

# **JUSTICE SQUARED**

**by REX BOLT**



**Chris Seely**  
**Vigilante Justice Book 4**

★★★★★ Really good series!

Chris gets it right - throw  
out the script and wing it!

## **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 One

Chris said to the guy next to him, “The difference, in your opinion? Between her and the ones in the record stores?”

“First of all, my friend,” the guy said. “There *are* no more record stores.”

“That’s a point well taken,” Chris said, “so forget that. I guess I just mean talent-wise.”

“I’d give her a B-plus,” the guy said. “Great range though, I’m hearing two octaves.”

The guy finished his beer and picked up his plastic cup of quarters and headed back to the slot machines.

Chris could tell the guy *did* know a little something about music, from a couple of comments he made . . . but then how could you only give her a B-plus if her range is so impressive?

The band performed two more and took a break. The four of them coming down from the little stage into the bar area . . . a guitar player, keys guy, drummer and the female vocalist. And of course these days the keyboard person could synthesize the heck out of nearly any sound they were trying to emulate, from a bluegrass banjo on down to a line of tubas in a marching band, to a dang full orchestra.

They were called ‘Luella and the Capris’, is what the electronic sign at the entrance to the lounge said, though you had to be kind of quick to read it because there was other stuff rotated in--Texas Hold-em seats open, progressive slots jackpot updates, the blackjack tournament taking final entries, the all-you-can-eat king crab legs tonight in the buffet.

Luella was at a table with the drummer, both of them roaming around their phones.

Chris thought should he or shouldn't he a couple of times, and went over there and sat down with them.

The drummer didn't pay attention, his thumbs continuing to work the phone, and Luella finished up her business too before she looked up and said, "Well, *that's* direct . . . we don't mind, as long as you're a fan." Following it with a nice-enough smile.

"You're really Luella?" Chris said.

"No, Terri," she said. "Why?"

Chris said, "So once people get past that voice . . . you have some spunk as well."

Terri said, "That's what my husband said when we met. Not in those exact words."

Oh boy, the husband card right away.

"He one of the band guys then?" Chris said.

"My hubby? No, no. That would never work."

"Either way, I didn't mean to be cozying up to you, if you got the wrong impression . . . you've been kind of blowing me away up there though. Echoing a *few* great voices. Karen Carpenter, the main one."

Terri gave Chris her full attention for the first time and said, "Well now *I'm* impressed . . . Not everyone comes up to me and picks that out. She's an idol of mine."

"She had that calm, clear voice," Chris said. "Straight and pure and angelic. The exact opposite of Whitney Houston and Celine Dion, who *never* sang a straight note."

"Wow," Terri said, "you are *so* right . . . So I might as well ask, what other *great* voices did I remind you of."

"Two others. Harder to pinpoint, just bits and pieces jumping out, but I was thinking Patsy Cline, and Linda Ronstadt."

"Well I'll take both of those," Terri said. "The problem now, are you going to stick around for the third set?"

"Why? I *shouldn't*?"

“No, it’s just that you’ve raised the bar on me. The pressure’s on.”

Chris appreciated the humor, and she seemed like a happy person, but what did you really know.

Chris said, “A couple things I always wonder, when I hear a terrific lounge act like yours. The first thing, dumb question, but you can’t all live *here*, right?”

“No, Reno.”

“You’re kidding. That’s like, 4 hours.”

“They put us up for the gig. We do three-night minimums. We’re headed to Wendover next. Then Tonopah. What was the other question?”

“What the difference is . . . you, and the big stars.”

“You mean you can’t tell?”

“No.”

“That’s very nice of you . . . The answer is, the backstory, for one.”

Chris asked what that meant and she said they had to tune up but stick around and she might get into it.

Chris decided he didn’t have any other pressing engagements tonight, so why not?

What he was doing here unfortunately, in Bingham, Nevada, three-quarters of the way across the state, was hiding out.

Though he liked to think of it more as keeping a low profile, which was less dramatic.

You were nearer to Salt Lake City than anywhere else, that being three-and-a-half hours, though fine, you did have Winnemucca back the other way a little closer.

Wendover, which Terri mentioned, was an hour-and-a-half but it didn’t count for anything because there was nothing there except for three big casino hotels that had sprung up in the high desert, with an airstrip to haul in the high rollers.

It was interesting there, how they built the casinos literally six inches from the Utah state line, but it made sense, why make people waste extra time to get there.



You might as well throw the town of Battle Mountain into the mix too, an hour *west* of Bingham, but again very little to it other than the legal fireworks outlet, which tended to draw the out-of-staters who wanted to explode stuff back home.

Chris was residing currently at the Quality Inn next door to the casino. He'd started off at the Super 8, but rational or not, he felt more exposed out there on 227, so day before yesterday he switched it up.

From the Quality Inn you hopped out your door, crossed the parking lot about eight steps and right into the casino, *The Palermo*, through the side entrance where they spun the big wheel of fortune, which they called the *Wizard Of Odds*.

You kept going and you were in pretty good hands, he had to admit.

Five restaurants, a 24-hour Starbucks, an observation area on the mezzanine level where you could sit under a massive glass dome and look out at the wide open spaces and mountains in the distance.

The lounge every evening, kicking off the live music at 4, with a couple late shows after that, one of which was Terri's *Luella and the Capris* act.

You had cocktail waitresses scurrying around at all hours in what Chris figured were supposed to be lacey Roman tunics, though there wasn't a whole lot to them, political correctness not a factor inside the casino.

In keeping with the theme of the place, there were fountains and a hanging garden and a fake Roman column you could bump into about every two feet, everything oversized. You even had a bowling alley and an indoor mini-golf setup and a mechanical bull, if you were a fan of that stuff.

But essentially, you could spend all day in here, and all night too if you wanted or couldn't sleep. You could eat and drink almost for free, between the bargain buffet and the complimentary appetizers they came around with in the lounge, which were pretty darn tasty, and honestly, the place was worth it for the people-watching alone.

Chris had always liked casinos, and *The Palermo* had a different feel than most of the Reno and Vegas ones, a little cozier, despite it being pretty huge and going all out with the glitzy Roman element.

Maybe it was because you were out in the desert and the people working here had more of a small town quality, who knows.

Of course the one thing Chris *wasn't* interested in was gambling, which every last detail in the place was engineered to have you *do*, but that didn't matter, you could enjoy all the perks without participating and nobody ever bothered you.

Bottom line, this would have been a perfect stopover on a cross-country drive, or even a great self-contained vacation . . . except in this case he was forced to be here.

What happened, was a couple weeks ago he gets a call from a detective in Modesto.

The guy, perfectly polite, asks if he wouldn't mind speaking to a colleague down there in SoCal, and Chris robotically agreed right away, though when he recovered slightly and tried to ask a couple of questions, the detective told him it would be easier for the colleague to explain, and he thanked him and wished him a nice day.

