stubborn people.”

“You know something, you jump to conclusions easily. I was answering your question, what jobs you don’t have to have a boss for.”

“How do you know where to go then, what to deliver?”

“Okay you loosely *have* a boss, obviously. The point I’m making, you’re on your own, outdoors, no two days the same. No one looking over your shoulder.”

“So why’d you stop?”

“All right . . . How about we turn the corner on that, advance to the next subject.”

“Do you have a wife?”

“Jeez . . . you *thought* that? No.”

“You live with someone?”

“Yeah, sort of. A guy. I think. He’s in and out quite a bit.”

“You’re in and out too,” she said. “Why?”

“You fire off questions effortlessly . . . I see your thrust, these couple weeks, my being out of the apartment.”

“You went to San Francisco too, you said.”

“Okay yeah, I stopped on the way.”

“No, you told me you had to take care of some *things* there. *Before* this trip.”

Chris didn’t remember telling her that but it was probably in the La Quinta. He was punch-drunk tired just having made it cross-country, and was no doubt running his big mouth. Though hopefully leaving out the details, Jeeeminy Christmas--but you never knew.

“What did I say I was doing up there *that* time?” he said.

“You said you had a bad tenant. And you were visiting some people, and something else came up.”

“What was the something else . . . did I say?” Holy Smokes . . . Chris was reasonably confident he hadn’t mentioned the terrible business with the *female* bike messenger, and tracking down Errol and taping him up and driving him into the woods at Tahoe . . . except *wait a second*, that ended with the guy peacefully walking into the police station.

“You *didn’t* say,” Rosie said, with the slightly devilish smile that she flashed now and then.

Chris said, “So I’ve got some mystery about me, you’re saying. Good.”

“When someone says, ‘*see a guy*’--when they’re answering your question of why they got in a car and drove here from California . . .”

“Tends to be suspect?”

“A little.”

“Okay, all’s *that* was . . . a man out by me, he needed to transfer some money to someone. I guess off the books was important. I was free, so I volunteered . . . Look at it this way, I wouldn’t have *met* you otherwise, and your life wouldn’t be transformed.”

Rosie took her time with the logic. “You’re kind of cute. I’m not particularly *attracted* to you, but I like you. You’re interesting.”

Wow.

“Not sure how to take that one,” Chris said. “Since you have no problem being honest, obviously--is there anything I can improve? Like *make over*? In your view?”

“I’ll toss it around,” she said. “I don’t think so.”

So that was that . . . and what did you expect.

In the morning they’d showered and found a little breakfast joint and were in the motel parking lot ready to plow on forward, when there’s this little dog poking around in the open field between the parking lot and the freeway.

Not even a field, more like an empty lot with weeds, and some scatterings of litter and probably a few broken beer bottles too.

Some patches of ice as well. It looked like it hadn't snowed in a few days, but that was almost worse, because the ice was rock hard and slick and real dirty.

"Aw," Rosie said, "he's limping."

"Appears to be," Chris said. "That's a tough one."

"What do you think happened?"

"What I'm hoping--probably wishful thinking--is someone let him out? Their room maybe? Or a car? And then ran next door to get gas?"

"I'm afraid not," Rosie said, and there sure wasn't much evidence of that theory, no one standing around, no open motel doors, no vehicle at the gas station that looked like it was missing a pet--not to mention no apparent collar around the guy's neck.

Not only was the dog walking poorly, favoring its right front leg, it was pretty apparently looking for food--which all dogs do, but this poor thing was in some trouble.

Without saying anything Chris and Rosie both got out and approached the dog, a black and white mix, a pretty extreme one, no breeds you recognize, furry in the front and around the head, less so around the body. Scrawny tail sticking out kind of funny.

Rosie bent down and held her hand a certain way and said something high-pitched and welcoming, and the dog cautiously approached, and stopped five feet away.

"Do we have any snacks?" she said.

Chris thought of some iced cookies left in a bag in the back somewhere, and a can of mixed nuts, and neither of those seemed optimum, so he hustled over to the convenience store at the gas station . . . and that wasn't much easier--and *dang* we have a lot of processed crap in this country, he was thinking--and he figured he'd have to go with Ritz

crackers or something, but then he found a little travel section in back, and they had these emergency packs of Purina Beneful, and Chris bought 5 . . . and added a pack of paper plates, and then thought better make that paper bowls, and he threw in a couple bottles of water.

When he got back the dog was not exactly in Rosie's arms, but his 5 feet distance had been narrowed to 2, with Rosie was sitting all the way down now, and Chris stayed out of it and let it happen, and a few minutes later she was petting the poor little guy . . . and then yeah, he *was* in her lap.

"You can say hi," she said. "He's not scared of men."

"How can you tell?"

But before she tried to explain her intuition Chris couldn't help it, he was down on the ground too, and yeah there was broken glass around but you didn't think about it, especially when the little guy came to you now as well, and best he could, started wagging his tail.

"Sheesh," Chris said.

"I know," Rosie said.

Chris opened up the food and dispersed it, and filled a water bowl, and they watched the guy go to town.

"What do you think?" he said.

"I think his name is Bo."

"Fine. I was more asking . . . what do we *do*?"

"What do you *want* to do?" she said.

That was a good question obviously. Both of them thinking the same thing, do you just scoop him up at this point and lay him in the backseat, and he's part of the deal now?

Chris couldn't help think of Melvin, Mark-the-hacker's little dog, who was so friendly to Chris that time, a complete stranger, that Chris had trouble saying goodbye.

Come to think of it . . . *this* time, when he'd swung by and Mark gave him the option of the poison, the gas or the injection methods--Jeez, where *was* the little guy?

Hopefully he was just sleeping in the other room or something, but how could he have at least not thought to ask?

"Excuse me just a minute," Chris said to Rosie, and he wasn't a big cell phone person on the road, that was an understatement, but this was important, and he called Mark.

"Hey my *friend*," Mark said, and then a slight delay. "Everything . . . work?"

"*Your* thing," Chris said, "turned out it didn't come to that, and I didn't need it. Which was my hunch. Not that I don't appreciate the consideration."

"Oh. Good then."

"But how's Melvin?"

"Fine, why?"

"Jesus, thank God." And Chris did feel massively relieved, there'd been a wave of panic there.

Mark said, "Don't take this personally, but you sound off, bro. You *sure* everything's under control?"

No doubt referring to his mental state. Chris said, "I found a mutt out here in Ohio . . . and I just lost it for a second, realizing I didn't see *Melvin* this time . . . and sorry but my mind started running away."

"Well he goes to Doggie Daycare 3 afternoons a week. He looks forward to it. That's why you missed him."

"Oh . . . but even with you working at home? That's necessary?"

"No, strictly optional. But he has his social circle there. I'm limited in what I can provide."

"I just thought . . . man's best friend, and all."

“Yeah, but they gotta mix in. Goes way back in their genetics, before domestication.”

Chris was getting the idea, the *pack* and all, though if he was Mark he'd be thinking screw *that*, I like you with *me*. But it made sense . . . Melvin wasn't going to tell you in so many words, but yeah, you *could* picture the reaction when he got dropped off with his buddies.

Either way, what difference did it make, the dog was fine, that's what mattered, and Chris figured that's all the phone time you needed with Mark, and he said he'd catch him next time he needed him for something--and of course threw in that he hadn't forgotten about the DNA test.

And that was true, you needed to stay on top of that. It seemed every couple days now, you'd read about another supposedly impossible cold case solved through familial matching. It was scary.

On the other hand, maybe the one bright spot, the authorities seemed to be putting their DNA energy into the old cases more than the new ones. Likely it was the challenge, the ability to erase years and often decades of frustration.

Clearly they were working the new ones hard too, likely including some of Chris's escapades, but you weren't reading--yet--about the new ones being solved through Gedmatch, which typically seemed to take time and an outside team and dedicated resources.

But even so, don't screw around . . . when you get back home pick up the damn test and get it to Mark.

The other thing you thought of too, the Zodiac. Very likely, behind the scenes, they were re-testing old evidence that had come up empty all these years. Now with super-computers involved, and DNA sequencing, all bets were off.

Chris was thinking he, as much as anyone, had a stake in if it really *was* that guy Hilliard, who he met with in Modesto.



If the Zodiac did turn out to be that guy, law enforcement should be ashamed of themselves, with he and Kenny figuring it out over a couple of days with the help of some old high school yearbooks.

“Was that person you were just speaking to the one you were delivering the money for?” Rosie said.

“Huh?” Chris said, coming back to the here and now.

“There were some odd pieces to that conversation,” she said.

“Honestly? I was checking on the status of his dog. *This* here guy triggered it.”

And the dog had finished gobbling up the food, and capped it off with three intermittent efforts at the water bowl, and was now back on Rosie’s lap.

“Look at that,” Chris said. “That’s the thing, makes it so dang tough.”

“I know exactly what you mean. All his struggles, the poor thing probably scared to death half the time, they all vanish when he finds a good human.”

“I see that. Like nothing was ever wrong . . . I wish *I* could adapt that quality.”

“I think you meant adopt,” Rosie said. “There’s a difference in meaning. You adapt *to* something.”

“Ooh boy. So you’re a good student?”

“Excuse me? And it didn’t come to *what*? In your phone conversation there. You said it didn’t *come* to that. Sort of mysterious.”

“Fuck. You’re relentless. All that meant, I took care of my business negotiation, and no one had a problem with the outcome.”

“Hmm. And *what* DNA test?”

“Oh that. I’m looking for long lost relatives, my friend’s a computer guy, he knows his way around that stuff. I’m told him my mom’s side, we got back to a tiny town in Norway. At this point wholly unconfirmed.”

“So go on Ancestry.com or one of the other \$79 dollar sites. You spit in a cup, and send it in.”

Chris knew all about that process, and didn't particularly want to be focusing on it right now. Plus in his case, she was wrong, those commercial sites wouldn't work. Of course his motivation was different, he didn't give a hoot if one side of the family went back to Norway, or anywhere else.

“I'll keep it in mind,” he said.

Rosie said, “That's fun. You might receive an incredible surprise.”

“So, *you* try it.”

“Mine's not going to be that interesting, I'm afraid. We're not complicated. I know for a fact, it's nearly all Spanish and African.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Chris said.

Rosie was amused. “You're an expert on PR culture then?”

The truth was Chris knew nothing about PR culture, in fact he embarrassingly wouldn't be able to find it on a map--until about 6 months ago, when he read that most of the island *still* didn't have the power back on from the hurricane they got hit with.

Which pissed him off. All the government waste, the needless red tape, the silly proposals and bills and motions in Congress--like it or not, Puerto Rico's been a US territory since the Spanish-American war . . . and you can't even turn on the damn lights?

So being angry-curious, Chris researched it just a bit, which essentially boiled to 20 minutes on Wikipedia. But he learned a few things.

“You may very well be a more complex-ly structured individual than you think,” he said to Rosie.

“Very funny. Hopefully you're not building up to an off-color joke.”

“I'm serious. Yes, Puerto Ricans descend from Spanish migrants, specifically southern Spain, meaning Analusia and the Canary Islands.”

“Gosh,” she said.

“But . . . did you know there was also immigration through the decades from mainstream Europe?”

“What countries?”

“The real *white* ones. Plus Italy. If I remember right, we’re talking France, Ireland and Germany.”

“Whatever. I’m not feeling that.”

“Then of course you’ve got the Africans. Freed slaves and runaways, both. The capper though, you likely have plenty of Indigenous American blood--plus some Guanche in you too.”

“Seely, *what?* For *real?* What is that?”

“Look it up,” he said. “The roots of the Guanche people are aboriginal.”

“You’re making my head spin,” she said. “I don’t *feel* complicated. Can I leave it at that?”

“No doubt,” he said. “What about Bo, as you refer to him?”

“Do they have, like a shelter around here, do you think?”

Chris was wondering the same thing of course, though you’d assume Zanesville was big enough to maybe have a *couple*.

“The problem there,” Chris said, “would be, does he *make* it?”

“Something to consider, it sure is,” she said.

And what neither of them were blurting out, was this was not a particularly attractive animal, bordering on ugly, to get technical, and who’s going to adopt him?

If a potential adopter got to know him, and they’re down on the ground and he’s on their lap and so forth--then fine, they get the picture, what Bo is all about.

But chances are it wouldn’t come to that. He’d be in his little kennel like all the others, hoping for the best, and the adopters would keep on walking.

Nonetheless, much as you were tempted, you couldn't throw him in the Subaru and start a new life with him. Too much going on, getting in the way, for you to be a faithful parent.

So Chris took out his phone and started looking.

"Looks like they got a city one," he said, "and a private one, on Bell Street, up toward the Walmart Supercenter."

"Let's try the private one," Rosie said, and Chris was thinking the same thing.

On the ride there, still on Rosie's lap, the poor little guy looked so dang comfortable, this was going to be even harder.

It was a modest white wooden structure, it looked like a house out of the 1930's, and you could see a couple outbuildings in back. Chris and Rosie took a collective deep breath and went inside.

"I'm Jefferson," a young man said right away. "What can I help you folks with today?"

He was a red-haired kid, a lot of freckles, neatly dressed, khakis and a flannel shirt, work boots. A couple tattoos, which Chris had never gotten used to on young people, but what could you do. The kid did seem on the ball and capable.

"We found him," Rosie said. "Over by the interstate."

"We gave it a while," Chris said. "We're convinced he doesn't belong to anyone."

Rosie was holding Bo, and without missing a beat Jefferson squats down and sticks his face right in Bo's and starts scratching him under the chin, just right, and Jefferson says, "Yeah . . .you're a *good* boy, *aren't* you there buddy? . . . You *are*."

Chris and Rosie looked at each other.

In a perfect world, this guy takes him.

When Jefferson straightened back up Rosie said, “You have quite a way with animals. That was beautiful to watch. I can feel the love oozing out. We *all* can.”

Chris looked sideways at Rosie, thinking where did *that* come from, that’s a little over the top. But at the same time, yeah--not so melodramatically--but you did have to agree.

Chris said to Jefferson, “So what would be, like, the procedure . . . If we were to turn him in for adoption.”

“Do you have to say it like that?” Rosie said. “Like we’re turning in the rental shoes after we just finished bowling?”

“Well the big difference,” Jefferson said, “us and city facility. We charge higher fees. Not to you, but to the adopting owner. What they do receive though, for their extra money, is a thorough vet exam and a written set of recommendations, up front, from an independent veterinarian.”

“The city shelter doesn’t get them checked the same?” Chris said.

Jefferson grimaced slightly. “More questionable,” he said.

“What do you think might be wrong with his leg?” Rosie said. “Could that obstruct him from being adopted?”

Chris was thinking, there’s a lot *more* that’s going to stop poor Bo from being adopted, besides an issue with his leg. Again, you could unfortunately picture family after family coming in on weekends, excitedly tromping through the back buildings where you assume the kennels are located, and Bo looking up at each one hopefully, and then getting passed right by.

It killed you to think. But once again the reality was, he was a pretty dang unappealing mutt. On the surface.

Rosie was more upbeat, but she was likely thinking the same thing. She said, “And as far as someone providing him a good home . . .”

“Just give me a moment please,” the kid said, down on a knee again, this time gently cradling Bo’s right leg in the air.