So Chris called the LA guy like he was supposed to, and the guy says now's a good time and where is he?

This panicked Chris a little more, a cop showing up and snooping around *period*, and he offered to meet the guy somewhere, but the guy, a Detective Hamm, said no, it'd be better if he came his way.

An hour later Detective Hamm arrives, a brown, unmarked vehicle with about ten antennas sticking off the roof pulling into the *Cheater Five*.

Hamm had a uniform guy with him as well.

Chris's brain was pretty well fried with the possibilities at this point.

The likeliest one was that the old man Mel had called and claimed he got assaulted.

Less likely but still a wild possibility, Chris had unmasked the Zodiac and the police wanted to follow up. How they would have found out is hard to say, though maybe Mel, after 48 years on the run, confessed.

Taking it a step further, could he have turned himself in because he feared Chris was going to come back? So he contacts the police for his own protection? Nah, that sounded off.

Either way, someone had to have identified Chris, which probably meant someone took down his license plate when he parked across the street from Mel's . . . maybe a suspicious neighbor, or maybe Mel had a wife in a back room, after all, when it was going on . . . maybe the old guy himself, though that seemed the least likely given his condition when Chris departed.

Hamm and the other guy shook hands at the apartment door and started to automatically come in, and Chris held firm, not getting out of the way but suggesting they go down to the pool. Ken wasn't home, he was at work at the library, but still, don't let the cops in your house if you don't have to, even if they're selling Christmas cookies to raise money for kids in hospitals.

You could see Hamm wasn't thrilled with that, but they sat at one of the patio tables. It was mid-day, there was a gal in the water swimming some easy laps, and Chris knew her a little bit by now, she was a flight attendant for Southwest, no spring chicken, probably close to his age, but she was fit and the two cops followed her up and down the pool for a minute.

Hamm lowered his voice and said, "Reason we're here, a gentleman passed, up north, and we were given your name."

Leaving it alone right there, watching Chris carefully for a reaction.

Of course, the terrifying part, there were *two* men that passed recently up north. You had Sullivan, and you had McCall. Who his friends called May on Facebook.

Chris was thinking, hold on though, you had a Modesto detective contacting him . . . but is that how it could *work*? Someone saw him in Modesto, picked up his license plate . . . and then he got connected back to Chico? or Sebastopol? . . . Or God help him, Chip, right down the road?

Even in this extremely uncomfortable situation, being essentially cross-examined by two guys right in your face . . . Chris had enough of a handle on common sense to decide those were too big a stretch.

He said, "Sorry, *what* gentleman?"

"An older man," Hamm said. "Horace Williard. He died on Monday."

"What was that, the 13th?" Chris said, trying to stall for a second and get his timeline straight.

"Correct," Hamm said, looking at him closely again.

A couple things now . . . First, a relief to have it apparently confirmed that this had nothing to do with Sullivan or McCall, or Chip . . . Second, a bit of a shock though that Mel all of a sudden died . . . Third, he'd clarified the timeline in his head, and luckily he'd be in the clear, even if someone did take note of him parked at Mel's.

It would have been Sunday, November 5th, that Floyd got into it with Ned at the *Crow's Nest*, so it was a couple days later when he and Ken drove Allison and Monica home . . . meaning, the running around asking questions about Mel and checking the yearbooks, that was Thursday . . . So, Chris heading out to Modesto, leaving Ken at Gloria's even though the kid wanted to come with him, that'd be Friday the 10th.

And since he and Ken returned to MB on Saturday, the 11th, he'd be 100 percent in the clear . . . wouldn't he?

Separately, not something you were going to discuss with anyone . . . But it was sure ironic that the stuff he *did* do wasn't necessarily on anyone's radar--although there'd been ominous scares here and there--but the one where he *didn't* do anything, you got these two hard-nosed dicks sitting here at the moment, asking you to tell them about it.

Chris said to Hamm, "I'm not familiar with that name."

Hamm stayed quiet for a moment. "Well that's interesting," he said, "Since the information we got . . .," flipping open a notebook, "you were located speaking to the gentleman--the one and only--at . . . it looks like 319 Marigold Street . . . Doesn't ring a bell at all?"

“It really doesn’t,” Chris said.

“I see,” Hamm said, giving it a fake smile. “So is there anything else you can help us with--and you can take your time, dig deep into that memory bank, we got no rush--as far as what happened to this particular Mr. Williard?”

“I wish I could,” Chris said, “but I got nothing.”

The uniform guy opened his mouth for the first time. He said, “Don’t fuck with us Bud. You *were* in the area.”

Chris figured this was *good cop, bad cop* now, one guy friendlier than the other on purpose. He said, “I *was* in San Francisco last week. But I came back on Saturday.”

Figuring that alone, if they checked it out--and he had plenty of people down here who could confirm it--should get him off the hook, at least the part about being in Modesto Monday.

But Hamm said, “Back from doing what?”

Which was starting to get more than a little disconcerting.

“Well I’m trying to move *here*, completely,” Chris said, “but I’m from *there* . . . so . . .”

“So you got one foot both places still?” Hamm said.

“Exactly right, unfortunately,” Chris said.

Hamm gave him the penetrating long look again. Chris figured it was something he probably practiced in the mirror and pulled out regularly . . . except he needed this like a hole in the head.

Hamm said, “Well, we’ll ask you to stay put, if you could, for a little while . . . Since you say you go back and forth a lot.” Winking at Chris.

“Just until we can clear this up,” the uniform said . . . with the sincerity of an undertaker.

“Once we check back with Detective Polski up north,” Hamm said, “we’ll have some follow-up for you, no doubt.”

“I understand,” Chris said, “and I’ll be right here if you need me.”

“Good to hear,” Hamm said, and the two cops got up and left, no handshakes on the way out.

## Chapter Two

So Chris let the conversation settle for a few minutes, watching his flight attendant friend get out of the pool and returning her little wave, though hopefully she wasn't about to come over and chit-chat, and luckily she didn't and got on with her day.

But Whoa the heck Nellie . . . now what?

He didn't feel like tequila but he needed something for sure, so he went upstairs and took inventory and a scotch and soda sounded decent, except there was no soda so went with it straight.

The guy *died*? Were they jerking him around? And what would be the point of that?

Of course the real irony here--with the scotch kicking in a tad--if that guy *was* indeed the Zodiac, the cops should be giving him a *parade* for figuring it out.

48 years of trying to solve it, and he and Ken show up and apply some old-fashioned resourcefulness . . . but now *he's* the bad guy?

That's the way things worked, Chris was convinced, and he'd seen the dynamic repeat itself plenty, across all manner of situations: They (whoever *they* were) often miss the single main thing. It was a fact.

And of course backtracking, you could apply that conclusion multiple times to the actual Zodiac *case*.

First of all, the more Chris thought about it, how could they give lip service and not much more to a guy like Dirk, who tells them he *knew* who the frig the guy *was*?

Another example, which Chris picked up from one of those Zodiac web forums--Right at the murder scene a teenage witness is talking to the first cop who arrives. The kid is pointing up the hill, toward Jackson Street, at the Zodiac

hustling away, *right then and there*. But the cop is making sure to get the kid's name and information written down in his notebook, and doesn't look up until it's too late.

Anyhow . . . back to the *here and now* . . . Chris was slowly but surely getting a sick feeling that this wasn't going to end well.

The thought . . . of heading down to the Strand, taking your walk, making small talk with people, stopping for a beer and a slice of pizza somewhere . . . the normal routine . . .

Then Ken coming home . . . having a few laughs . . . asking what *else* is going on . . . la-di-da . . .

*No.*

These guys were coming back, weren't they, just like they said, and it didn't add up--yet--but soon enough he'd be in the system, wouldn't he, and one level of scrutiny would lead to another . . .

*And life as he knew it would be over.*

Ho-ly Toledo . . . was he dreaming all this?

He finished his scotch. What he'd resorted to in the past, situations like this--and there'd never been one quite like *this*--was get in bed, take a nap, more than that actually, get into a deep sleep, and put the world on hold.

It took a while, plenty of tossing and turning, and he found a YouTube video of a guy hiking the rim of the Grand Canyon and talking as he walked, and Christian turned it down soft and that finally did the trick.

He must have been out two, three hours he realized, until Ken barged in and woke him up. Not barged into the bedroom, but was banging around the apartment, and he heard a female's voice and got dressed and went out there, and what do you know, it was Stacey.

Chris said hi and how's everything and Stacey was a little embarrassed since they hadn't really spoken since the incident where Chris angled the guy over the railing into the pool.

"Ken's giving me a tennis lesson tonight," she said, "which someone might think is kind of weird, since we never did that when we were dating."

Ken was half-listening, changing into his shorts and tennis shoes, plenty of energy after a full day at the library, which Chris could only imagine was extreme drudgery, and wouldn't it beat you down at least a *little*?

Stacey was a sweet kid, but Chris was afraid there was trouble there, that bad decisions don't just go away, you keep on making them, and if he was getting close to her again Ken was walking into another hornet's nest.

Which was tough to watch unfold . . . but the kid was an adult, it was none of his dang business, and you'd just keep your fingers crossed and hope he's happy.

"Boss, do you want to join us?" Ken said.

"Actually not tonight," Chris said. "I appreciate it . . . I've got something I'm trying to work out . . . and I don't *mean* it this way, that I don't enjoy having you around, but this'll be good . . . I'll have time to think."

"Uh-oh," Ken said.

"No, really," Chris said. "I shouldn't have opened my stupid mouth. Now you're gonna make a mountain out of a molehill, I know you."

"Well now you put a *big* damper on things," Ken said.

"Can we help out?" Stacey said. "Maybe you can bounce it off of us, and we can chime in with some constructive feedback." She was looking as earnest and concerned as Ken was.

"You have a good heart, Sweetie, and I appreciate it," Chris said, and it's true, he *did* think that, even back then. "But things end up on our plates, you know what I'm talking about, and we have to handle them ourself . . . No big deal, really."

Ken said, "What's making me nervous, you're way too long winded for something being *no big deal*."

"At any rate," Chris said, "have fun hitting balls, and if you feel like, when you're done, we can go get ice cream or something."

"Yeah, right," Ken said, and he and Stacey left, and it was obvious everything wasn't okay with Ken now.



If you took a taxi to the Greyhound Station, Chris was wondering, could that show up?

Meaning, would there be a master record of cabs and Ubers who might have called on a resident on McLellan Lane in Manhattan Beach, specifically the *Cheater Five* apartments, Apt 8-C--and coincidentally on the exact day the police happened to stop by?

Chris was afraid there *would* be some of that if someone was determined to dig . . .

Meaning . . . what would they *have*, really though? Some doofus they've got their eye on gets on a Greyhound bus. So what? Which could mean he went anywhere in the country, wouldn't it? . . . Unless of course they pass the doofus's picture around the Greyhound depot and some friendly clerk remembers *oh yeah, that guy*, and he bought a one-way to Las Vegas and paid cash.

Which is where Chris thought he'd go, massaging it during his big nap just now--Vegas, since you could likely get pretty lost there.

So forget that, calling a cab. You could try a city bus, but that sounded pretty complicated, LA not set up great with a bus system and probably two or three transfers and a lot of time and maybe a bad neighborhood or two before you arrived at 7th Street, downtown. Even then . . . could someone *place* you waiting for that first bus, on Sepulveda Boulevard, if they got asked?

This was getting ridiculous and Chris was pretty sure he was over-the-top paranoid, about the whole deal *period* . . . and things calmed down for a minute . . . until he remembered again the cops, specifically, telling him don't go anywhere.

It was kind of funny he was thinking about jumping on a Greyhound, since that was one of the first thoughts that popped into his head when Floyd decked Mancuso and Ned wasn't moving yet--that *Floyd* needed to do that.

Chris hadn't been on a Greyhound or Trailways, or whatever other ones still might or might not be around, in years.

It seemed in the old days, and especially in the movies, people would use them to go underground.

The concept seemed solid, still, compared to any other way he could think of to disappear, though admittedly his brain wasn't working that comprehensively because it was currently in simplified panic mode.

But you could pay cash, not have to fork over an ID or go through security like an airport, find a seat in back, pull up your coat and pull down your hat, and hopefully block out the whole rest of the experience and sleep your way there.

Only wait a second . . . *would* you get away with no ID? Could all that have changed since 9/11?

Chris started thinking, Holy Smokes, law-abiding American citizens can't do *anything* anymore, can they?

It did seem unlikely, given the clientele that rode Greyhounds, since they'd lose a good chunk of their business if they starting requiring identification . . . but you never know.

What brought Chris back to earth, relaxed him a little, was he remembered now that *he* had a *fake* ID, which he'd never used.

Booker, from the Booker Lounge had discreetly suggested it to him one afternoon when they were shooting the breeze, Chris having posed the question, could bullets be traced?

Booker told Chris he had no idea where he was going with the line of questioning, and didn't *want* to know, but that an ID never hurt and he could provide a recommendation, and Chris couldn't think of a practical use for one, but it sort of made sense anyway and he took care of it.

So . . . unless they photo xeroxed the sucker on you at the Greyhound counter, thereby retaining your face along with your fake name and address . . . you should be good.

And if not . . . then Criminy, what was the alternative, stand by like a good soldier and stick out your hands to be cuffed?

You had to do *something*, is what was becoming clear these couple hours.