And he was dutifully trying to figure out what might be wrong with the leg--and Chris wondered, like with horses, if it is *really* fucked up, would that be *it*?

He also knew where Rosie was going with her question, that the gist of it, him getting successfully adopted, was: *what are the odds?*

Jefferson finished his informal exam and said to excuse him for a moment please, and he headed behind the desk into a back room, and son of a gun, Bo tried to follow him.

Everyone laughed, though in Chris and Rosie's case it was a slightly uneasy one, knowing Bo's situation may be not always be so friendly going forward, and Jefferson closed a door to confine Bo to the main waiting room, and a minute later he returned with a middle-aged good natured woman, who was wearing latex gloves and carrying some medical stuff.

"Meg is my trusty assistant," Jefferson said, smiling at the woman, likely intending it as a playful aside, but the truth was, that was probably accurate.

Meaning the kid, all of maybe 22, was running the show already. Maybe not the whole show, if there was a non-profit group and board of directors behind the scenes or something, but certainly the part that was presented to the public.

Meg laid out a large paper mat, and she sat down with Bo the way Rosie had in the parking lot, and he came right to her, and she put on a pair of glasses and got to work.

Jefferson said, "What I saw--what I'm hoping all's it is--he's got a thorn in that paw."

"Oh thank *God*," Rosie said.

"*Really*," Chris said.

"The caveat," Jefferson continued, "there may be an additional problem higher up as well. Those are difficult to diagnose without x-rays. What I recommend, whether you leave him with us or not, give it three days

and re-evaluate. If it was only the thorn, he should be bounding around like *nobody's business* by then.”

Jefferson no doubt figured Chris and Rosie were wondering about the cost of what was going on right *here*, whether they were going to get hit with a \$300 vet-like bill. Which Chris *wasn't* worried about, that wasn't even on his radar, but the kid added: “No charge at all for this, by the way. It's our pleasure.”

“Well fantastic,” Rosie said. “And thank you *so* much. We're keeping our fingers crossed.”

“My guess?” the kid said. “What Meg's doing right now, tweezering it out of there--then disinfecting the wound with old fashioned peroxide--that should do it.

“Pardon me for jumping around a second,” Chris said, “but where'd you grow up? Here?”

“Mostly, yes. Before that, until I was 10, we lived in Hanover.”

Chris was wondering, could he mean Hanover, *Vermont* . . . but don't jump to conclusions and embarrass yourself by asking . . . so he said, “Ah. Where's *that* now?”

“Hanover? No big deal. You know where Krylon Lake is?”

“Sorry,” Chris said.”

“Doesn't matter. You run 146-North out of town, and then a little ways west on 16 you're in beautiful downtown Hanover. I probably wouldn't recommend it, unless you had your own reason to be stopping there.”

“Why did you have to be nosey?” Rosie said, “interrogating him on where he's from.”

“No worries,” Jefferson said. “I enjoy talking about myself, when people ask.”

“That's a good quality,” Chris said. “The best part, you *admit* it.”

“I agree with that,” Meg said, from down below working on Bo. “Too many cagey people out there these days. I tell my kids, just be yourself. But they don’t always listen.”

Chris said to Meg, “How about dogs? Do you have any of *those*?” Letting that one hang, praying it resonated with her. Or with Jefferson.

Meg shook her head. “My hubby’s allergic. Along with my middle one, my 8-year old. I know it sounds wacky, with me here 40 hours a week.”

“Sometimes more than that,” Jefferson said. “A *lot* more.”

And that wouldn’t be surprising at all, that not only Meg, but Jefferson too, would be working way overtime when it was required, and unlikely telling anybody about it or getting paid a penny for it. Just doing it.

These were good people. The type of humans that made you proud to be one.

Chris said, “I’m going to blurt out something here, at the risk of sounding maudlin. You’re very decent folks, both of you.”

“Well thanks,” Jefferson said, “that makes our day.”

“*You’re* not kidding,” Meg said, just about finished with the Bo paw now, closing up the peroxide and pulling some moleskin-like material out of a box, along with a pair of scissors.

“How did he *do*?” Rosie said, anxious. “How does it *look*?”

“Oh, your little guy’s amazing,” Meg said. “Flying colors. You notice he didn’t even barely flinch when I doused it with the peroxide?”

“He trusts you,” Rosie said.

“Big-time,” Chris said. “And Jefferson, the only reason I asked where you’re from, you threw out an expression--*like nobody’s business*. My grandfather used to use it, and it filtered down to my dad . . . Can’t say I’ve heard it too many other times.”

“Especially from someone under 25, you’re saying?” Jefferson said. Big smile, the kid caught on quick. “*My* grandpa too, that’s where *I* got it. It’s a small world, I guess.”



Chris was tempted to ask where the *grandpa* was from, he was always interested in that stuff, picturing how someone's family roots might play out, but he figured that'd be going too far, and didn't want to further irritate Rosie.

Meg was finished and you heard the water running at a sink in back, her washing up.

Bo was up, like he knew was going on, stepping lightly toward Rosie, tenderly sampling the repaired paw. *Dang that tail's wagging*, Chris couldn't help thinking.

Chris said to Jefferson, "So what about you? You have anything else going on?"

"*Seely*," Rosie said.

"Entirely fine," Jefferson said. "Well it's a pipe dream--I know--but I want to be a veterinarian."

"Tremendous," Chris said.

"What a perfect fit," Rosie said.

"It's a long shot," Jefferson said, "I have no illusions. There aren't a whole lot of vet schools in the United States . . . and statistically, actually harder to get accepted into than med school. At any rate, I'm taking the plunge, part-time for now, but doing the science requirements over at Zane State."

Chris thinking: *fuck* this shit. If they don't let *this* kid become a vet, we've gone completely down the tubes as a society--even beyond where we already are.

He filed it away, and vowed to *do* something about it, if and when the time came that the kid was applying to vet schools and getting turned down. He pulled out a business card, one of the original ones with the **Chris Seely Freelance Journalist** on it, from the time when he *was* one of those briefly, after his stint at the Chronicle fell apart.

“Wow,” Jefferson said. “San Francisco. It’s on my dream list to visit it.”

Chris realized that in small print the card had his address, not a cagey one like PO box or mail drop, but the Broderick Street one, still a bit of a sore spot resonating there, after he’d had to dangle the guy off the roof.

“Jeez, you could almost stay in my old place,” Chris said. “It’s a sublet these days, I live in LA now.”

“So how could he stay in your *old* place?” Rosie said. “You’re making no sense.”

“Well it’s vacant, currently. A friend of mine who works in the neighborhood, guy named Shep, pretty resourceful, he’s trying to land me a new sub-tenant. Which means hopefully a better caliber one than the last guy . . . but Jefferson . . . thinking out loud here . . . you really *can* stay there. I’ll hold off on the new person. Why not?”

“Gol-ly,” Jefferson said. “I can’t quite believe what I’m hearing. And I’m going to have to respectfully decline your incredible offer. Unfortunately I’m stuck with two things I can’t walk away from just now, school and work.”

“I know,” Chris said. “It’s not realistic. That said, when you *are* free . . . why don’t you come out to LA? Meg too, bring the husband and kids.”

Rosie didn’t say anything, and she tried not to be obvious about it, but you could sense her thinking, *okay it’s good you’re trying to be a nice guy-- but are you out of your mind?*

Chris was in one of those moods, probably because he’d become unexpectedly fond of these people in a hurry. It was a *life’s too short* impulsive thing, like the old Raider coach he looked up to, John Madden, telling a story how he was on Amtrak and there was train trouble in a small town, and Madden walked into the main street bar and announced all

drinks were on him. Madden said later it felt like walking into a saloon in the old west and just going for it.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Chris said to Jefferson, and Meg now too, who’d come back in the waiting room and was listening to this. “The accommodations. How will that work? Don’t worry about it, we got you covered.”

And this was playing of course, carrying out the hypothetical he’d laid out there, which likely wouldn’t happen in a million years . . . though one thing for sure about honest midwestern folks such as these--if they ever *did* tell you they were coming, you could take it to the bank.

Separately, Chris chewing on it just for fun--how *would* you work it--but it was pretty clear, when you thought about it, that between Chandler and Mancuso and their connections, you could probably put up *fifty* people, no big deal.

That was the other crazy thought. Chandler could maybe somehow get *Jefferson* into UCLA. Pretty dang good foundation to apply to any vet school from . . . Funny to think that would make *two* of them going there if everything broke right, Rosie *and* the kid.

But back to reality. Chris asked Jefferson if he had any pets.

He said he had two cats and two dogs, and that was pushing it, but luckily they were a harmonious bunch. He pulled out his phone and starting cruising around it, obviously happy to show photos of them all.

Chris and Rosie took a look and nodded, and Meg leaned in for a peek as well.

“How do think *this* guy would get along with cats?” Chris said.

“Bo? Oh, that’s a slam dunk.”

“You can tell? . . . Don’t you have to introduce ‘em and stuff?”

“Sometimes, of course. I’ve seen a lot canines come through here though. This little guy’s friends with *anyone*.”

Chris felt himself tearing up. He said, "So can you *take* him? . . . Please, I'm begging you."

Rosie was crying now too, trying to disguise it, and she had to turn away and open the door and go outside for a moment to compose herself.

Meg and Jefferson were looking at each other. You could tell they were torn up, and you had the impression this wasn't the first time--not even close--that they'd been put through this.

Jefferson hadn't said anything yet, he was trying to phrase it right, how he'd have to turn that down, and Chris felt awkward that he'd made the kid stumble around on his behalf.

So Chris said, "What does food cost, by the way? A guy like Bo."

That was an easier one and Jefferson was relieved to deal with it, and he said, "Well, *premium* dry food, which is what we recommend . . . let's see, guy his size, we're talking a 30-pound bag every month and a half, two months . . . So, I'm going to say, 25 dollars per bag, ballpark, and on the average, 8 bags per year? Let's go 10, to be safe. So what's that, 250 dollars a year."

"You can do better even, you watch the sales at PetSmart," Meg said.

"What else would he need?" Chris said. "What other expenses?"

"Not a lot," Jefferson said. "We make sure shots are up to date before we adopt him out. You should factor in the occasional vet bill. Leashes. Collars. Training sessions if you want, but you can get those cheap at the senior center. You don't have to be senior."

"Don't forget toys," Meg said.

"Oh yeah right," Jefferson said, smiling a little. "Lot of options out there. You *do* get into it, when you see them respond. You always want to buy more."

"So a thousand total for the year?" Chris said. "Rounded off?"

"Oh that should be *way* high," Jefferson said. "Unless there was a dire circumstance with a vet, God forbid. Not seeing it with this guy though. He

looks great, despite all he's probably been through. Not to mention heavily mixed breeds like *he* is, they're by far the heartiest."

Chris thought of something else. "How much does it typically cost to take care of a dog? Like when someone comes in."

"You mean a pet sitter? That depends, there can be a range . . . We have a dependable one . . . Meg, what's Janna charge these days?"

Meg said, "I think she's at \$40 for 3 hours, \$110 for overnight. There *are* cheaper ways to go."

"No, but you don't want to fool around too much there," Jefferson said.

"No," Chris said.

"You don't," Rosie said.

Chris was trying to make some calculations on the fly, and you could tell it had gotten to the point where Jefferson and Meg were wondering if a decision had been made about leaving Bo here.

Fortunately an older couple came in. They had a big dog, bounding around friendly, looked like a rotweiler mixed with something a lot tamer, maybe a golden retriever.

For a moment Jefferson and Meg were concerned, since what was apparent was the couple had recently adopted the dog and now were back with it.

But all it was, they had a few questions, they were perfectly thrilled with their new household member, and Jefferson, in that special way he had, addressed all their concerns, giving everyone the impression that he had nothing but time and theirs was the only thing that mattered.

Chris and Rosie retreated to the waiting room bench, and Bo tried to get up on Rosie but couldn't quite make it and she hoisted him on to her lap, and the poor guy almost fell asleep, the events of the day plus a wave of contentedness overtaking him.

Chris was mumbling very softly to Rosie, “Jeez, a hundred a night-- what’s that, 7 a week . . . so 35 grand a year.”

“Huh?” Rosie said.

The point was, you weren’t going to match that kind of rate, not even close, so how much a pet sitter would charge had been a moot question.

Chris wasn’t clear on how much he did have on him at this point.

“You have a pen and paper?” he said.

Rosie fumbled around in her purse, came up with a pen, and pulled a flyer advertising a charity crab feed out of one of those wall slots, and that would work, the other side being blank.

Though you couldn’t help wonder--*crab feed* out here in *Zanesville, Ohio*?

But forget that, come on.

This was going to take a few minutes to piece together, since you’d have to re-create a few things, but luckily Jefferson--and now Meg--were fully engaged with the couple with the questions and it looked like it could go a while.

“You’re scribbling,” Rosie said. “Not sure if there’s a method to your madness. But I won’t ask.”

“You want something, but the way?” Chris said. “Little market across the street. Anything? Ice cream sandwich? Popsicle? *Real* sandwich from somewhere?”

“Sweet of you,” she said. “I’m watching my weight. Plus, if you remember, we just ate breakfast.”

“Yeah, but that was at least an hour ago,” Chris said. Rosie was pleasant. Awfully good humored, being tied down on a trip to someone like *him* . . . you had to admit. It was getting to where you *did* want to sort of take care of her.

It took a few minutes, and Chris had a handle on it and he isolated a fresh section of the paper and wrote more carefully:

**POST ROBBERY BREAKDOWN:**

**13,120 gone from hotel safe**

**300 gone from personal wallet**

**Total amount robbed: \$13,420**

**TO JOE THE DICKHEAD PARKING GUY:**

**300 feed for info**

**1000 to cinch**

**Total amount to Joe: \$1300**

**STIPEND FROM MANCUSO IN MB:**

**25,000 to Paulie or as necessary**

**5000 travel expenses**

**Total Mancuso allowance: \$30,000**

**TRAVEL EXPENSES TO DATE**

**Total Outlaid: \$1700**

**ADJUSTMENTS**

**30,000 Minus:**

**13,420 robbery**

**1300 Joe**

**1700 travel**

**Total Left Over: \$13,580.**

He'd figured out what he needed to, did have a handle on it now, and folded up the sheet of paper. Chris was that way period, he liked his numbers clear, same with his dates. Maybe it *was* a function of having been in the news business, where you couldn't stand factual loose ends, especially with numbers.

Then too, it's possible he'd gotten more anal about that stuff since his diagnosis. He was pretty sure he *had* become more *OCD* this past year in general, though you didn't want to ask anybody if they were noticing any signs of it, since they'd likely start honing in on everything you did from that point forward.

Even movies though, he was never comfortable with scene changes until you got a sense of what *time* it was--and at the minimum, what *day*. Chris could never understand unleashing a finished product onto the public where you leave them struggling to pin down the most basic parts.

Maybe twenty minutes went by, and Chris half-dozed off and half-scratched Bo under the chin in Rosie's lap--and she was dozing off too, and *dang*, don't *drop* the guy.

The older couple was at the door now, thanking Jefferson and Meg and shaking hands all around, and they left with their new big dog, who'd been very patient through the visit.

"You're a jack of all trades," Chris said. "I overheard some of that. Part of your job is obviously dealing with people's anxiety. Not just the xyz's of pet care."

"I was impressed," Rosie said.

Jefferson gave it an aw shucks shrug of the shoulders but you could tell he did embrace the dealing with the adopters' emotions as part of his role.

Chris was going to ask Jefferson to step outside for a moment, but then he figured why keep Meg in the dark, that would be kind of rude, so he



took a quick deep breath and said to Jefferson, “I’ll give you ten thousand dollars to take him until the end of the year.”

Letting that baby hang there. Stopping everyone in their tracks.  
*Praying . . .* that it would work.

Jefferson, nor anyone else, didn’t ask Chris to repeat it, like would be often the case when something outrageous is entered into the discussion with no warning . . . where you assume you misunderstood part of it.

Jefferson was too smart for that, he knew what he heard, and you could see the wheels turning, him piecing it together, the logic behind it--not knowing *anything* about this man and woman standing here with the dog, when it came down to it.

“You’re processing it,” Chris said.

“Yeah I am,” Jefferson said. “You *got* me there.”

Chris didn’t want to be a jerk and start pulling out cash a little at a time, counting it up in front of the kid, unduly influencing him, and likely embarrassing him. He wanted to kid to embrace the concept, plain and simple.

Chris said, “What it would be, we’re at the end of February right? Where *are* we exactly?”

“Today is the 2nd,” Meg interjected. “March.”

“Dang,” Chris said. “Where’s the time go?” saying to Rosie, “Wait a second, I only picked you up yesterday . . . that was Thursday, correct?”

“Yep,” Rosie said. “March 1st.”

“I apologize,” Chris said to everyone. “I *did* know that.”

“What’s the difference,” Rosie said. “Why are you making a big deal?”

“Because I worry sometimes about my mental fitness,” Chris said, and that was an honest answer, being in the back of his mind ever since the diagnosis, would he start slipping mentally, and could that be a sign of much worse to come.

Even having hit the year mark now--no physical decline, pretty convinced there'd been a mistake and that he wasn't death-sentenced after all--still, the mental side of it, you couldn't help watch for warning signs.

No one said anything, and Chris knew he should have kept his mouth shut, don't be saddling people with the sympathy card and making them uncomfortable.

So he said, "That's a *joke*. I didn't deliver it right, obviously." And everyone laughed a little, not much.

Chris said, "On the other thing though, the actual date *doesn't* matter. What I'm getting to, once the year's up, around New Year's Day for example, we'll talk again and figure out a Plan B."

"Wow," Jefferson said.

"That way," Chris said, "Rosie and I have complete and total peace of mind, right through the holiday season."

"That would be *amazing*," Rosie said.

"I know," Chris said, "and a year's a long time. Or 10 months or whatever it *is*. A lot can happen. If it does, we can rest assured that one aspect is stable."

He was rambling, but it felt like the right thing to do, give Jefferson more leeway, don't put him on the spot with silence all around the room.

Jefferson crouched down and looked over at Bo, and in a voice that was as sincere as an angel, he said, "Come here boy!"

## Chapter 9

They did require a second breakfast after that tense episode, even Rosie admitted she was a little hungry, and Chris tried to find the main drag.

“The way these towns used to work,” he was saying, “from the outskirts, you coming in on one, you could point to the center, and angle the vehicle that way, and your estimate would never be off by more than a couple blocks.”

“Is that right,” Rosie said. They were currently at a stop light, a 3-way one, and it was definitely taking a while.

“But that’s the old days. Meaning there *was* a center of town, and a main street and a diner where everyone went. Sometimes a *couple* of those, right on the same block, but normally you had one that dominated the action.”

“How’d the other one stay in business then?”

“Well . . . I guess enough people ate *out*, period, because whichever place, they charged you a fair price for your meal, and tended to provide a heaping portion. That’d be one reason.”

“You’re reaching, it sounds like.”

“Okay then probably the other reason, there weren’t all these dumb options. McDonald’s, Subway, In-n-Out. Even Burger Kings now inside the gas station.”

“Does Starbucks count as one of the dumb ones?” Rosie said.

They were finally moving, through the intersection, and coming up on their right there were some modern offices and a sign for a Starbucks,

which you could see now around the side, a lot of cars parked over there and the drive-through looking pretty dang busy.

“That depends,” Chris said. “Not a dumb one where *I* go, in *California*, but a pretty artificial choice out here, when you can take advantage of some real down-home cooking.”

Rosie didn't say anything and Chris made the right turn into the Starbucks parking lot, figuring everything he said was true, but not sure he could take another couple of traffic lights trying to *find* that down home business.

When they were comfortably seated in there and Chris had finished gobbling up a gouda cheese bacon wrap deal and washed it down with big swig of slightly too-weak coffee, he said, “What I was talking about though, the prices in these towns, the local joints, not *this* place, but whole different world where *I* live.”

He was thinking of Chestnut Street, where could you eat anymore where you didn't feel like they were robbing you? . . . But of course the same was true with Manhattan Beach.

“So,” Rosie said. “We won't go out and eat then.”

“I didn't say *that*,” Chris said. “I love eating out.”

“You're weird,” she said, but at the same time she reached across the table and took his hand.

“What?” he said.

“Thank you.”

Obviously this referred to Bo now, the circumstance back there at the adoption clinic.

“Not that big a deal,” Chris said.

“You could have fooled the three of *us*, on that.”

“Nah. Some guy taught me years ago. Some words of wisdom when I'd unfortunately made the mistake of owning a few rental properties. This guy's a veteran, he's been through it all, and he says to me, ‘If cash makes

the problem go away, spend the cash'. When you think about it, that applies pretty regularly, to everyday life experiences."

"Well," Rosie said, "except this wasn't one of *those* . . . and good God . . . 10 thousand dollars."

"He's a great kid," Chris said.

"Bo? Or Jefferson?"

"I actually was thinking Jefferson, in this case . . . but heck yeah, Bo too. *Both* of 'em great kids."

Rosie took a moment, and said, quietly, "I *could* make love to you right now. For *real*. I'm kinda feeling it."

"Jeez," Chris said, feeling it himself now in a hurry, and wondering what, if anything could be done about that. "See then," he said, "another example, like the guy was telling me. Cash making a problem go away."

Rosie shook her head, but she was smiling, and she got absorbed in her phone. It was good to see that she apparently was okay with the trip so far, hopefully no regrets that she'd been keeping to herself.

Chris honestly couldn't see a logical way to make it happen, what she hinted at there a moment ago. After all they were packed and ready to jump back on the interstate . . . and the mission was to eventually get to South Dakota without too many further delays, and he told himself to hold that thought for later, and hopefully Rosie would too.

There had been a moment of panic back there at the clinic, where he went in the office with Jefferson and started pulling out the cash--and ever since the incident in the LaQuinta he'd been carrying it all split fairly equally in two rubberbanded wads jammed deep into his two front pockets.

The problem being, he'd never physically counted what he had left over. In making the offer to Jefferson he was strictly going by the monetary calculations he'd made on the sheet of paper in the waiting room, and now as he emptied the left pocket first and counted it out, there was less than 5 grand there and that wouldn't be good at all.

You couldn't *not* pay the kid now, after all the dramatics you put everyone through, so Chris in a hurry pulled out the right wad and starting counting *that*, and his heart was pounding pretty good at that point.

His mind was racing too, wondering if something *had* gotten screwed up real bad what would you do? Could you stick your debit card in an old fashioned cash machine if you had to? Would there be any downside to that, any risk?

He was pretty dang sure his calculations were right, but what if there was a significant expenditure he completely drew a blank on . . . or worse, what if he lost some of the money he was convinced was all in those pockets? Some of it fell out when had his pants off and was taking a shower, or some ridiculous mishap . . .

Your head starts caving in on you, no more so than when money's involved . . . and Chris was relieved when the wad in the right pocket contained mostly 100's, compared to the left wad which was a lot of 20's and 50's and he was half-way through counting the right one and realized thank God everything was okay.

In fact he'd had it down just about to the penny, it turned out, leaving them \$3,480 for the rest of the trip, which should do it.

That would mean only drippings, if anything, for Mancuso when they got back, but Chris had that part handled in his mind, he'd take care of the 10 grand and reimburse Ned for it.

Still, why not at least burn the \$3,480 on the way home, he felt he had earned *that*, and that would mean staying in more top of the line places and eating fancier--except those weren't the easiest options on the road and would likely be more trouble than they're worth.

One thought, if all goes smooth and you do have something left around Reno, throw it onto a blackjack hand and see what happens.

But that was a *ways* off still . . .

Rosie was content at the moment with her phone, though Chris never *liked* owning one himself, and of course the last couple road trips where he was on the run, yeah he had his real one, it was a fact of life, but for *those* situations he'd also buy the hopefully untraceable cheapos from 7-11, in case he had to make the occasional call, and one which you didn't want to be associated with.

Obviously humans had become quite proficient at reading *anything* on these things--it wasn't just all about text messages probably--and more power to them . . . but Chris spotted a garbled stack of old-fashioned newspapers in the bin they had over near the side exit, and he picked up the local paper, and best as he could, tried to piece together the 4 sections that most papers still had.

"What's that?" Rosie said, when he came back to the table and spread it out.

"You're kidding me," Chris said.

"I know what it is," she said, "I'm not *that* unaware. I read the Post, occasionally the Daily News. I mean what's that a photo *of*?"

Chris hadn't noticed yet what she was pointing to, the front of one of the sections, and he saw it was titled **LOCAL NEWS**, so without going through the rest of the paper you'd assume this is the second section, the first section typically containing the national stuff, and some local stuff too if it's big, such as maybe a scandal with a town official banging another one's wife and somebody throwing a punch.

Chris zeroed in on what caught Rosie's attention--and Jesus Christ, you have to be kidding me.

What Chris was seeing was a reconstructed face, of either a cold case criminal, or an as-yet unidentified victim.

The face was a woman's and it looked hand-drawn but not quite, as though a computer helped out, and it was in color, but not true colors like a photo but more the pushed-up artificial ones you'd see in comic books.

Chris had been following this stuff pretty carefully--unfortunatately--since it all tied in to the DNA worries that kept him awake some nights, and there was a lab in Virginia called Parabon which had become the go-to source for Law Enforcement to recreate this kind of shit.

In other words they could take unknown DNA from a crime scene, and the lab could turn into a photo of the person . . . and Chris had seen examples of the *real* faces versus the *computer* ones generated by Parabon . . . and dang it.

They may not have been exact matches, but put it this way--he definitely wouldn't appreciate being on the opposite end of one of those. It made you consider altering your appearance, it really did, the frigging technology . . . though you'd have to *think* about that, because that might be worse . . . you drawing attention to yourself in a *different* way then, and someone who knew you before, possibly raising an eyebrow, *gee, what's up with the big alteration?*

This face in the paper being a woman, you'd assume she wasn't a serial killer they were hunting--although that would be possible--but more likely, she was one of those one of those unknown, nameless victims--and Chris had seen a few of these in following the Parabon developments--and you hate to picture the circumstance, but something where the body may not have been recognizable enough back when it happened.

And yeah, this lab with their computer programs *was* assisting in solving plenty of these, just by putting the speculated face out there.

If it's the shooter they're re-creating, sure, someone's liable to remember the guy, and in the case of a woman's profile, a victim, someone could easily call in a tip on some sleazebag she was hanging around with 20 years ago.

That was only a good thing, Chris would be all for it--except how it could pertain to him.



“Gosh you look tense,” Rosie said. “All’s I asked, what that was *of*. I wasn’t needing the formula to fly a craft to the moon.”

Chris took a good look at the photo and article for the first time . . . and it was the winning entry in the ‘Formal Portait’ division of the winter edition of the Muskingum County Fair, which was held this past weekend, it said, at the old stockyards west of town.

“Oh,” Chris said. “Well, they’re telling us it’s a piece of art, won a nice award.”

“That person’s really talented,” Rosie said. “And that lady they painted, she looks like my third grade teacher. I had a crush on her. Mrs. Walker.”

“What school?”

“PS 173.” Which of course meant nothing to Chris, you didn’t know where any of the New York City public schools were unless you grew up there.

But either way, it was a relief that the news thing had nothing to with DNA tracking and Parabon and criminal activity--but at the same time, it was a reminder that obsessing over this stuff may be taking its toll, that you’re starting to make wild projections with no basis.

You’re sitting here in a small town Starbucks, for God sakes, and you’re bringing the outside world to your table.

Chris was thinking maybe he *should* schedule another session with Dr. Stride when he got back to LA . . . we’ll see.

“Funny you mention your teacher,” Chris said. “Not my 3rd grade one so much, she was matronly and strict, but I had a *heck* of a crush on my 2nd and 4th grade ones. To where I still wonder about them, to be honest.”

Chris passed the section of the paper to Rosie, and she was interested enough to put away her phone, and Chris shuffled through the rest of the paper, first the sports page, which was always interesting in small towns, high school basketball huge this time of year, winding down the regional

playoffs, and there were detailed summaries today of each team in contention, pretty dang comprehensive, and not that different than how Sports Illustrated might do it in previewing the NBA playoffs.

Some of the mistakes and mis-use of language in the local thing made you cringe of course, but you had to hand them credit for taking it seriously and trying real hard.

Then there was the front page, the main section of the paper, which Chris noticed by now was the **Zanesville Examiner Record**, and the little blurb next to the masthead informed you it had been published daily since 1912, which you must admit, especially continuing into today's electronic age, was some feat.

You had the usual news stories up top. Washington stuff first, Congress and Trump and Mueller. Then the state stuff midway down, Ohio politics and a bill introduced to make you produce an annual rather than semi-annual inspection certificate before you put a boat in the water this summer at state-managed lake and river access points. Chris couldn't imagine *that* would go over well.

Then at the bottom--lower right corner, where newspapers, depending on space that day, will stick an out-of state story the has a human interest angle--there's one on a confrontation at a soccer game.

## **Youth Soccer Referee Puts Bounty on Parents Following Game Altercation**

**by Mills Laine, The Davenport Daily**

**March 2nd, 2018 - A youth sports referee has announced a \$50 bounty on out-of-control sports parents, after a referee was punched and kicked in a parking lot Sunday following a soccer game in eastern Oregon.**

**The referee, 42-year-old Brian T. Enwald of Davenport, was hospitalized overnight at Lincoln General, with what a spokesperson termed were injuries consistent with an assault.**

**Enwald was released the following morning.**

**Michael Wainwright, who owns and operates an insurance office in Davenport and has been an area youth sports official for the last decade, said, “Enough is enough.”**

**Wainwright said, “My good friend Brian, he finishes his game in the Civic Cup tournament--and we’re talking Under-14 age players now--and someone follows him to his car and pummels him, ostensibly because they didn’t agree with some of his calls. You can’t have that in a civilized society.”**

**The individual in question was identified as Otto Edward Grinham, a 38-year old Katonah resident, last employed according to state records by WCC Welding in Bearton.**

**Grinham was arrested at his home following the incident and released on his own recognizance.**

**Grinham is thought to have had a nephew playing in the game that Enwald refereed.**

**Wainwright’s proposed bounty, he explained, works the following way:**

**“We ask sideline observers at youth sporting event to begin monitoring the behavior of others, and documenting it as necessary. At this point I’m will to pay \$50 out of my own pocket for any record of out of control behavior. This includes filming or photographing the incident and the perpetrator.”**

**Wainwright went on to say that he then plans to post the video and photos on Instagram.**

**“I’ll be honest,” he said. “We’re looking to embarrass a few people. But the bigger picture, we’re hoping for some deterrent effect.”**

**Wainwright asked that any and all material be forwarded to the league, the MCSPL, via their website contact.**

“Mother-*fucker*,” Chris said to himself when he finished reading the article.