And Chris couldn't help think of Chandler's take on it, that first time he'd brought up the subject, what were the best choices for law enforcement evasion in today's climate.

Chandler claimed his theory was you hang out-of-state long enough, they tend to forget about you.

Of course Chandler was full of plenty of hot air, and probably threw in a couple curveballs on purpose, because that's how he got his kicks--but you couldn't argue with the logic.

Meanwhile, Chris thought of it another way. Just go somewhere *else* and call a cab--or if you're that paranoid that you think they can track the phone call now too, hail one.

Which admittedly wasn't all that easy in LA, but if you were in an active place, such as downtown MB, you just jump in one that someone gets out of.

That'd be a good idea anyway, he was thinking, because he could clean out his cash machine in town, or at least however much they let you withdraw in one pop--*and* get a fancy Starbucks to go, *why not* . . . since you might as well at least live it up on the way to the bus station since you probably wouldn't be coming back.

That was the other thing, money. You didn't want to be using your ATM or credit cards at all, so you needed all the cash you had. There was the emergency stash in the trunk of the Camry, about a grand, and another two or so in a white envelope rubberbanded in the back of the sock drawer.

Clothes, you didn't need much, and Chris stuffed a shoulder bag full, and was trying to figure out how to handle the computer, the laptop, when Ken came back.

"No Stacey?" Chris said. "And that seemed kind of quick."

"Nah, I took her home," Ken said. "The vibe wasn't there tonight, if you want to know the truth."

"Now why's that, I wonder," Chris said.

"Boss, please," Ken said. "What do we got?"

"Okay what we *got*," Chris said, zipping up his jacket, "is I have to go out of town for a while. Quietly." Nodding to Ken, waiting for it to register, at least the concept.

“I was afraid of something like this,” Ken said, and unfortunately the kid sounded a little choked up, which was going to be hard to take.

Chris said, “Just one of those things. Shouldn’t be a big deal.”

That was something else now too. Ken had expected to join him that morning, heading out to Modesto from Gloria’s. Chris had laid down the law, that it wasn’t going to happen. He didn’t know how he might react if he did really meet Mel, and he wasn’t going to let Ken be a part of it, in case he lost control.

Now he felt like saying, see, I’m not such a dumb old guy after all, I had my reasons.

But it was all irrelevant, no point dwelling on it and making the kid feel worse . . . especially since the thing had spun out of control and you had significantly more major shit to worry about.

“So just like that?” Ken said. “You’re off? I mean you’re going back to the Bay Area or something?”

You could tell Ken was wishing that but didn’t believe it, and Chris didn’t answer, because what were you going to say . . . plus he *himself* didn’t know where he was going.

“One thing you can do for me, if it’s not too much trouble,” Chris said, “drive me into town? I got it from there.”

“Oh yeah? . . . You have *what* from there then?”

“I’m going to do a couple errands, and then jump in a taxicab.”

“At . . .” Ken was checking the time, “almost 9? You can’t wait until the morning? You’ll have daylight, for one . . . plus you might re-think it overnight, come up with a different plan.”

“I appreciate the thought,” Chris said. “Can we go?”

Ken wasn’t going to argue anymore. It was a good quality he had. He’d make his case, but he wouldn’t whine.

“Fine Boss, give me a second,” he said.

“What about my computer?” Chris said. “What do you think?”

“Oh . . . You’re leaving a lot out, in fact pretty much *all* of it. I think I’m following that part though . . . you don’t want it laying around?”

“Yeah. Not here, and I don’t know about bringing it . . . You think they can find people by pinging their laptop, or something? These days? I’m not expecting it to come to that, but just in case.”

“For your piece of mind,” Ken said.

“I don’t need the thing anyway, I just wasn’t crazy about someone else maybe getting into it.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Ken said. “What about your phone?”

“A good question there as well . . . I’m not sure.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of that too, if you want . . . Except how will I reach you?”

Chris tried to fight it off, but this was the kind of behavior that broke your heart. The kid legitimately afraid when he would see him again, and now losing your lifeline on top of it.

Chris said, “That’s very nice of you, both deals. You sure?”

“100 percent.”

“That’s a load off my mind then . . . On your question, not a problem, I’ll be in touch.”

Chris was thinking pick up one of those Go Phones from 7-11 where you don’t have to register anything and you pre-pay for credits, or however they worked it.”

“If I get a cheap phone, a new one,” Chris said, “again, I mean I’m way over-worrying here, taking it to the next level--but can they find me with something like that?”

This concept, Chris telling him that he wasn’t going to end communication point-blank, perked Ken up just a bit, and Ken thought about it.

“Boss, I don’t want to give you the wrong answer. My sense would be they can’t--unless maybe you call someone and they check *that* person’s phone.”

“Okay good. I’ll be careful who I call.”

“I might take it a step further though,” Ken said. “Don’t leave your phone on . . . and better yet, take the battery out except when you’re using it.”

“Jesus,” Chris said. “I thought *I* was the one who worried too much.”

“Well I’m just saying. Might as well not fool around . . . If you’re already on the run from the law.”

Chris looked at him and for a moment tried to fake big shock and outrage at that statement, but it wasn’t working, who was he kidding. He’d obviously let enough slip to the kid these past weeks, that Ken at the very least knew there was a history.

Sure, their trip up north tracking down Mel should have confirmed beyond a doubt that Chris wasn’t the *Zodiac* for God sakes, which Ken insanely wondered about that night on the Strand . . . but that it could even cross the kid’s mind meant he wondered about Chris *period*.

And Chandler had stuck the needle in as well, and who knows what suspicions Chandler might really have that he could have conveyed to Ken during their tennis sessions.

But still . . . no need to volunteer information to the kid either.

“I’m not on the run,” Chris said, “it’s not like that. This is more a . . . pre-emptive action.”

“For how long?” Ken said.

“Until whenever,” Chris said, thinking . . . I’m not going to hug the kid like that one time . . . *am* I? But it happened anyway, and Ken wasn’t going to let go anytime soon, and Chris had to gently break away . . .

That was the image he had of the kid now out here in Bingham. The puppy dog face looking up at you, remarkably unconditional for a human . . . But also tough. The kid had a backbone, and he’d proved it more than once . . . and Chris missed him bad, but he was proud of him.

## Chapter Three

The Greyhound experience wasn't quite as terrible as Chris anticipated, mainly because the snow was so beautiful in the Sierras.

They'd had a fresh two feet, one of the passengers was saying, and you could see snowplows all over the place on the side roads, and it had the feel like they'd cleared Highway 80 not that long ago.

What Chris did, at the LA depot on 7th Street, he ended up buying a one-way ticket to Chicago.

The clerk informed him that he was slightly in luck, since there was a mid-week special that would run him \$187.65 one-way.