Luckily he didn’t say it out loud to Rosie and whoever else might have heard, but he came close.

Chris passed the section of the paper over to her and said, “You mind reading this? The soccer thing at the bottom?”

“Fine. Why?”

“See if I interpreted it right . . . I tend to get so mad at this stuff, I see red. Not sure I’m grasping the full picture, maybe I’m missing something.”

Rosie did her duty and read it right away, carefully, using her finger on some of the lines of print.

“This is very unfortunate,” she said, after a minute.

“That’s what I thought. The ref, he’s out of the woods it sounds like-- nothing broken at least, and they send him home.”

“But the other man,” Rosie said, “he gets picked up--fine--but *own recognizance*, pretty sure that means no bail money, right?”

Chris didn’t want be an ass, and go there, but he couldn’t help thinking the irony being Rosie was probably familiar with the basics of the system, based on at least somewhere along the line likely getting picked up *herself*. Anyhow . . .

“I think so,” he said. “You’d figure a case like this, it’ll get pled down. Especially if the guy has no history, he just went nuts at the game. Bottom line, highly unlikely he’ll do any time.”

“That’s a shame,” Rosie said. “The other gentleman, who *knows* if he’s really okay.”

“Well you’re preaching to the converted. First of all, who knows what might have happened to his *head*, in there. Which could catch up him later.”

“The concussion issues. I saw the movie on that, the doctor for the football players. Very scary.”

“And secondly,” Chris said, “The guy’s gotta carry it around with him now. Looking over his shoulder. Not just at soccer games, but all over the place. Something like that, it takes its toll way beyond the actual incident.”

And Chris didn’t particularly want to re-visit his own circumstance, and you weren’t going insert it in the conversation with Rosie, but Ray and his boys doing a number on Chris that time by the park, he carried it around for . . . well, only 25 years.

And he’d still be hanging onto it if he hadn’t tracked Ray down, and then things took a turn, and they broke bread together.

“I’m thinking maybe I’ll call him up,” Chris said.

“Hmm?” Rosie said.

And this was getting way out of character. Calling the guy period, a situation like this. Normally you’d keep an eye on it, hope nothing escalated. If it did, you might consider making a trip out to eastern Oregon, paying a visit to see what’s *really* up.

Also out of character was bringing it up to someone, and including them in your business. There’d been bits of pieces of that all along of course, you couldn’t avoid it, and sometimes, with guys like Chandler, you *benefitted* by dropping some hints, since he sort of gave you advice. Often packed with more wisdom than you would have come up with.

Shep too, the bartender at Weatherby’s. He had a pretty dang good idea what was going on, who was anyone kidding. And Shep wasn’t maybe

as book smart as Chandler--fancy LA big-money attorney, consulted on the OJ Simpson case and all that.

Chandler was street smart too though, when it came down to it, even though Chris never wanted to give him credit for it. But the guy with the motorcycle, for instance--and Chris couldn't remember now exactly what the details were, except some guy tried to pull a fast one on Chandler, who was selling a bike on Craigslist . . . and took it personally and took the appropriate action. Meaning the *off-the-record* variety.

Chris had begrudging respect for the guy after hearing that--though he couldn't get past Chandler ever owning a motorcycle--it just didn't fit . . . but the story was credible, and in fact Chandler still got worked up telling it, not convinced in his own mind he did quite *enough* to the guy--which from what Chris understood in the story sounded like plenty.

So no, Shep wasn't as educated-smart as Chandler maybe--though who knows, the guy was mysterious, never talked much about himself or his past--but either way he was street smart too.

Shep of course being the one to first raise the issue that Chris didn't look like he was getting any worse, which he should have been by then if the diagnosis was accurate.

Shep also asking Chris more than once, not directly referring to his list but putting it out there--*haven't you done enough, can't you settle down now and enjoy life?*

Chris always appreciated that, Shep putting his finger on it, plenty of insight on his part, but also being concerned for Chris, trying to coax him into doing the right thing.

So yes . . . Chandler, Shep, people here and there had an idea of your dilemma, and the direction you might be going to act out on it . . . but it was rare to point-blank say to someone like Rosie, "Let's call the guy up who I might be having to visit and mess with."

Then again, Chris hadn't spent a lot of time in Zanesville, Ohio, either, with a sometimes New York prostitute who he was feeling pretty comfortable with, on an unusual morning where you saved a poor little dog--not to mention had a nice experience in doing so, with two wonderful human beings-- and were still feeling pretty exhilarated by it.

So Chris excused himself for a second and went out to the Subaru, and opened the trunk and felt around the bottom of his bag, and he found that latest incarnation of the throw-away phone that he'd picked up on the inbound--the drive *to* New York, at a rest stop, just shy of Salt Lake City.

Not a rest stop technically, where they have the bathrooms and the maps mounted on the laminated walls and the vending machines and a bench or two out back facing away from the freeway. But one of those pull-offs that has just enough everything, and there was one he made a point of hitting most trips over the years, and if you timed it right you could be sitting in Carl's Junior with a tremendous view of the Wasatch Mountains that was lit quite uniquely by either the sun coming up or going down.

And you felt the Great Salt Lake nearby, and the Bonneville Flats weren't far, and the sky was a big dome out there, even in the dumb parking lot getting back in your vehicle--and Chris had some interesting, though strange, encounters with other fast-food stoppers in that little spot.

One guy, for example, he came over to Chris's booth and asked him point blank, after they'd made a little small talk in line, that was the extent of it . . . and the guy asks Chris if he knows anyone who can screw up this IRS agent who's been hounding him for back payments.

Chris processed what the guy was getting at, and he advised the guy, a) take it easy and b) it sounds like you're angry at a collections person *hired* by the IRS, but that wouldn't likely be the actual agent hassling you for money on the phone.

The guys says, *whatever*, can you help me with it . . . and Chris is damn curious, he has to ask the guy why he thinks *he* could help.

And the guy gives him an acceptable answer--that you look like the kind of guy no one would believe *did* something like that, so we should be able to get away with it.

We.

That was bizarre all around . . . though Chris did get the guy's license plate as he was driving off--not that he was ever going to help the guy with his problem, that wasn't it--but you better have a handle on who just asked you this stuff, in case there's more to it.

At any rate, that little stop off, which he could never remember the exit name for, that's where he bought the current cheap-o phone, at a convenience store across from Carl's Junior.

And every one of these trips it was a bit of a hassle, you had to spend a few minutes activating the thing, and Chris always reminded himself add the setting where you prevent people from figuring out what *your* number is and where you're calling *from*.

"Would you mind?" Chris said, back at the table with Rosie, "Googling the guy? We might get lucky. If not . . . would you like anything else? For the road?"

"Okay, who am looking for again?" Rosie said, firing up her phone.

Chris read the name back from the article, and the guy's employer, and a minute later she said she's not finding an Otto Grinham out there, but she is finding that company, it looks like, WWC Welding.

She showed him the information on her screen and Chris said, "You mind if I call them from here? Or should I go outside?"

"Doesn't matter to me," Rosie said.

"Just 'cause it's nice and comfortable here. In fact, didn't dawn on me right away, but this is one of your nicer Starbucks. Pretty dang sleek, and a fine window on the world, this vantage point."



“Oh it really is. It’s like, if you lived here, you’d be tempted to spend all day right in this seat. As though a lot of thought went into the design. It feels like the snack bar at the Museum of Modern Art.”

“Jesus. You go *there*?”

“Once. I had a client. He was into 20th Century figurative. There was an artist from out west, Montana I believe, who he particularly favored. We spent at least an hour in this one *room*.”

“You’re revealing yourself as more worldly than I thought.”

“Gee thanks.”

“So your clientele . . . it’s all over the map then? Their needs?”

“What you’re getting at,” she said, “the answer is yes, I don’t sleep with all of them.”

“Hmm. Same rate and everything? You accompanying some guy around, as opposed to having to lay it on the line, so to speak?” Chris knew he was getting obnoxious here, but what the hay.

“Oh yes. One and the same.”

“Well that’s good business actually. Whenever I see an ad, and there are too many options with the price points, I feel like it cheapens the product.”

“Okay you can stop now,” she said.

“Just to prepare you,” Chris said, “my Starbucks in Manhattan Beach isn’t as nice as this one.”

“No? Well forget it then, turn around and take me back home.”

“That’s not funny, don’t joke around like that. All I’m saying, it’s not necessarily a place you’re comfortable hanging around all day. You’ll see what I mean, the set-up, the line, which sometimes winds around through the tables, and you’re trying to focus but you got some guy’s rear end in your face, and some *irritated* guy who hasn’t had his first coffee yet.”

“Whatever.”

“But . . . you have a view of the ocean.”

“You’re not going to make me *go* in the ocean, are you?”

“I hadn’t thought about it, but yeah, good idea. In fact I’ll buy you a bikini, first thing. There’s a bikini store located just a block up from the beach. What’s always entertaining is watching the gals already *in* bikinis heading in there to do a little shopping.”

“You know what you’re doing?” Rosie said. “You’re stalling.”

And of course she was right, and Chris tried to shift gears and focus, and he dialed the number of WWC Welding in Bearton, Oregon.

A friendly woman’s voice answered and Chris asked if Otto Grinham was available please. You could hear pounding in the background, something that sounded like a jackhammer.

The lady told him to hold on for just a moment, and Chris assumed she’s consulting with a supervisor, and they’re wondering who the hell wants to know that . . . and Chris had a line prepared, that it was James Buehler calling, from the State Police domestic crimes unit.

But the woman came back on and said, “Sorry about that. We’re re-doing the employee rest rooms, and you can’t hear yourself think around here. Otto doesn’t work here any more, but would you like his number?”

Chris said thank you, that would work fine, and the woman gave it to him and thanked *him* for calling and told him to have a nice day.

“Progress?” Rosie said.

“I thought it would be more difficult,” Chris said. “I guess that’s what happens when you’re not a big city operation. Those tend to be paranoid and suspicious. This was refreshing.”

“Except now you *have* the number and you have to follow through. If you’d gotten one of the suspicious ones and they shut you out, that would be the end of it, and we’re on our way.”

“You’re starting to tick me off. Cause you keep putting your finger on the pulse of this stuff.”

Chris had read an article recently, some 5-second rule gimmick, but the crux was they conducted a big study on procrastination and found, with tasks you're not crazy about taking care of, that if you don't handle it right away--loosely meaning the first 5 seconds--then you tend *not* to handle it, or at least put it way down on the list.

It sort of made sense, and he gave it an exhale and dialed the number.

"Who's calling?" a man answered.

"Otto Grinham," Chris said.

"Speaking. And someone's fucking with me."

"Bad idea?"

There was a silence. You could tell Grinham was considering hanging up, except for the curiosity factor.

Chris said, "Hey I saw in the paper what you did. How'd that play out, what was the issue?"

"Well then," Grinham said, changing his tone slightly, measuring out the words, "*you* would know. *Wouldn't* you."

"Yeah, well, that's what I figured . . . Listen, I'm going to be in town, can we talk? Do you have a few minutes?"

Another silence and then, "What the *fuck*."

"I'll see you *then*," Chris said, and hung up.

"Tell me," Rosie said.

"Hard to know."

"You're really going to be *in town*? What you said?"

"I don't know. I guess it depends on how he continues to comport himself."

"What does *that* mean?"

"I'm not quite sure," Chris said, putting away the phone and giving Rosie a little squeeze on the shoulder . . . that at any rate, maybe they should be hitting the road.

## Chapter 10

A half hour past Columbus, they saw a roadside attraction with a huge Disney-like character beckoning you to take the exit, so Chris did.

Rosie said, “I don’t mind, but just so you’re aware, we’re starting to set world records for the shortest amount of travel before stopping.”

“The guy was holding a cinnamon roll though,” Chris said. “The big statue? Did you notice?”

“Yes. It looked extremely gooey.”

It was a strange attraction, sort of half a mini-golf place except without the golf, but the same doohookies making you think you’re in Scandinavia or the Swiss Alps. Or maybe that’d be Holland too. Anyhow, the little footbridges and windmills and cartoon characters, along with an immense amount of Astroturf.

The place sold food and souvenirs and they even had hourly talent shows that travelers could sign up for and participate in. There was a farm element to it as well, something going on in a small indoor arena like you might expect at a fair.

“One thing for sure,” Chris said when he’d polished off a foot-long corn dog and they’d surveyed the place. “You wouldn’t find something like this in LA. This century, or any other.”

“Well, there are certainly are a number of 300-pound people on hand,” Rosie said. “Not to be judgmental.”

“I can be judgemental *for* you. They need to get off their *ass*.”

“You say that. But it’s not easy. Have you known anyone with a weight problem? I’m not talking like a little pot belly or something, where they’re always drawing attention to it like it’s the end of the world.”

“I *like* a little bitty pot belly on a woman,” Chris said. “It’s natural. No female should spend an hour a day doing crunches.”

“That’s your opinion. My point is, a true weight problem, it’s a lot more complicated than people realize.”

“You’re not going to tell me,” Chris said, “*you* used to weigh 300 pounds.”

“No, I’m one of the lucky ones in my family. But if I showed you some Christmas photos--the aunts and uncles and cousins gathered around, even everybody’s *kids*--you’d see where I’m coming from.”

“No I hear you,” he said, “and I see I *was* out of line with that comment, them simply needing to get off their ass. What I can tell you’re building up to--so I’ll save you the trouble and the lecture--is obesity can be an illness . . . just like a real physical one . . . or a mental one, I guess. Am I warm?”

“It is a mental one . . . on another note, looking around here, what percentage of these folks do you think voted for Trump?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Chris said. “All of ‘em.”

“That’s . . . pretty much the way I pictured it too.”

“I take it back. The local ones yeah. Not all the stop-off visitors from the interstate like us though, who also took the exit back there when they saw the statue and the gooey bun. Some of those no doubt have different views.”

“Only if they’re from the east or west coast would be my prediction,” Rosie said. “And that’s fine. The Trump folks had their reasons, I guess. They make me *crazy*, but I try to understand their *motivation*, give them the benefit of the doubt.”

“So you’re buying into the business that they felt previous government let them down? Didn’t give a rat’s ass about them in the little towns and rural counties out here?”

“Yes. I think Trump’s letting them down too. I mean look at how he’s already backhanded-slapped the farmers while he’s playing golf in Florida every weekend.”

“But you understand where they were coming from--*thinking* it was going to be different.”

“I think *hoping* is more accurate,” she said. “Again not to judge, but I’m glad *we* at least see if differently.”

“I voted for Trump,” Chris said. “Then I got duped.”

Rosie turned slowly and decisively toward him, and opened her mouth as though the evil clown in the Stephen King novel had just tracked her down, and was moving in for the kill, and there was no escape.

“Excuse me?” she said finally, and her voice went up high on the *cuse* and cracked slightly.

“You just said,” Chris said, “you’re not holding it *against* people, because they had their sincere reasons. Except I’m in a different category apparently.”

“What I *said*,” Rosie said, banging out each word with emphasis, “was I *try* not to hold it against people. Chris you have to be out of your fucking mind!”

“I made a mistake. Not too proud to admit it . . . A separate thing, but I think that’s the first time you’ve used profanity. At least around me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Not about hating you right now though.”

Well that about wrapped it up at the theme stop, which was called *Clarktown Jungle and Event*, however you were supposed to construe that--the bottom line being Chris figured taking more time here to locate and devour one of those trademark cinnamon rolls, that might not fly too well.

So they got back on the highway and Rosie didn’t make any further remarks but it felt like she was still shaking her head as they got started and a few minutes into the drive she fell asleep.

Or she might have been faking it, but either way you had to give her some space.

Chris was always amazed how politics worked--meaning you develop a feel for someone and then it's like your whole world is turned upside down when you learn their views are a lot different than you ever thought.

It was ridiculous but it was part of life, and he was as guilty of pre-judging people as the next guy. And sometimes you're surprised either way.

You take someone like Mancuso for example. It was strange to think, but, if Ned told him he was a right wing Republican--all things considered, you would have been reasonably shocked. Same though if he dropped it on you that he was a liberal, it just wouldn't add up.

At this point Chris almost felt like waking Rosie up and setting the record straight, can we get back to a clean slate here please, and point out that he's seen so many relationships wrecked by politics--admittedly often when partying was involved--but still, a guy he knew from the old neighborhood, Pacific Heights, that guy didn't talk to his dad for 6 or 7 years, the whole thing stemming from a holiday dinner argument over gun control--the irony being, as the years went on they probably didn't remember what *part* of gun control the argument was even about.

But waking her was wrong, you'd straighten this out later, which also meant the couple of navigational decisions you had to make, which you were going to ask her about, were probably your own deal.

The main one, when you get to the Indianapolis interchange, about two hours away, do you hop on 74 and stay south, or do you go 65 North to Chicago.

GPS said the Chicago way was a little faster, but for whatever reason southern Indiana and Illinois and Iowa sounded more interesting than Wisconsin and Minnesota, so that was that, you stay left at Indy.

The other decision, you had about 17 hours to Pierre, and it was already after 4, given the action this morning at the adoption place, then

the wind-down at Starbucks and now the stop at *Clarktown Jungle*. Meaning do you push it for 8 or 9 hours, get in late, but have Pierre in your sights for tomorrow?

Chris figured yeah, you handled it that way, don't take *days* to get to where you're not sure even sure you're going to be doing anything--and he earmarked a little town called Pella, Iowa, as where you're shooting to make it tonight.

Rosie slept, or fake-slept until after dark, and Chris hoped for the best breaking the ice with her, and he asked if she played any sports growing up, and that seemed to work okay, she said she did, all of them, meaning soccer basketball and softball--and that's always surprising, especially the soccer and softball part, when you think of New York City, miles of cement with a rare patch of green here and there.

But obviously people worked it, and some of the best athletes of all time emerged from the New York area, and Chris asked her which one was her favorite.

"That'd be softball," she said. "I had an inside-out flat swing, but I made too many errors in the field. I was a liability, I won't deny it."

"I'm still working on the swing part," Chris said.

Rosalie laughed, not much of one but thank God anyway, and she said, "They teach it that way when you're little kids. You go with where the ball is pitched. Line drives."

"Ah. I do get that actually. I think home runs in pro baseball are down, because no one uppercuts the ball anymore."

"Now you're losing *me*," she said, likely making a joke.

Chris said, "But that was your favorite, but not your best?"

"That'd be soccer. I was a natural mid-fielder. Had the speed to get back."

"But what?"



“I didn’t love it, what can I tell you. Not enough scoring for one. You do all these little things they tell you are important, but most of them seem like they weren’t.”

“So try it again. Some adult league stuff. You might have a different outlook, especially if it came so naturally.”

“Maybe sometime.”

Chris was thinking Gee, maybe we *can* find a league like that in MB. One more chance to make it work out, give her a foot hold.

“Something I’m second guessing just a tad,” he said.

“Oh no.”

“Nothing major, just . . . I feel a little funny now talking you into . . . not *coming*, as much as pulling out of your second semester.”

“That’s fine. I was only taking 2 classes, and I probably would have dropped one anyway.”

“Okay still. I feel like maybe I rattled your chain more than I should.”

“Turned my world upside down you mean?” and she was smiling.  
“I’m a big girl. I can think for myself.”

“I mean, hopefully you’ll be good with it out there . . . But if not, like I said, I’ll put you on the plane home. You just have to say the word, don’t sugarcoat it . . . LAX is twenty minutes away, right down Sepulveda Boulevard.”

A moment passed and Rosie said, “So you were talking like a big shot. But now you’re coming up a little bit lame.”

“Something like that,” Chris said.

“Well . . . when we get where we’re going tonight--if we do get there--that thing I told you this morning, after you made it work for Bo? That I wanted to do?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m still in favor of that,” she said.

“Oh,” Chris said.

## Chapter 11

Chris inadvertently violated one rule, which was to always stay in the chain motels, and always the ones right off the interstate.

The reason he violated it was: by getting fancy and out-thinking GPS and not going the recommended route toward Chicago, he got them in a situation where they had to drop it down for a few hundred miles, regular highways, 2-lane in some stretches though not bad overall, but definitely not interstate material.

That meant when you got to Pella, and this late, close to midnight, you did have to venture into town and find a mom a pop place, the kind Rosie favored and Chris hated, and unfortunately you had to ring a buzzer and wake up the poor people to rent you the room.

But the room turned out to be immaculate, a lot of pride on display, like you were in someone's home, and in the morning they had the typical continental breakfast thing set up for you--except in addition the owner's wife came out of the back room with a platter of fresh smoked trout, that she explained came from her husband.

And she had this special sauce that went with it, that apparently was in the family for a couple generations, and god dang did the whole business jumpstart your day in amazing fashion.

Then the woman--and her husband both now--they come around at the end and refill your coffee and make sure everything was a thousand percent fine, and Rosie can't help it, she says to the woman, "Scrooge over here, he insists on the normal lodging, the boring ones right at the highway exits."

“Only reason for that,” Chris said . . . and he was going add to it but realized it was going to sound stupid, and Rosie and the woman--and the husband now too--were waiting for his explanation.

The woman spoke up, to save him the embarrassment, and she said, “Tell you the truth, when Bill and I travel, he looks at it the same way. I can’t fault you. You’re going with what’s worked for you in the past.”

“I guess,” Chris said. “This is an eyeopener to be sure. I’m going to re-think my approach.”

“He won’t,” Rosie said. “We got lucky.”

“Very lucky,” Chris said. And still feeling it from yesterday, all the goodwill and kind spirit surrounding the Bo rescue, he figured what the heck, and pulled out a business card.

“Why thank you,” the woman said, not knowing what it was all about but appreciating whatever gesture was behind it.

Chris said, “If you’re ever in southern California, please let me know. I mean it, I’d love to show you around.”

The husband had come closer now, and the two were huddled together staring at the business card, the way people do.

The man said, “Why that’s mighty sporting of you son. We’ve been out your way a *few* times now. But always up north.”

“We have an RV,” the woman explained. “I’m sure you’re familiar with our summers here.”

“We used to handle ‘em without batting an eye,” the man said. “But there comes a point . . . We don’t shut the motel *down*, but two weeks in August someone takes over for us.”

“I hear you, absolutely,” Chris said. “So . . . you drive it there, and what, hit the coast somewhere, like around Bodega Bay?”

Chris pulled up Bodega Bay because that was where he spent that night, in the parking lot, when the smoke from the Santa Rosa wildfires was too strong, when he was looking to bump off Jerry Smith in Sebastopol.

There'd been a nice couple camping there in a tent trailer attached to their car--they lived in the Sonoma hills and were getting away from the smoke too--and they cooked him bacon and eggs in the morning--though they did wake up Chris a little on the early side, and asked him to please change a flat tire for them. Anyhow, he thought of Bodega Bay.

"Close," the motel husband said. "A little north of there. More up around Salt Point."

"Oh yeah, nice up that way too," Chris said. "That's where they do the abalone diving."

The husband nodded and said, "We'd enjoy coming your way one of these years. Just haven't put my finger on a good spot down there."

"Okay," Chris said, thinking now. "I'll have to check into it for sure, but you've got Dockweiler Beach . . . I never considered it, you pass it going the back way to Marina del Rey, but there's always a bunch of RV's there. I mean there's nothing to do, per se, in the immediate area, not like a campground, it's just a cement parking lot--but you're literally right on the beach."

"Gee," the husband and wife said together. "Well, food for thought," the wife said. "We thank you."

"Oh no, we thank *you*," Rosie said. "This has been very uplifting."

The woman said, "Thank you so *much* dear. Now will you be in Los Angeles too, on the off-chance we did come out that way?"

"That's a good question," Rosie said, "and I appreciate your asking. I met Chris just a few days ago, in New York. He was visiting someone. On a whim, he asked me to come out west with him."

*Jesus Christ*, Chris was thinking, let's not go too far here, in the honesty department. Especially God forbid if they ask if you can do a similar job out in California, to the one you had, or if you'll have to change careers.

“Well I think that’s the *sweetest* thing,” the woman said. “God bless you both, and good luck to you.”

“Stay safe,” the husband said, and he shook hands with Chris and gave Rosie a little peck on the cheek, and soon you could hear the two of them washing dishes in back.

When Chris and Rosie got back to the room he said, “I’ll tell you, that’s *some* work ethic on display, those folks.”

“I wish they were my parents,” Rosie said, and that stopped Chris for a moment, and he wondered how serious she really might be, what kind of tough circumstance she likely came from that put her, at least part-time, on the street.

“Well the good part honestly,” Chris said, trying to lighten it back up, “I’m thinking they really *might* come out some day. Tell you the truth, it never occurred to me, but that Dockweiler Beach parking lot, I wouldn’t mind living there myself.”

“I hope they do,” Rosie said.

Chris had to shave and he asked her if she wouldn’t mind reading to him about the town, a few facts about Pella, Iowa, since yeah, they did have a nice experience here and you’d like to think that was a reflection of the community.

Rosie said, “There’s a chamber of commerce blurb, and then you have wikipedia,” and Chris said give him the latter, and Rosie started in, “Well population 10,000--a little bigger than I would have thought--we’re in Marion County, hmm, settled by Dutch in 1847. Gee, do you know who someone named Wyatt Earp is?”

“Holy Smokes,” Chris said. “Really? Of course . . . he was a famous US Marshall in the old west. You’ve heard of the Gunfight at the OK Corral, right?”

“No.”

“Well anyway, he was *in* that. What *about* him in Pella?”

“Just that he lived here growing up. His father had a farm.”

“Dang, I put my finger on a map, like pin the tail on the donkey, and who would have thunk? What else?”

“Bad tornados here. A manufacturing plant went airborne last summer. They have an opera house from 1900. And a canal. And a drawbridge. There’s a pastry that originated here called a Dutch Letter . . . that’s about it.”

“You want to drive today, start off?” Chris said.

“I’m not going to lie to you, I don’t have a license. I got my permit back in high school but I never went any further. I’m kind of a beginner.”

Chris thought about it for half a second--that on his personal risk-level scale these days, those minor points would rank pretty low. “Not a problem,” he said, “you’ll be just fine.”

## Chapter 12

He'd been a bit overly optimistic it turned out, Rosie's driving abilities, not that it was that much her fault, because again, this off-route he chose wasn't anywhere near as easy as driving the interstate.

You had different things going on. Every so often you'd actually hit a stop light out of the blue. Other times you had trucks pulling on and off unexpectedly from side roads, and there were a couple of train crossings you had deal with too.

But Rosie did okay, she didn't hit anybody and didn't do anything abnormal enough to draw the attention of any state troopers, so Chris supposed that was a win . . . though she did swerve bad once when the guy in front of them pulled onto the shoulder, and Chris panicked for an instant that she wasn't going to make it back into the lane in time, with traffic bearing down on them the other direction. Why would you swerve in that situation . . . *just slow down and let the dang guy pull over, Jeez.*

At any rate Chris was happy to take over again when they got to a town called Walnut, and Rosie played it off like it was fine either way, whatever he wanted, but you could tell she was relieved.

"You know something?" Chris said. "*Much* better than I expected. I'm not kidding. I'd give you a B plus, at *least*."

"Oh you're pulling my leg," she said. "Aren't you?"

"What are you talking about?" Chris lied. "That was about the first time I could really relax on the whole trip."

"Well, it *was* kind of fun."

"And like I was saying, or maybe I *didn't* bring it up, but we can straighten you out in LA no problem, get you official."

“Wow. I hadn’t considered that.”

“Which would be good news and bad news. The good news--once we take care of the BS--the state of California will trust you on the road. The bad news, you’ll have to *drive* then, out there.”

“What does that mean? Though I think I’m getting it.”

“Yeah. I tell this story. Pakistani guy owns my apartment complex, also a couple motels on PCH. Nice guy named Sharif. Anyhow, he moved here 20 years ago, all fired up to show his kids Hollywood and Beverly Hills, and they spend a day trying to do that . . . and from then on--couple of decades now--he limits all driving to a 1-mile radius.”

“It can’t be worse than New York,” she said. “Have you been on, like the BQE at rush hour?”

“Put it this way,” Chris said, “you take your worst New York traffic experience, *square* it . . . and then you’re maybe approaching the ballpark of LA traffic.”

“Square it, you mean exponents? Like 2 to the 2nd power?”

“Whatever. I’m just making a larger point. That when Sharif flies his family back to Karachi every two years, the toughest part of the trip is right off the bat, getting to the airport.”

Rosie said, “You can be a negative person, you know that?”

Chris could see how he was coming across that way, but he couldn’t help it, the LA traffic scene factored in to nearly every move he made down there, outside of Manhattan Beach.

*One* thing for sure, fine, help Rosie get her license, but don’t be sitting in the front passenger seat helping her practice. Much wiser to just book one of those driving schools and let them take care of the whole shebang.

They turned onto 29 toward Sioux Falls, crossed into South Dakota and had lunch in Vermillion.

Back on the road Chris said, “Okay we got about four hours. You going to be okay while I run around a little in Pierre?”



“Of course. For how long?”

“Shouldn’t be more than a day or two. Or is that already pushing it?”

“It isn’t. And I’d like to help you, if you need me . . . This is another one of those ‘*see a guy*’ things, right?”

“I guess . . . something like that . . . but what, I *said* that?”

“What *else* are you doing? You don’t strike me as a typical businessman honestly, like you’re stopping to check on an account.”

“Why not? I could be a paper manufacturing rep, checking inventory . . . making sure they’re not wasting any pulp. It’s all about efficiency, constantly striving to streamline the process.”

“You’re so full of shit,” she said.

“Jumping around for a minute,” he said, “something else on my mind too, I got a buddy back home, dropped a personal dilemma on me, I felt bad, I couldn’t give him any advice, or even a pep talk to make him feel better.”

“Okay so what *was* it?”

“Well . . . the guy’s got a son who he’s worried might be drinking behind his back. That’s the first thing, nothing to do probably with the real trouble.”