Chris had no idea what he'd do in Chicago but if you closed your eyes and pointed at a US map, that sounded as good as anywhere else. He'd had Las Vegas in his head . . . but Jeez, if you were going to all this trouble anyway . . . why not put a little more distance on the situation?

The only problem was, that bus didn't leave until 6am--so you had to deal with it.

And by the time the morning rolled around Chris was thinking, that'd be one way to reform these petty criminals who drove you crazy--such as the guys in Chico who stole bicycles like they were candy--forget about locking them up, just make 'em spend a night in a Greyhound station.

Anyhow, they got to Reno early afternoon, and you had a two-hour layover, and Chris had a couple ideas.

First would be call Chandler. On the one hand you'd be taking a chance, in case you really *didn't* know the guy, and the first thing he was going to do after hanging up was call the police and announce you'd gone AWOL.

On the other hand, Chandler was loyal to his clients, Chris knew that much, and it was a stretch but he'd probably fit into the client category right now.

Second, why not pick up one of those throwaway phones *here . . .* that way you get a Reno number, which who knows, might give you one more layer of separation when you use the thing in Chicago.

There was a third idea too--namely eat, since he'd had to deal with vending machines overnight, which was pretty darn torturous.

Right on Virginia Street, not the fancy casinos but one of the last mom-and-pop ones still standing, wedged between *Fitzgerald's* and *The Nugget*, they had a steak-and-eggs special all day for \$2.99, and that took care of part 3.

Chris couldn't find a 7-11 but someone told him there was a Rite-Aid about six blocks away. and it felt good to stretch your legs, and he picked up the simplest phone--no internet capability at all, and Chris wondered, could that also help you in not getting found, though he doubted it--and he added some pre-paid minutes and that was it.

Though it was a little bit of a pain to activate the thing--there's always a catch, and you never speak to a live person anymore--but he got it handled, and walked back to the vicinity of the bus station and with about twenty minutes to spare he tried Chandler.

And of course the guy didn't answer.

Before he called him Chris had gone into his settings and hit 'Hide Number' from people's Caller ID's, and hopefully he did it right, meaning there'd be no return call from Chandler.

Chris hadn't thought about it, but the guy was probably on the tennis court, the timing would fit.

So he waited 5 minutes, gave it another try, and Chandler picked up.

"You know you got me all screwed up, don't you?" Chandler said.

"Huh?" Chris said.



“I got *no* one right now, I’m reduced to bringing out the ball machine. *You’re* ducking me, and Kenny’s working, and then he’s got that girlfriend again . . . This is fucked.”

“Listen,” Chris said, “a couple law enforcement guys stopped by . . . and I guess I got kind of spooked. I’m out of town right now.”

You could feel the wheels turning and Chandler switching to his professional side, and the son of a bitch was sharp, you had to give him that.

“Don’t tell me where you are,” Chandler said. “Who were the law enforcement people?”

“LAPD.”

“What did they want?”

“They said they got a call from up north. Which is true, a Modesto detective called me first, or at least *claiming* to be one.”

“What’s your connection to Modesto?”

This was the crossroads that Chris knew was coming. He figured at this point you needed to proceed as though Chandler was on your side.

It he wasn’t . . . well, that could sure gum up the works . . . but the fact was Chris really had no one else.

“I found that Zodiac guy, we were talking about. Ken and I did.”

There was a brief pause on Chandler’s end. “Kenny was with you?” he said.

“No,” Chris said, “not in Modesto . . . And when I say we *found* him, nothing’s for sure.”

“What are they alleging?”

“They didn’t spell it out, but they claim the guy died, and someone saw me there.”

“Did you kill him?”

“*No*, I didn’t *kill* him, Jesus . . . Part of me wanted to, I’ll admit . . . When I left he was a little shook up, that was about it . . . They got him dying three days later, with me back in Manhattan Beach.”

“Could you have killed him, not knowing it?”

“I’m really not seeing it . . . you mean, the three days part could be when they *found* him, not when he officially *expired*?”

“Hard to know. And they could be feeding you a line.”

“I was wondering that, yeah.”

“If you didn’t kill anyone, why are you on the run?”

That was a fair question.

“Because they told me to stay put,” Chris said. “Does that make sense?”

“So you panicked,” Chandler said.

“I can’t argue with you, there . . . Part of what else I screwed up, not sure why, I told them I didn’t know that guy, and was never in Modesto.”

Chandler took a moment. “We can handle that part, I believe . . . What’s inherently problematic, is the primary issue.”

“That a guy may have died and I may have been there,” Chris said.

“Are you reachable?” Chandler said.

“No. I’ll call you . . . if that’s okay.”

“You don’t want to return in the meantime though? Since they told you to stick around? . . . That might be my advice. Depending.”

“I really don’t,” Chris said.

“Give me a couple of days,” Chandler said.

“Hey listen . . . I really appreciate it.”

“Yeah well, you hang in there,” Chandler said, and he was off.

Chris got back on the bus and tried to digest the conversation.

Nothing to do with the *big* picture, but he was impressed with Chandler, it was clear he was a real pro.

For example, he didn’t judge Chris or second-guess him. It would have been natural to ask *why the heck did you tell them you were never in Modesto*, when they’d already *told* you right to your *face* that someone placed you there--but Chandler didn’t bring that up, because it was done, and you worked with the hand you were dealt.

That *was* dumb on my part though, Chris was thinking, let’s face it. What was I *thinking*?

You had an excellent built-in reason for being in Modesto and talking to the guy, which would be easily substantiated by Gloria and Dirk, that you were dusting off your old newspaper reporter's hat and following your nose on the Zodiac.

Perfectly logical, and pretty dang airtight. *Yes I was in Modesto on Friday, and yes I met Horace Williard and I questioned him about the Zodiac murders after finding a lead in a high school yearbook.*

What would have been the problem with *that*?

Chris figured this is what happens when you do *other* things you don't want the police to know about. *This is the price you pay . . . You're afraid period, so even when you didn't do anything wrong you don't think straight, everything becomes a blur, and you give unbelievably bad answers to simple questions . . . and now you're on your way to Chicago.*

Back to Chandler for a moment, there was also the part of the conversation where Chris said Ken helped him find the Zodiac.

Most people would at least, out of curiosity, ask *something* about that--since it's only one of the most notorious unsolved killing sprees in the last half-century, plus Chandler had already told him he followed the case.

But Chandler's only question here was *Did you bring Ken with you to Modesto?* . . . obviously to establish, yes or no, if Ken could be tied into it and would need legal counsel.

Chris thought of a radio talk show host he used to enjoy, one of those female psychologists, not Dr. Laura but another one, who solved people's problems on the air.

Some of the calls were pretty spicy, and you wondered what was going on in the side-story, and the host would always ask the same questions *you* had, even though they often had nothing to do with the person's issue.

It was like the psychologist got caught up in the circus and became a nosy doofus just like everyone else, and Chris was glad she asked the questions because it made the show more interesting, but it seemed unprofessional . . . the opposite of Chandler.