“How old’s the son?”

“I’m going to say a couple years out of college. Like I say, not the issue.”

“Then why’d you bring him up?”

“Just for a little perspective. I’m thinking my buddy may be struggling with a drinking problem of his own, unfortunately.”

“So he’s on the lookout. Projecting.”

“Likely so. So forget the kid. The other one though, his daughter, she marries a guy, my buddy says he’s a pretty decent guy, solid son in law.”

“Except,” Rosie said.

“Except he’s got 3 DUI’s.”

“What else?”

“Jesus, what else is there?”

“No, I mean continue. What, you think I’m not listening?”

“Now the daughter is pregnant, supposedly. Twins. She’s like mid-thirties, not a particularly attractive woman--those are his words, not mine, but I get his point, that if it didn’t work out with this guy, not a slam dunk that she’d find someone else.”

“So she has to drive him everywhere?”

“No. That’s the trouble, he’s still driving. Legally.”

“You can get 3 DUI’s and still be driving? That’s sounds suspect, your friend’s story.”

It did to Chris too, the way the guy laid it out in the casino lounge in Winnemucca, on the inbound trip.

But the guy explains it, that improbable as it is, South Dakota of all places, where they happen to live--and that’s because he’s *from* there, the son-in-law, even though they met in Florida.

The rub being, South Dakota has the most liberal drunk driving laws in the nation, which the dad is explaining to Chris . . . that the first two DUI’s barely count, and the third is technically more serious, except that they don’t take your license or make you install one of those breath test things in your car that won’t let you start it unless you pass.

Meaning God almighty, they don’t do *jack* to you it sounds like.

Now if the kid got a 4th one . . . then who knows. The trouble being, what if he takes someone with him on that one--be it a stranger, or the wife, or inconceivably, the two new twins after they’re born, strapped into their pink and blue carseats in back.

Chris’s dilemma, ever *since* that conversation with the guy a week and half ago, is:

Should you do anything about it? And if so, what? What angle do you pursue?

So here he was, 70 miles an hour and a couple hours from Pierre, tossing it around with Rosie, playing it off as a side thought, pertaining to a buddy in California.

You weren't going to argue with her--that yeah, likely in California and most semi-rational states you wouldn't be getting behind the wheel and cruising around quite so easily if you had three of those, especially within a year or two, as the Winnemucca dad implied.

Though who knows. Even in California you read about stuff every day, someone slipping through the cracks, a judge out of their mind, and something bad happening anyway.

But you at least liked someone's chances better, outside of South Dakota, to be jolted to reality. Something at least *happening* to them with the police or the courts. Not continuing to drive around la-di-da like *nothing* did.

Chris addressed Rosie's point, that his friend's story sounded suspect, and of course you weren't going to mention that this isn't California you're talking about, and furthermore, that the reason for the stop in Pierre is specifically *because* of this mess. Not to *see a guy*, the way she's been playfully portraying it.

He said, "Let's move past how it *sounds*. What would you do, if you were the dad? My buddy."

"Well . . . my first instinct, that's up to her, isn't it?"

Meaning the daughter, and dang, Rosie was awfully logical sometimes, she kept it simple, didn't go overboard.

"That's true," Chris said. "But I can understand his side of it. You're a dad, and you're also about to be a grand dad. What if your daughter is not being reasonable?"

"Yes I see. And not acting in the children's best interest. That *would* be more complicated."

“You’d think you’d, like--and not in real life, necessarily, but at least in the movies or something--you’d get her out of that *situation*. So those kids never ride in a vehicle with him. You don’t risk it, you take that *out* of the equation.”

“Gosh . . . So maybe the dad should move *in* or something. Insist on providing all transportation.”

“Definitely an idea, though that kind of thing, it tends to sound better than it works. Always somewhere along the line, there’s a break in the chain.”

“I don’t know,” Rosie said, “now you’re starting to stump me. Kidnap her?”

“You’re funny,” Chris said. “One extreme to the other. Now you’ve got the dad committing a capital crime.”

“If it were me . . . and I’ve never been pregnant, but putting myself in her shoes? If I knew I wasn’t thinking all rational? Or, as you say, I was afraid I wouldn’t find another man, and I’m acting accordingly?”

“Yeah? You stopped.”

“No, I was just thinking of it a different way too . . . But the first way, yes, I guess I would appreciate the dad intervening. Kind of reminds me of Serena Williams in tennis.”

“Oh no,” Chris said.

“Serena, she didn’t want to play tennis when she was a kid. But the dad Richard, he says you know what? She doesn’t *know* what she wants. That none of them do at that age. And now she’s a world champion.”

“Terrible analogy.”

“You’re just not a fan of Serena.”

“I root for her sister, but for some reason I root against Serena. Shoot me I guess . . . but back to this . . . I get what you’re saying--loosely. Someone stepping in may be appropriate.”

“Depending on the *real* circumstance. If there was one.”

“So kidnapping would be one scenario. You’re saying. *Hypothetically* . . . What would another one be? You said you were thinking of a different way.”

“Well obviously, you hinder the brother in law.”

“Beat him up, or something? Tell what’s going to happen if he does it again? . . . Injure him slightly? . . . Like maybe cut off a finger with a bolt cutter, so every time he takes the wheel he has a reminder staring him in the face?”

“Seely these are hard questions you ask me. Even for fun . . . But I’d say no, none of those would probably work, at least long term.”

“You know something,” Chris said. “You drive a tough bargain . . . and speaking of driving safety, any way you can take off that seat belt and come here?”

She kind of shrugged her shoulders and unbuckled the belt and slid over onto the middle console of the Subaru, not designed for sitting, but Chris was able to get his arm around her and she didn’t mind, the arm or the console, and she stayed there a while.

## Chapter 13

And of course Rosie was right. Answering your question in her roundabout way, perky and at the same time making you wonder if she's seeing through you, that she's got an idea what you are really doing here out in Pierre--which you couldn't worry about at this point, *what* she might think--but the fact was, like she said: none of those would probably work.

Everything Chris had been involved in to this point, the past year, this one didn't quite fit the mold.

Not that there was a formula to these things for Pete's sake--but none of the others that came to mind, was the fallout the same.

Easily there could have been more to some of them, particularly the unexpected issues that developed on the fly.

You take Arizona for instance, when he was reduced to hiding out in Eclipse for that month. Jonas Blaise, the baseball player, you could state with a fair amount of conviction that he deserved it, and to extent society deserved it.

The other unfortunate guy out there though, with the road rage business, where Chris was admittedly as guilty as the other guy in the beginning, but then the fellow pushed it to a point of no return and probably would have done away with Chris on that remote mountain pullout if Chris hadn't figured out what might work out of the trunk, and then bowling-balled the guy.

A guy that--sad to think--could have had a significant backstory, been a productive member of society, who just flew into a half hour rage. Chris didn't ever want to go there, wondering if he had family members and so forth, and he mostly blocked those thoughts out. You had to.

But this . . . the son-in-law--and Chris and Rosie had checked in to a Super 8, the first one they saw, contradicting Chris's new vow to be open-minded to the mom and pop places, but he couldn't help it, and Rosie seemed okay with it, they had an indoor pool and spa, which definitely worked, in what felt like 10 degree weather at best.

Something you had to keep in mind, you *were* in South Dakota, one of the colder spots in the nation, and you just barely had the first day of spring, two days ago. Old newspapers and plastic bags and other debris were stuck frozen to the outside of a large metal garbage can in the corner of the Super 8 parking lot, and there was old dirty ice all over the ground where they hadn't plowed, and it seemed like nobody was bothering with any of it yet. Too much work, you wait for the thaw.

This guy though, the drunk husband, and father to be . . . this was different than the others but you knew up front the degree of moral choice facing you.

Chris hadn't pursued it further with Rosie, the hypothetical in the car, his so-called 'friend', but the question was, if those unborn twins lost their dad--before they knew they had a dad--would they be better off?

Brutal when you laid it out like that.

On the other hand . . . what if the motherfucker does drive drunk--even one time--the babies in the back.

No. Sorry.

You can't let that happen.

Even one time.

You just can't risk it.

Chris supposed you'd feel bad for the mother as well--the Winnemucca guy's daughter--if something did happen to the husband.

On the other hand . . . by not getting *out* of the situation, and essentially *enabling* the prick, she's as culpable as he is.

Even though she means well, and ostensibly wants a father for her babies, and is hoping it turns around. Or is in denial.

Still, a blunt assessment, but you have to stick with it. Don't bring the mother into it. No sentimentality there. She's a non-factor.

Though when you did think of this DeAngelo monster, you might cut her just a little slack for hoping.

And of course unfortunately Joseph DeAngelo has been all over the news, the infamous Golden State Killer from 30 years ago . . . and they caught up to him through DNA . . . and not just any DNA, but the exact method Chris has been obsessing over, which is the familial matching variety.

And dang it--ONCE AGAIN: don't forget to check on your test, ASAP when you get home--and hustle that thing over to Mark.

But forgetting the fallout in Chris's direction, it's obviously terrific they caught the guy. The part that relates to the drunk-driver wife, was that DeAngelo stopped his evil spree--reportedly--cold turkey, when his first child was born. Like a switch got flicked.

So maybe.

An evaluation would be required, an assessment. Chris hated those, but it had to be done.

He'd done a little homework back at the LaQuinta, when he'd already made up his mind he was going to stop in Pierre on the return trip.

You started with the guy's Winnemucca business card, amusing fellow named Marty, and they likely would have had a few laughs together if this current business wasn't weighing on him so heavy.

Reading the card again, sitting at one of the lobby computers in the LaQuinta the second morning before breakfast, last name Epstein.

Searching around this computer not being as air-tight safe as the public library ones he tended to favor, but Chris figured he should be okay.



Hard to see an anonymous guy in a New York lobby connected to something that may or may not happen out in the middle of the country.

Epstein being no doubt a Jewish name, and Chris was thinking it did make sense, the daughter meeting the husband in Florida. What didn't make as much sense, was her following him back to South Dakota. Hard to see much Jewish population there, if that was important to her. And maybe she wasn't even Jewish, who knows . . .

Although wait a second, her dad, the Winnemucca guy, had been making comments in Hebrew, certain words . . . and *not* Hebrew actually, but *Yiddish*. The guy pointing that out more than once, testing Chris with a few words, seeing if he could figure them out in context.

Chris reminded himself again, you gotta steady yourself, you shouldn't be getting this basic stuff confused, when you socialize with people. That if you take a deep breath, take a step back, it's all there in your head . . . you just have to keep it organized.

So he started googling around for an Epstein in Pierre, South Dakota, hoping she didn't scrap her maiden name, and then you *might* be screwed . . . but his gut said she'd be the type that might not.

And what a surprise, there were a *few* that he found, more than just one . . . though apparently when you searched Pierre they were showing the whole state first, or at least the region . . . and when you narrowed it down, there was the one in Pierre proper, not connected to a home address but it was a business, Epstein Design.

*Owner/decorator* listed as Elaine Epstein.

The obligatory **About Our Services** link, and the photo, a smiling headshot, and admittedly you could see what ol' Marty had meant when he emphasized that she wasn't particularly attractive, that the good genes had gone to his son.

Then the bio below that, and yada yada . . . grew up in Maimi influenced by the art and architecture there, knew from a young age that

she wanted to be a designer, graduated in 2005 with whatever key bachelor's degree she's telling you about, from the University of Florida in Gainesville.

So far, you got a pretty good fit. The three or four pieces of the puzzle.

As a side thing, Chris never knew what the heck people were talking about when they called themselves designers or decorators. In this case, the gal was using both, almost interchangeably . . . Those people go in your house and figure stuff out, make recommendations? Or design things for you on other fronts? And what would those even be?

And how could you make a living at that, out here where it seems pretty down home and basic, and people working hard for the money and typically not slingling it around the way they might in Florida or New York?

Of course Chris reminded himself it's all about image these days, and he got out a pen and wrote down the address of her so-called company, thinking you know what, she could easily just be throwing up the website to see what happens, and wasn't bothering with an office at all, and this could certainly be the home address.

So you had something. And this was before the robbery that he was sitting there in the LaQuinta lobby-- though just about an *hour* before it to get technical, since he'd leave the computer and sit down to the decent-but-not-great continental breakfast they served, and then mosey back on up to the room . . . and it would be at around a quarter to 11 when he got the knock on the door.

Chris proceeding of course to open it, no problem, and then get smacked in the face and the 13 grand and change stolen, and on top of it, realizing like an idiot he'd been duped by Joe the parking guy on 11th Avenue.

But back then that morning at the computer, before he *did* get up to go eat, he figured he better confirm one more thing.

So far it added up, but what if the old man--the Marty guy in Nevada--had it *in* for the son-in-law and made up the DUI part?

That was certainly possible. This stranger you just met sitting there in the casino blowing off steam, maybe frustrated with his own life--or one of those guys where *no* one's good enough for my daughter--and the son in law might very well be a perfect citizen but this Marty on a mission, with a vendetta, carrying on about it to whoever might be listening that day.

Despite his reasonably extensive series of similar searches this past year, Chris still had trouble wrapping his head around how it worked. Not so much *the way* it worked--he wasn't going to challenge the tech guys on that . . . but *that* it worked *period*. You could have the technology up the wazoo, but you still had to set this shit up . . . and boom, it took like 30 seconds and you're into the *Unified Judicial System Record Search* for the State of South Dakota.

Amazing, and you had options. Case number, date, complainant's name, defendant's name. Jeez.

Except for . . . one slight problem. You didn't have the prick's last name. The *potential* prick.

Hmm.

So this took a little longer, maybe 90 seconds, and there it was, the Marriage and Divorce records division . . . and you had an Elaine Epstein tying the knot with a Frederick Rolloun on July 28, 2012 in the Minnehaha County Courthouse in Sioux Falls, Jonathan Smith, as witness.

Wow. So back to the criminal side . . . and soon enough, yep, the old man wasn't joking. Not only did the kid have 3 DUI's on the record, they were all in the last, say 18 months.

One in September 2017. One in April of 2018. The third, and yep, just like Marty said, at Christmastime, December 20, 2018.

The cocksucker.

Chris had been hoping for it to play out differently, a couple ways would have been okay. Obviously learning that Marty was wrong, or making it up, that would have been great. Second to that, not finding any evidence of the guy, or Elaine either, out in South Dakota--that would have worked too, because you leave it alone. Because you're forced to.

No, though. Back there at the LaQuinta . . . it was all in Chris's pocket, it was *on him*. For better or worse.

"I think I *will* try the spa," Rosie was saying now. "That's like a hot tub, right?"

They'd gotten in about 3, and Chris had to admit that sounded pretty good as well--for one thing, to take the edge off enduring Rosie doing the driving those couple hours this morning.

But Chris knew from past experience that hot tubs tended to wipe him out for the day. He could outlast anyone in there, people were always surprised, but the flip side was he was good for nothing for about 12 hours after.

Many times he wished the Cheater Five had one of those things, and in fact Sharif gave him a standing invitation to use the one at the motel on Sepulveda, but Chris never quite did.

"It is," Chris said to Rosie. "Be careful in there, if you're not used to it. Mix it up back and forth with the pool." He was going to ask her if she brought a suit, he really would be surprised if she included one, and that would give him the chance to again use the dumb transparent line about let's go shopping for one, but enough was enough, and soon she did have something going, and it was a modest one-piece, and he couldn't resist making a comment.