The Bingham part happened because someone got sick, which wasn't surprising.

Unfortunately you could have picked four of five of the passengers, at least, probably on *any* Greyhound bus, and conclude they didn't look too good.

But halfway across Nevada, dark out now, around 9, a good 6 hours after leaving Reno, there's some commotion up front, and after a minute the driver pulls onto the shoulder, and people start helping this one woman.

She rallies apparently though, and the bus starts up again, and at the next stop, Winnemucca, an employee gets on and speaks to her, and the passenger stays on, everything better, and they gave her something pink that looked like pepto bismol, and an hour later Chris is just about asleep but then you hear the driver on the CB radio telling someone they have a medical emergency.

Chris figured at that point they'd pull over and wait, but things worked differently out here in the middle of nowhere apparently, and the guy swung into the left lane and drove a lot faster, and when they pulled into Bingham, about 45 minutes up the road, there was an ambulance standing by and an announcement that there'd be a delay and everyone was welcome to get off.

Long story short, Chris did get off, walked around maybe a three-block radius, and when he got back to the little depot the bus was gone.

Fortunately he had his shoulder bag with him.

The only reason for that, and he took it off the bus with him in Reno too, was he had some of his cash in it.

How do you handle it from here?

He considered talking to the girl at the counter, explaining what happened. He was pretty sure they'd take care of him--work it out so he's on the next bus to Chicago, likely the same time tomorrow, and there was a chance they'd put you up in a motel too, if they were in a good mood and you convinced them it was a misunderstanding.

But then you'd be initiating unnecessary contact, wouldn't you, and there'd probably be something to sign, and even if you faked all that it wasn't the smart move.

So . . . Chris liked Super 8's and there was a *Red's Recovery Cab Service* taxi idling outside the bus depot.

Chris got in and asked the driver about the name, and the guy said there used to be a *Red's Recovery Room* in town and the name caught on . . . and Chris thinking this being Nevada, was that a bar or a brothel, and he asked the driver.

The guy said it was both, and Chris said that made sense, and no doubt it filled a need.

The driver nodded his head, that he had *that* right, and said it's been gone for four or five years now, and there have been some pretenders but nothing that has adequately replaced it.

The guy was friendly and candid, and Chris was liking the feel of the town as they headed out to the Super 8, and he got squared away in a nice renovated room and figured might as well at least give it until tomorrow to decide what to do.

That was two weeks ago . . . and here you were now, in the main lounge of *The Palermo*, enjoying the third and final set winding down from *Luella and the Capris*.

Any yeah, you really could pick out the Karen Carpenter in Terri's voice.

The fact was, Chris never cared too much for The Carpenters except for their first two hits, 'Close to You' and 'We've Only Just Begun'. Most of the others were a little shmaltzy and over-produced, and you've had plenty of music critics taking their shot at The Carpenters, but the fact was her voice was magical.

*Luella and the Capris* finished it off with a country song Chris didn't recognize but the audience did apparently, and they gave her a nice ovation by casino lounge standards, and Terri thanked everyone and the lights went down and another act started shuffling equipment around and setting up for the probably late-late show of the night.

A few minutes later Terri was back in the bar area, same table, same guy with her, the drummer, same routine, both fooling with their phones. The only difference was Terri had changed into jeans and a sweatshirt.

She saw Chris coming and held up her hand like *just give me a second* and wrapped up whatever texting business was so urgent, and said, “You sat through it. My impression was you wouldn’t. So did I maintain my standard?”

“Honestly?” Chris said. “I kept waiting for you to drop down a notch, but you never did.”

“Well it’s a gig,” she said, a playful shrug of the shoulders, which Chris interpreted that, no, it wasn’t New York City, or even the Vegas strip, but one did one’s best.

“Why’d you think I wouldn’t stick it out though?” Chris said. “The third set.”

“Because almost no one stays put for the whole show, start to finish. Unless they’re real drunk and can’t move.”

“That’s a fair point I guess, given the other distractions in here . . . what about that backstory though?”

“What *about* it?”

“Well, I was asking you a question . . . and now I realize it was a little sensitive, so that’s my fault.”

“No, I’m fooling with you,” she said. “There’s breaks in this business . . . and there’s luck, there’s timing, there’s who you sleep with.” Chris thinking Jeez, this may be a little *too* much information now.

“In my particular case,” Terri continued, “I did have a recording deal once. Capitol Records, the old round tower building you still see from the freeway passing through Hollywood . . . Re-hab got in the way.”

Chris wasn’t surprised to hear any of it, including the last part. Not that anything about her screamed she was an addict, but it not adding up that you have all this talent and you’re playing towns most people haven’t heard of.

“Well the good thing about that, then,” he said, “and this might come out wrong . . . but it justifies my judgment. I mean I must have a pretty dang good ear after all.”

Terri shook her head and said, “You’re starting to emerge as a piece of work. What’s *your* backstory?”

Chris wasn't quite ready for this, and realized he should have had a standard answer prepared . . . but honestly in the couple weeks he'd been holed up here no one had asked him that.

And he'd struck up conversations with a lot of people, which was his style, both locals and folks passing through.

The casino Starbucks alone kept you busy in the mornings, people caffeinated-up and talking like machines, and Chris enjoyed the ambience and the window on the world, the Starbucks perfectly situated in the hotel lobby at the mouth of the casino.

But no one asked him about himself, other than *how's your day going?* and *having any luck at the tables?* kind of stuff.

It was probably a little melo-dramatic . . . but people maybe *did* come to these casino towns to start fresh, or in the case of visitors, put the real world on the back burner for a day or two.

Come to think of it, *he* was mostly doing the same thing, not prying into people's backstories either.

But he'd opened the door with Terri, so he said, "I don't *have* any good backstory. I'm trying to re-invent myself."

"From what?" Terri said. Man this gal was getting pushy.

"Well first thing, I guess," Chris said, "from living in New Jersey."

"What part?" the drummer-guy said, the first time he'd opened his mouth, Chris assuming he hadn't been listening to any of it.

"Teaneck . . . are you from back there too?"

"Down the shore, yeah . . . not *from* there, but spent a lot of years . . . You remember when AC first opened?"

The guy was referring to Atlantic City, which Chris had only been to once, but it was best to play along so Chris nodded yeah.

"Those days," the guy said, "the music business, you had the Philly, New York, AC triangle . . . All dried up pretty much."

"You wouldn't know it by looking at him," Terri said, "but Carl played with some big names. Michael Jackson, for one."

“Ho-ly Toledo,” Chris said.

“Not *with* him,” Carl the drummer said. “Everything was overdubbed. I never met the man.”

“That was *Bad* though, right? The album?” Terri said.