"Dang," he said.

"I'd ask *what*, but that's unnecessary," she said.

“No I was just thinking, I really *am* going to have to revise my swimsuit preferences . . . Leaving a few things to the imagination, that may be the way to go *after* all, you know it?”

And Rosie seemed to be thinking about it for a second, and then she told him to shut up and come here, and that snuck a little unexpected delay into your evening plans.

Which were initially to head over to that address, the one listed on Elaine’s design business web page--since he had tried to find one for Fred Rolloun, and that failed, the first blip in the radar with the South Dakota records system.

If the address matches where they live, Chris pretty sure it would, then you size it up from there.

But that could wait. Tomorrow was another day, and he joined Rosie in the hot tub after all eventually, and they found a little home cooking place a couple blocks away, cozy, with candles on the tables, and you kind of got lost in the moment, and it wasn’t the worst thing, not at all.

## Chapter 14

They had a nice big mall on the west side of town near the river--and Jeez, this was the famous *Missouri* River, Chris had no idea.

He needed to occupy Rosie today and it would be nice to present her with something more culturally interesting, like a museum-type affair, or even drop her in the old section of town, which did sound decent, particularly because there was a lot of American Indian heritage out here, and it seemed to be appreciated and well-preserved.

But all things considered, especially when you factored in the weather, where they were predicting a high for the day of 38, the mall made the most sense.

And this mall was a boomer, you could get lost in there, and at the worst you'd cover two or three miles it felt like, if you doubled back through it a couple times looking around.

When Rosie was getting out Chris said, "Here's \$300. That enough?"

"You're out of your mind," she said, ignoring it.

"What are you doing? Make me happy. I'm feeling guilty already, my appointment's not rock solid, it could take a while."

"Unh-huh," she said. "I love malls, if you want to know the truth. But I'm frugal."

"So be frugal with your *own* money. Spend *other* people's. Come on."

And she reluctantly took the cash, and Chris watched her cross the parking lot and mix in with a group that was headed toward the main entrance, and Chris hoped this wouldn't take all that long . . . not sure what that *meant*, but that was the thought.

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2012 Weatherington was in an older section of town, some of the houses looking pristine, but a bunch of them not, which was kind of surprising, since Chris figured this was one of the elite residential areas, since the houses *were* large and there was plenty of space between them. And you had old-fashioned wide streets with trees, and you could have been looking at an all-American movie set from out of the 1950's--except again, some of the properties were beat up.

Chris supposed that's the way it worked, the economy doing funny things to people out here. Maybe it tied into the state of farming, filtered back down. People could obviously afford to live in these semi-mansion things, because they were no doubt dirt cheap, compared to California--they just couldn't necessarily afford to fix them up.

Elaine Epstein's--and the son-in-law's--was in that category, at least on the surface, plenty on the outside you could do to make the place look better, so you assumed the inside needed some help as well.

First you made sure you had the right place, and that was easy, **Rolloun/Epstein** in solid letters handwritten on the curbside mailbox, which Chris picked up on as he made his first pass by the place and turned around down the street.

The curious thing though, it sounded like little kids making noise in the back yard. It could have been a neighbor's house, but as he doubled past and cruised by slowly it was definitely Elaine and Fred's place.

And Jeez, what day was it even?

Chris had to think . . . he picked up Rosie in NYC on Thursday afternoon, they made it to Zanesville that night. The delay in the morning finding a home for Bo, and then the late night arrival at the amazingly nice mom and pop motel in Pella, and now pulling in to Pierre last night.

So wow, today's Sunday. It did feel a little sleepier than normal as Chris was looking around town on the way over here, though he had no idea what a *normal* weekday felt like.

But was there a birthday party going on in the backyard?

It seemed prudent to park a ways away and walk back, and even better was park out of the neighborhood entirely, which was on a side street, a commercial one, near a taqueria--and obviously they had those out here too.

It did feel good to stretch the legs, he gave himself about a half mile to deal with, and when he got to the block and he casually strolled by the house, there was most definitely kids' activity on the premises . . . and then Chris noticed a small but distinctive sign hanging above the wrap-around porch:

### **Belles and Beaus, Friendly & Active Daycare**

And he looped around a *few* times, coming back on the opposite side of the street, and on his third pass there was a new car in the driveway, the engine running, and a smiling woman greeting them, and a moment later a little girl gets out of the car and the woman takes her hand and starts walking back around the side of the house to the back yard.

Everyone was a little bundled up obviously, with the temperature, and the greeter woman had a wool hat on, but you tell right away, the bio photo from the web page in your head, that it was Elaine.

At this point Chris didn't want to be cynical, but the obvious thought was, the design and decorating business, looking pretty dang fancy online, apparently isn't knocking them dead out here in Pierre.

And that was obnoxious to look at it that way . . . for all you know the husband lost his job and she had to double up . . . or maybe the guy didn't even *have* a job that he could *lose*.

The other thing you couldn't miss with Elaine--yep, she was pregnant. Hard to know with twins, how far along, but far enough . . . and in a



moment of clarity Chris *felt* for the woman and wanted to follow her into the back to see if she at least had some help back there.

You couldn't do that of course, nor did Chris want to linger too long in one spot, so he kept moving, and when he got to the corner and was debating *now what*, meaning go back to the car, or parade up and down past the house a couple more times--he looked back *toward* the house and there was a guy pulling out of the garage, and then getting out, the way you have to close the garage door if you don't have an automatic one.

And even from half a block away Chris got a reasonable look at him, tall and thin and loose-limbed like an athlete might be, and yeah, he looked to be a good 10 years younger than Elaine, which jived with what the old man Marty had said.

Something else, he was wearing a baseball jersey, and long sleeves underneath, sticking out of the jersey's short sleeves, Chris guessing the under stuff was thermal, since the guy wasn't wearing a jacket, that was it. The pants didn't match, they weren't street pants or jeans, but they weren't uniform ones either, they looked like sweats.

Hmm. First of all, you don't know, but you assume that's the guy. Fredrick Roullon, the son-in-law. And nothing specific to tip you off, but it did kind of fit, just the happy-go-lucky slightly cocky look that he flashed there for a couple seconds, that your scenario might have been correct, the guy may *not* work and she *might* have all the burden.

But Chris wasn't here to determine that, or judge it.

The thing now, was where was the guy going, and dang it, *you* had to go the half mile back to the car so it wasn't like you were going to follow him to find out.

Walking back to the vehicle, there were a few clues you could toss around.

Was that a major league jersey? Like you see doofuses wearing around for all pro sports these days, mirroring their favorite team or

player? Chris was thinking, if you lived in Pierre--and by the way he learned pretty quick, checking in at Super 8 the first minute or two, you don't pronounce it like the French's guy's name, even though that's exactly what it is . . . But you pronounce it *Pier*--just like, well, the Manhattan Beach one.

But the point being, if you lived here what major league team would you root for? You'd have a few options, no slam dunk, but there'd be the Colorado Rockies, the Kansas City Royals, the St Louis Cardinals, and even the Chicago teams maybe, the Cubs and White Sox.

Though he forgot about Minnesota, the Twins, and yeah that'd be the most likely by far, and Chris took what he always thought was a little risk and tried to avoid, which was pulling out his real phone and googling the Twins' jerseys.

And while he was at it he found a main site, and they featured all the MLB jerseys, and nope, the dude in the driveway's not only didn't resemble any of them, it wasn't of that calibre. It could have been a minor league team's jersey perhaps, though you had trouble conceiving of a team sticking a minor league franchise *here*, if nothing else due to the long winters and short summers.

You could of course have a *minor* minor league team around, one of those weekend leagues that working guys join who still have the nerve to play some hardball.

Or honestly, that thing kind of looked like someone's high school baseball jersey.

So, whatever. Hard to tell if that was the guy's typical Sunday attire, or he was on his way to go play some kind of ball--which if you had to take a wild guess, would mean old-man's softball. Plenty of those leagues around, even when it's 38 degrees out Chris supposed, figuring that once they hit March 1st around here it's cause for celebration, and what's 38 when you've been dealing for a whole lot of weeks with some minus-20.

You might as well start driving around. Likely more paranoia with worrying about going online, but still Chris thought better to not use your phone to search softball fields in the area.

And a reminder . . . if you do happen to find the guy, you better make 100 percent sure that's him, before you even remotely consider taking it to another level. Be certain, *for Gosh sakes*, that it wasn't the guy's kid brother, or some random overnight guest, pulling out of the driveway back there.

He found a few parks in the area, one with a softball field, but the scene was admittedly pretty bleak. A few dog walkers and some old couples moseying along, but no sign of athletic activity, not even close, nor of anyone getting prepared to play something.

He passed a junior high school, a couple fields but nothing doing . . . and then the high school was adjacent to it, in back, as can be the case in smaller towns.

There *was* something going on *there*, the high school, but it didn't feel right, there were a bunch of what looked like teenage girls near the goal post on the football field, huddled around an adult coach-like figure, listening to some kind of lecture . . . and Chris noticed the sign, that it was a tryout for a cheer squad, which apparently these days didn't mean necessarily cheering for your high school football team but being part of this competitive team, much of which seemed rooted in gymnastics.

Anyhow no sign of men's adult softball, that was for sure . . . and then Chris noticed a separate sign. Not like the cheer one, which was one of those letter clusters on the typical school permanent announcements sign out front by the street, where you can picture a custodian getting on a ladder periodically and moving the letters around to make new announcements.

The one Chris was seeing now was a lot more makeshift, a paper banner secured to the cyclone fence that framed the back of the football field, and it said

**Welcome Alums - Charity BB & BBQ - 3/4 Noon - Dillon**

Hmm, now what was this?

He took a minute to decipher it. Okay . . . you were looking at an announcement for a charity event. That involved alumni of the high school. The barbeque part you got, and Chris assumed the 3/4 was the date, meaning today.

The BB could mean a lot of things--but seeing the mope getting in the car with the jersey--the one you concluded looked like a high school job--you'd want to at least follow up.

Dillon. Sounded like the location, a Dillon field or Dillon park. Could also be some nearby town called Dillon but that was less likely.

Well, what the hay, and Chris almost threw a little caution to the wind to search it but decided not to, and thought of something else, a convenience store that maybe had a city map.

And he tried a couple of those and that didn't work, so he thought give it one more shot, find one out by 83 where you came into town--typically more maps and travel paraphernalia those places--and sure enough the convenience store at the Chevron gas pumps did have one, a nice laminated version, and it was 3 dollars, which seemed like a heck of deal these days, all the work that went into those things.

He combed through the map in the car, twice, then three times--and son of a bitch there wasn't anything Dillon. No park or field or even *street*.

He was thinking what next, and saw some guy come out of the convenience store with a newspaper under his arm, a USA today . . . and Chris thought Jeez, like an idiot, at least check one of those.

And there were a couple options, the first one looking like the daily local paper, and the second, more one of those independents, a weekly deal, typically free, and this one was, and he bought the daily as well and went back to the car.

It took a few minutes, and the event was referenced in both, and the daily confirmed that an alumni baseball game *was* part of it, and it was an annual thing. Again though, taking place at *Dillon*.

Fortunately the freebie had more detail, nothing on the event itself, but calling the location Wingwalker County Park.

And Chris did find that on the map, northside of town off West 8th Street, where it looked like behind it was farm fields, so you were at the tip of the city limits.

And entirely possible the freebie paper made a mistake, but equally possible Dillon was local nickname for the park, or at least the field over there, and it stuck and required no explanation.

Chris drove across town, taking his time, wondering how it might play out . . . but also wondering should he check on Rosie first, make sure she was still okay at the mall . . . but you start overthinking it, checking on *too* many things, the dang event you're trying to attend might be over.

So you focus. And bingo . . . no kidding now, there *was* something going on in this park, and you could hear an announcer talking through a cheap PA system and you pulled in and parked, and it wasn't all that routine to find a spot, but Chris managed to grab one at the far end, the third base side of the field.

And yeah, the game well underway, and fans yelling and having fun, and barbeque smoke hitting you in the face, and a lot of guys out there with the same jersey as the driveway guy.

You could discern pretty quickly what was going on. You had the current varsity, the high school kids, taking on the alumni team. That 'team' was likely nothing formal, just whoever could show up today, who once

played baseball at the school. No one had to buy tickets, but there were all kinds of games and raffles set up, and the PA guy kept reminding you to try all that good stuff, that the proceeds go into a college scholarship fund for deserving student/athletes.

Someone got a third out and the teams changed positions, and the driveway guy, the probable but as yet unconfirmed Fredrick Roullon, was playing shortstop, and that's kind of what Chris figured, sizing the guy up closing the garage door, the loose athletic look of someone probably good with his hands.

The varsity kids were a little uncomfortable, you could tell, especially the pitchers, because the alumni guys were having trouble hitting real pitching, especially the older ones, some of whom looked to be in their 50's.

So the kid pitchers didn't want to fire it in like normal, including God forbid risking *hitting* an old guy, but you could tell they didn't want to baby it in there either, embarrassing the alumni guys by blatantly showing them we have to go easy on you.

Meanwhile, it was the 4th inning and Chris noticed the scoreboard, Varsity 18 Alums 2 . . . so maybe the kids *weren't* all that worried about it after all.

The alums changed pitchers and this new guy looked pretty good, throwing hard, live arm, likely a very recent graduate and in his athletic prime, and now the alums got three straight outs and they came back to the bench celebrating like they'd won the Superbowl.

The possible Roullon guy was on deck when the next inning started, meaning he'd be batting second, and the first guy fouled off a lot of pitches but then struck out, and the PA guy came on the mic, and with a flourish of the r's, announced: Now batting, Shortstop, Number 19 . . . Frederick Roullon.

Chris thinking Jeez that's some introduction, but meanwhile getting the confirmation he needed, and not being real surprised.

While Roullon dug into the batter's box Chris scoured the stands for any sign of Elaine, since if you're a spouse at a game like this, you don't always pay attention, but you do tend to sit up a little straighter and focus the 3 or 4 times your man actually steps to the plate. But no . . . likely the daycare was still dragging on, or else she finished but was tired . . . or possibly she doesn't *want* to watch the guy do much of *anything*. Who knows.

Roullon grounds out to third, and Chris had to give him credit, he hustled it hard down the line and almost beat the throw, and he came back to the bench and guys were making friendly jokes at his expense, since apparently you weren't supposed to overdo it at these things, and Roullon seemed like one of the boys and took it in stride.

The game concluded after 6 innings, a little short but no one seemed to mind, and the players and a lot of the fans gravitated to the barbeque area, and Chris was thinking dang, that smells awful good, I wonder if *I* can get in on some of it.

Meanwhile what he really hoped he *wasn't* going to see he did, and it didn't take long.

There were picnic tables and beer kegs lined up and the stuff was flowing, everyone with the plastic see through cheap cups, and okay fine, if Roullon joins the party what are you going to do.

He shouldn't be drinking anything, not a drop, but if he has a beer and his burger and drives home safe . . . and doesn't start in again at that point . . . raiding the liquor cabinet . . . and oh boy, what a mess to have to keep an eye on if you were doing that.