Carl shook his head. “*After* that. *Dangerous*. Two tracks. That’s when drum machines were taking over, but they wanted studio guys in addition.”

Chris said, “Jeez, I’m in rarified company here, I’m not kidding.”

“What’d you do in Teaneck?” Terri said.

“Okay that’s enough about me,” Chris said.

“I get where he’s coming from,” Carl said.

“Well are you passing through then, you live here, what?” Terri said.

“I’m running,” Chris said.

“Now that’s a pretty unsatisfying answer,” Terri said. “Not much depth to it at all.”

“It’s a *good* answer,” Carl said. “Let’s play some cards.”



## Chapter Four

When Chris saw Terri and Carl in action at the blackjack tables, more of the backstory fell into place.

He hoped he was wrong, but it sure looked like a couple of degenerate gamblers sitting there.

There were four players at the table, plus the dealer, which meant three open seats, so Chris took one, even though he had no interest in being part of the game.

The other part of course was the drinks were flowing liberally, there was always an available cocktail waitress in range, and Terri and Carl weren't missing many rotations.

*Jeeminy Christmas* . . . this is how it worked, didn't it, they'd gamble their whole paychecks.

Start all over the next day . . . or week, or month . . .

It was tough to watch unfold, but Chris supposed not entirely surprising, since all along it felt like there was a missing link.

I mean for crying out loud, the guy played on a Michael Jackson record . . . and Terri was likely telling it straight about a legitimate recording contract that she blew.

She hadn't offered any more detail on that but she didn't need to. Chris figured if you were an established star and it was your third or fourth record you screwed up you'd probably get away with it, but a first-timer no way, that'd be it, all the time and money wasted and everyone pissed off and your name smeared around.

Chris wondered, Terri and Carl both, if the booze and gambling developed because their careers weren't where they thought they should be? . . . Or were the problems there first, and it worked the other way?

Of course Terri saying *re-hab got in the way* of her record probably gave you the answer.

But not only were they both dropping money like fools and drinking like a couple of fish by this point, and smoking too, which you were still allowed to do in casinos--they didn't know jack shit about how to play blackjack.

Chris did know a little bit about it. He didn't particularly *enjoy* it, the novelty had worn off several years ago, but for God sake's, at least give yourself a fighting chance.

*I mean don't be hitting on 13 when the dealer has a 4 showing . . . and pretty much everything else that you're doing wrong.*

There was a book called *Beat The Dealer* that Chris ran across in the library one time, and it looked interesting and Chris took it home.

It was written by a math professor, the gist of it being when the dealer has the advantage you bet small, and when you have the advantage you bet bigger.

To figure out who has the advantage on any given hand, you keep track of the cards that have been played. It sounded more complicated than it was, and with a little practice Chris had the basics down.

But forget all that for a second, the most important thing you needed to learn was when to hit and when to stand. You just memorized a chart, which took about twenty minutes, and once you understood it, it made sense.

It killed Chris in these places to see dozens of people playing wrong, using their instinct rather than the solid math that told you whether or not to take another card. If you did that part right, and never learned to keep track of the count or any of the more complicated stuff, you at least gave yourself the best shot of any casino game.

Why wouldn't you do that?

Both Terri and Carl had bought more chips, never a good sign, and you hated to guess what they earned every night on the little lounge stage, but the whole thing looked grim.

After a while Chris couldn't take it, and he thought about saying something to them, like how about we get a cup of coffee and let me make a couple

suggestions, but he suspected they were too far gone tonight and that wouldn't be happening.

So he said goodnight and cashed in the 20 dollars of chips he'd been pushing around and went across the parking lot to his room at the Quality Inn.

\*\*\*

A week ago . . .

Chandler said to give him a few days, and Chris had given him longer before sticking the battery in the phone and calling him back.

It was crazy, the paranoia that took over when you had all day available to basically do nothing except kill time.

There was a casino outside of town, at least 5 miles, near the old gold mine, called *Jake's House*, and they had shuttle service back and forth from The Palomino to out there.

The other thing was a few locals by now had been recommending the prime rib in the coffee shop at *Jake's*, so Chris figured if he didn't reach Chandler at least he could eat.

Chandler picked up though.

"I have something, not a lot," he said.

"Believe me," Chris said, "I'll take anything."

"Williard died of a heart attack, they think," Chandler said. "They'll know more after the autopsy."

Chris tried to process it, all the ramifications. He said, "Well that's good then right? . . . Or not necessarily."

"It depends if you caused the heart attack," Chandler said.

"Wait a second . . . a heart attack on *Monday*? When the last dealings I had with the gentleman were on *Friday*?"

"You could have started a downward spiral. They have a neighbor saying they couldn't tell for sure, but it sounded like a confrontation, you and Williard."

"Fuck," Chris said.

"Hold tight," Chandler said, "let's not get ahead of ourselves."

Chris was thinking that's pretty darn easy for you to say, your biggest concern is if you have to play against the ball machine . . . but that was unfair.

"How long do autopsies take?" Chris said.

"Normal one, as short as 24 hours . . . When they're looking for more detail, the report could take 4 to 6 weeks. But every case is different."

"God . . . *damn* it."

"So keep your shirt on," Chandler said, and it was ridiculous to think of right now but Chris remembered using that expression recently himself, and was trying to place it.

"Well . . . what would an autopsy *say*? I mean that could be in my *favor*?"

"Again," Chandler said, "let's allow it to play out."

"Have they . . . been back to the apartment looking for me, or anything?"

"They have *not*, according to my source. So you're not an official fugitive yet."

Normally when Chandler threw in a comment like that he was needling him, Chris could picture once or twice when Chandler was elbowing Ken and laughing after making a joke at his expense . . . but Jeez, the guy was going to bat for you here, so you better lose the cynicism.

Chris said, "How's Ken?"

"He's fine. We've had him over for dinner a couple times, the house, my wife and I."

Chris didn't like hearing this, a little jealousy creeping in, someone else maybe picking up the mantle of mentoring the kid . . . even though it *was* for the best.

"Thank you," Chris said, meaning for helping *him*, not necessarily *Ken* . . . though yes, that too.

"You don't have to thank me," Chandler said, and Chris took the battery out of the phone and went into the 24-hour coffee shop at *Jake's House*, and it was true, they weren't exaggerating about the prime rib . . .

Now . . .

He was lying on the bed in the Quality Inn, flipping channels with nothing doing it for him . . . tonight had brought him down a little, starting with the nice vibe in the lounge and connecting with Terri and Carl, but then the air out of the balloon when he saw they were struggling.

Against his better judgment he put the battery in the phone and dialed Gloria. Nothing he needed to talk about with her, and he wasn't going to open up and confide his situation or anything . . . but he just wanted to get a dose of that optimism she always put out there.

But when it started to ring, Chris hung up.

It *had* been another week though since the second call to Chandler, and should he try *him*? Take the shuttle back over to the other casino?