Poor Elaine. Despite what she thinks she might want. Despite her insecurities, that this is her chance at it, otherwise she'll go down as a lonely heart.

That line from the dad, Marty, out in Winnemucca--that this *might* be her best chance at it--was starting to tick Chris off, frankly. She's a big girl and she can make her own bed.

So if Roullon fell in with the boys and worked the beer keg, that's not what you want to see out of a triple DUI man . . . but maybe you live with it for now, keep an eye on it somehow.

What Roullon was doing at the moment was a lot different, which was sitting at the end of the visitors dugout, way away from the picnic festivities, and trading shots.

With another guy from the game, the alumni team. Who Chris was pretty sure he recognized as the left fielder.

No disguise to it. No hiding it in a water bottle, or mixing it with your Gatorade. None of that nonsense.

Just straight shots, one of the little beer keg plastic cups, passing it back and forth.

The two of the them rotating the re-filler duties. Passing back and forth a bottle of Jack Daniels. The regular type, if Chris was seeing the label right. The original. None of the honey-blend nonsense. And the bottle a good sized one, like the economy variety from Costco.

God damn it.

You don't talk try to talk to a guy like this.

A million people *have* tried to talk to a guy just like Roullon . . . an *awful* lot like him. There's no way.

You just . . . what *do* you just do?

Chris watched for a while from a distance, through the fence, and then Roullon and the other guy got up, wobbling a fair amount, the main party their focal point now, although you wouldn't be surprised if they had to use the bathroom first, and yeah they appeared headed that way, down the third base line and past where people had parked some cars on the



grass on the edge of the outfield, and Chris knew where the restroom was by now since he'd had to use it earlier himself.

Basically you're talking an outhouse, one of those chemical pit toilets, and Chris loosely followed along, and then someone at one of the parked cars by the outfield, a woman's voice, called out a general request for help with more coals, which she apparently was retrieving from her vehicle, and Chris assumed Roullon and the other guy would help out . . . but only the other guy did, and Roullon continued back toward the outhouse.

Chris took a glance around, it seemed good enough, and when Roullon stopped at the door to take that second to make sure the little signal was green, meaning no one was in there . . . that brief window before you're satisfied with your confirmation and you go ahead and pull on the door . . . that seemed like a good time, and Chris plunged the syringe into Roullon's right thigh.

And Holy Smokes, Mark wasn't kidding about this stuff, Roullon slid down in a heap, no worries about his calling out or whipping around looking shocked before the shit took effect--he was down for the count, it sure looked like. We're talking ASAP, Chris thinking.

And then it was pretty apparent he needed to get a move on, and he stuck the syringe back in the fanny pack, the one he hated to wear but you needed sometimes, and there was a substantial stand of trees past a small equipment shed to the right of the outhouse, and the parking lot was on the other side of that, and that's where he headed.

And it would have all worked out fine, probably--everyone crowded around the picnic area which the trees conveniently blocked from view when you were in the parking lot . . . and Chris was approaching the Subaru, and he had the key thing out and he hit the button, and he swung the one leg into the driver's seat, and then the left, all good, and then went to pull the door closed and he took one more glance back . . . and there was some guy taking a look at him.

Not looking at him like anything was wrong.

But noticing him.

The guy keeping his pace, walking toward the picnic area. Some guy who you figured unfortunately needed to get something out of his car.

Chris took a sizably deep breath, threw it in reverse, and drove out of there. You weren't going to say *hi* to the guy at this point, and *how'd you enjoy the game?*, you had to go about your business.

A couple blocks *into* that business, Chris realized he was in trouble.

Appearance-wise . . . he wasn't too worried about *that*. He was having plenty of trouble with the cold--he definitely wasn't South Dakota stock like these people picnicing in short sleeve shirts, and a few of them even wearing shorts, when you got 40 degrees outside and cloudy, and that's a *generous* 40 degrees.

But the good thing there, as a result of him freezing his ass off, was he bundled up, which included a wool cap that came down pretty low, rare for him to wear one but he brought it to New York just in case though he didn't require it there.

And he had a scarf, and a ski jacket, one of those fake down jobs that was pretty bulky.

It wasn't like they were going to put an all points bulletin out for a guy who looked like him, because he didn't look like *much* back there, he was confident of that.

Less confident . . . and where you absolutely *could* see them putting out a bulletin--was the God damn California plates on the Subaru.

Staring the guy in the face who happened to walk by at the wrong moment in that parking lot.

Chris got that weak-kneed acute feeling of terror and panic rolled into one, and for a split second he thought he might pass out, which happened once or twice before, running from stuff, same feeling, never coming to fruition but afraid it might this time.

He really . . . needed to think clearly here . . . and he pulled over, which in itself was taking a chance since you were maybe six blocks from the park, but you had to figure this out.

He'd been to the Black Hills once, years ago, spent a couple days at Deadwood, great old western town actually, but this wasn't the time to consider the backdrop, this was the time to hightail it out of here . . . and that sounded that good, get lost in the Black Hills, in case anyone really *was* looking for a guy in a Subaru with California plates. Which unfortunately was not far-fetched.

And Chris found 14 pretty quickly which took you out of town headed due east, and that become 34 which took you to 73, and you'd be humming right along, and when you got to Deadwood, or Spearfish, they had canyons and plenty of shelter where you could disappear the vehicle and figure it out.

Except . . . that was going to take you three hours, that little trek, and you sure felt vulnerable, plugging along that direction, a few other cars on the road but not that many, the main concern being there could be a few too many state troopers running this way, even though you did have darkness on your side--only 4:30 but getting there, which seemed crazy but you were out in prairie land and the light was a lot different, and Chris wasn't going to argue with it.

But it was an uneasy first twenty minutes, and the opportunity came to swing onto a small county road and head north--and it looked like you were getting on something called 1806 but he couldn't really tell--and that's what he did, one of those 90 degree right turn intersections right off the main highway . . . and this felt a lot better, and it seemed to be even darker, no other drivers' headlights involved now, and it felt like nothing but hay fields, and course being March that meant *zip* going on out there, and he stayed straight for another 5 miles and it looked like you could angle toward

a little pond, which of course was frozen over, and he eased it onto the bank and shut down.

Holy shit.

It didn't feel like you were on someone's land, but if you were, they weren't in the immediate vicinity, so you should be okay for the night.

And a long one it was going to be.

If you survived it. Jesus. He hadn't thought of that, hadn't really paid attention to the *low*, the couple times he checked the weather report, interested in the *high* exclusively.

Chris got out and opened the hatchback and slowly bundled on everything he could, as logically as possible without going so extreme you cut off the blood supply, and he got back in the front seat and called Mancuso.

"Yeah man!" Ned said, and Chris could picture it without much trouble, a Sunday at Manhattan Beach, early spring fever, probably mid-70's, everyone fired up and, including Ned, wrapping up a day at the beach.

In fact . . . right in the *middle* of it, because with the time change you had more like 2:30 out there.

"I got a problem," Chris said.

Ned got serious right away. "Hey listen, I heard what happened. Don't tell me about it now, on the phone. Just know that what you're doing . . . on my behalf . . ."

And Ned was searching for the words, and was going to go on about it, and he appreciated everything yada yada, and the *what happened* part was likely word having gotten to Ned about Paulie.

"That's not it," Chris said. "I got a situation. A different one."

"Talk to me," Ned said, and Chris did, he gave him the basics, and it was sure good to have that presence on the other end and Chris was trying to be a man here but he felt his voice start to crack once, and had to get a grip on it.

Ned was quiet, and Chris wondered if he'd gotten his point across, and at the same thinking did I *have* to call the guy? Can't I extricate myself from this, without imposing on anyone?

The silence continued on the other end, a few more seconds, and Ned said, "I got this," and he was off the phone.

You weren't going to call him back, bother him, distract him. You let him do what he wanted.

All *you* had to do, or your end, was get through the night, and you might have a breakthrough, a revelation when you woke up, and after all, tomorrow's another day.

But Rosie . . .

"I'm real sorry Babe . . . and I'm sorry I just called you that, I didn't mean to be presumptuous. I got in jam, I'm out of town slightly, not sure I can get back tonight, in fact I *know* I can't--"

"Slow down," she said.

"You going to be okay? Can you make it back to the motel? They have cabs and stuff you can call from the mall? Can you tell them at the motel, you may have to stay an extra night? I'll figure out getting the money to you in the morning."

"You don't sound good," she said, "And I'm already *at* the motel. I'm fine."

"Oh. Jeez, good then. In fact that's great. Listen, I just have to survive the night, no big deal . . . You know off hand what the low is going to be overnight?"

You could hear Rosie looking it up. "It says 19," she said. "Now I'm worried."

"No don't. I'm fine. I'm just . . . in a vehicle it looks like."

"Ours?"

"Yeah. Long story. Not important."

“I think there’s a candle in the glove compartment,” she said. “I was looking for some tissues, I think I saw one.”

“Jeez. Thanks.” And Chris opened it up, and yeah there was one, stubby job but thick, should burn all night easy. And a lighter there with it, and Chris flicked it and yes, you had a flame.

He’d read about this family in Alaska, got stuck somewhere, the candle saved them. The experts weighed in afterwards, that it doesn’t take much, small cabin that a passenger car is, to spread just enough heat. Rosie might have read about it too, either way that was quick thinking.

“What else?” she said. “I didn’t think I’d miss you that much, if something like this happened. But I do.”

Another one of *those* . . . that you don’t know quite how to interpret. So you might as well put on the positive spin, so you leave off with a good feeling for the night. He said, “I’m losing juice, but I’ll see you tomorrow. You can count on it.”

“If it *doesn’t* happen though,” she said, “don’t lose sleep over it. And I’ve got plenty of money for the room. That \$300 you forced on me, it’s still in one piece.”

“You’re something else,” he said, and they said goodnight.

And he had to smile, something *telling* him back at the mall she wasn’t going to spend any of that. And he tried to enjoy the moment, let it linger, because the rest of the night was likely going to be awfully grim.

## Chapter 15

Chris got the first unbelievable call from Ned around 1 the next afternoon, Monday.

He'd gone to sleep--if you could call it that--remembering to light that candle, with the notion that you work it out tomorrow, and when the dust settles you resume your trip back out west to MB like nothing major happened that screwed you up.

The problem being, he wakes up, and yeah there's the frozen pond, you could see it more clearly now, and yeah, there's still no sign of human life that you can detect, but . . . what are you going to do different today?

You go back on any major road, you got the same problem. In fact maybe worse, now that they've had a chance to piece it together. A guy driving a Subaru with California plates.

So he sat. He got out a couple times, walked around, twisted his predicament a bunch of different ways, couldn't see any particular way out, and went back and sat more.

If it was summer, and nice and warm out there . . . then maybe you risk it, you leave the car, you trek it the five miles back to the highway and civilization . . . and if you're lucky you get someone to stop for you. Maybe a trucker, someone like Abe in Arizona, and that worked out pretty sweet.

Although admittedly he met Abe in a restaurant, talking to him at the counter, the next guy over. It was still hitching a ride, Chris supposed, but not the hard-core type.

But the phone rang at 1, and Ned said, "I'm close. Your girlfriend you say, she's in Pierre, South Dakota?"

“She is,” Chris said, “she’s not my girlfriend . . . but what do you mean I’m *close*?”

“I’m outside Rapid City. I’m driving.”

“Jesus fucking *Christ*.”

“Don’t worry about it. Google said 22 hours door to door. I’m in the ballpark.”

“I’m not believing this,” Chris said. “But yes, she’s pinned in a motel, the first Super 8 off the highway, which I’m pretty sure is 83.”

“I’ll find her,” Ned said, “what’s her number? And then where are *you* at? Specifically.”

This time Chris came *close* to crying, wasn’t going to be able to hold back if it really started flowing, and fortunately Ned said he’d check back in, and hung up.

Chris got out of the car again. It wasn’t such a bad day *after* all. The sun was poking through, flocks of ducks were making their way overhead, and you had that early taste of the ground ripening to grow stuff.

Ned would be a couple hours away, and you work it from there, but something told Chris everything was going to be okay.

If Ned said 22 hours from MB direct--and so when you figured what time you hung up with him yesterday--Jesus, the guy didn’t sleep or stop . . . is what that meant.

The son of a bitch got in the car and took care of business.

You thought of Rosie--who you didn’t know until a week ago--hanging around the room now, and hopefully having a chance to get back in the pool and spa, at least break up the day . . . and then you had Mancuso, who you once were pretty sure things weren’t going to work out with . . . and Chris couldn’t help thinking that real friends come sideways at you, from the most unlikely places.

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“This is a nice casino,” Ned said, “you don’t even have to gamble to have fun. A lot more down-home than Vegas.”

They were at a 5 dollar blackjack table, John Ascuaga’s Nugget in east Reno, Ned and Chris and Rosie sitting there left to right, and they were actually ahead, all three of them, the dealer going through an abnormal streak of bad luck, most recently busting on at least 5 or 6 hands in a row.

Chris said, “I wouldn’t have scripted it this way, I can’t complain . . . Not the blackjack, but the big picture.”

“I feel like we’re in good hands,” Rosie said, meaning Mancuso showing up and basically saving the day, having the foresight to bring new plates, Michigan ones being the best he could come up with, but doing the job, replacing the California ones.

So you had Ned in his vehicle, this time the luxurious one that he was disappointed Chris didn’t take in the first place, and you had Chris and Rosie getting ready to caravan back to LA, or maybe not keep up with guy and not worry about it if Ned was needing to to get back fast.

Except Chris realized that even a tad safer, at least until they got a few states away, like Utah maybe, would be to have Rosie drive the Subaru.

That way you’d complete the cycle so to speak. No California plates, no suspicious *guy* driving a Subaru, even with Michigan ones.

So Chris suggested it to Rosie and she was game, and he rode with Ned, so you’d have a woman by herself at the wheel, no ‘Who are *you?*’ complications if she did happen to get stopped for swerving or otherwise reckless driving.

And Ned said more than once, following from behind, usually an exhale prefacing it, “I see what you *mean*,” Chris having explained that she was a beginner . . . and they did have to sweat it out, you just couldn’t relax watching her, you didn’t know what might happen.

They stopped for the night in Casper, Wyoming, 6 hours in, and Chris figured that should be good enough, and he took over in the morning and

Rosie asked would he mind if she rode with Ned . . . and that's the way it worked all the way to Reno.

And that was something he'd have to ask Rosie later, keeping it light though, but "Jeez, big crush on the guy? Or what?"

Which you couldn't blame her for, Ned could have that effect, and Chris had been down that road before, and it wasn't something you were going to obsess over.

Ned said now, "They got a clam bar in this place. I've heard for years it's good. Shall we? It's on me, no discussion."

And you could see a guy looking up, the first seat to the dealer's left, and he wasn't having quite the same good runs of cards the three of *them* were . . . or if he *was* temporarily, you got the general impression it wasn't working out for him that great in the long run.

So Ned said to the guy, "How about you? Can you join us?"

And the guy was fairly shocked, but he got up and followed, and when they got into the clam bar Ned said to Chris and Rosie, "You guys get your own table, this'll be nice."

So they did, and Ned sat down with the guy from the blackjack table, and he was right, the clams were amazing, and halfway through Rosie looked over at Chris and smiled and shook her head.

**THE END**

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