Who he really wanted to talk to was Ken, but you weren't going to involve the kid in any potentially traceable communication, no way.

The other person he thought of was Ray. Always ironic of course, since Ray was number one on his hit list and had occupied that position since that final spring semester of junior high school.

Ray was a *wiseguy*, put on the act, but was a pussycat underneath it all, and Chris missed him right now.

Ray hated the phone though, didn't like answering it, didn't like talking on it . . . he was a *fan of personal contact*, the way he put it more than once.

Plus it was getting late, and it didn't make sense . . . so you needed to suck it up, and admit you were on your own.

Or . . . you could go back over to the casino.

Why not?

Chris surveyed the blackjack area and didn't see Terri or Carl. He took a peek in the lounge, they weren't there either, and the late act was going on, three guys in matching button-down shirts doing a Frankie Valli song at the moment.

He went back to the blackjack table they'd been playing at and asked the dealer if his friends were still around, and she said she didn't believe so, and he asked if it went okay for them and she reacted kind of stiff, and Chris knew you

didn't ask that kind of question but he did anyway and the dealer didn't say anything but gave a little shake of her head.

So Chris sat down again, cashed in another \$20 for chips and asked how everyone was doing, and the others were remarkably friendly and asked how *he* was doing, and he realized three of them were there when Terri and Carl were.

Plus you had the same dealer, Renee, a pleasant face, and well coiffed, slightly dark, probably some native American in her, a couple of silver rings with turquoise. And she handled the cards like an artist.

The dealers in these places normally had nametags and they'd sometimes include a location, which Chris figured represented their original hometown, otherwise they'd all say Bingham and that would be stupid.

Renee's said Rapid City, so after a couple of hands Chris asked her about it.

"Until I was 12," she said. "Then I could rattle off 6 or 7 more places."

"You mean your whole life after that?" Chris said. "You're not saying 6 or 7 more just *growing up*, right?"

"I am," she said. "I graduated high school in Perkinsville, Pennsylvania. I couldn't tell you much about it though, the school or the town."

Chris was tempted to ask why all those moves, that kind of story always interested him, what was behind something like that, but he figured he better leave it alone unless she volunteered something.

The guy to the left of Chris, who'd introduced himself as Stan, said, "I didn't move around diddly-squat growing up . . . Same house, same neighbors all the way through. That's why I can't sit still now."

This was interesting, and the table was cozy enough, and Chris wasn't trying to count cards but was playing that basic strategy he'd memorized, which let you pretty much break even.

Meaning you could theoretically push your 20 or 30 bucks around for a couple hours and it'd be unusual to have a big win or big loss . . . and he supposed it wasn't the worst way to go.

He'd never thought of it that way, since when he'd read the book and learned the system it had been about trying to make money. The social part had been irrelevant.

For a while when he was living in Marin there was a Saturday night game that rotated houses, and Chris never told anyone he was counting cards but no one suspected anything, they just thought he was having a good run of luck, and you had a few bad nights mixed in but the system worked overall and he generally cleaned up. The game was supposed to be friendly but Chris was strictly in it for the money--otherwise why waste a Saturday night.

But this wasn't bad. Stan was a nice guy, and to the right you had Adela and Mike. They all knew what they were doing, it looked like, and they were betting sensibly and having a good time.

Chris asked Renee, "They got any jobs open? This isn't the worst atmosphere, actually."

Renee smiled and told him he needed to go to dealer school first, and then he'd know if he could cut the mustard.

Mike pitched in that his brother was a craps dealer in Vegas but was looking at a new casino in California.

"Where's that?" Adela said. "They *have* them there?"

"Designated areas," Mike said. "Indian casinos, which started out small, but now my brother says they're getting a lot bigger, and they pay well."

Chris knew what the guy might be talking about, the one in Rohnert Park of all places, a monstrosity rising up out of what used to be the hayfields behind Home Depot.

"Honey, what about that?" Stan said to Renee. "You ever consider looking for greener pastures? . . . Or all that moving around when you were a kid burned you out."

Renee said she was set here for now . . . not a lot of conviction behind it.

Adela said, "Of course when you factor it all together, you're probably making more, fair enough, but your cost of living's so much higher."

That was true, you're not kidding, Chris was thinking. He'd picked up one of those glossy real estate guides in the motel lobby, and you could rent a simple but perfectly fine house in town for \$850, \$900 a month.

"We can't complain, I guess," Mike said.

"It's more fun to though," Stan said.

This was kind of the tip-off that they were all local. Chris supposed there was an element of that, regular townspeople unwinding at night playing cards. How could there not be?

But Stan, Mike and Adela had it under control. First of all, which Chris hadn't even noticed for a while, this was a one-dollar table, increasingly rare and probably extinct at this point in Reno and Vegas.

When you took a look around *The Palermo*, there was only one other table like that, the rest being \$2 and \$5 and even \$25. These were the minimum bets you could make per hand, though unfortunately Carl and Terri had been betting a lot bigger than a dollar a hand even though they didn't have to.

By this point Chris had introduced himself as Jeff, and that was the name he used around town, though it didn't come up very often, no one seemed to care what your name was, which was kind of refreshing. He'd checked in at Quality Inn under Jeff Masters because he had to give them *some* name, and of course he paid cash.

It was interesting listening to the give and take between the three of them, and you picked up more of the flavor of Bingham and what it would really be like to live here.

Chris decided it wouldn't be the worst thing. People were dang friendly. You didn't encounter the slick, caginess that people could drop on you in the Bay Area and southern California.

Maybe the ambition wasn't as strong across the board, people trying to move up in the world . . . but who was he to judge that, since what was *he* doing to move up?

Renee not reacting though at the new casino paying a high wage, which they must be if Mike's brother was looking into it . . . Chris supposed you could



understand it, not easy to think about making a change, and she's probably squared away here.

But that wasn't the remnants of a black eye on her, was it?

Chris was pretty sure it wasn't, it may have been some makeup smeared or the light, and they definitely lit these places funny, millions of dollars of research behind it apparently, trying to artificially trick the customer's brain into thinking it was the happiest time of day to be opening up your wallet and having a blast.

They came to the end of the shoe though, the cards needing to be shuffled. Most casinos used 6 decks these days, and when a certain amount of the shoe was played, usually around 4 1/2 decks, there'd be a marker that would tell the dealer it was time to shuffle the whole works and start a fresh shoe.

A lot of the casinos had electronic shufflers, since they were quicker, and time was money, but *The Palermo* did it the old fashioned way, and Renee went to work, separating the cards into individual packets and shuffling the packets and stacking them back in the shoe, and Chris again admired her technique and grace.

He said, "I'm not trying to butter you up, so you spin me a couple 21's-- though that'd be fine--but you remind me of a concert violinist going to work."

"Or a harpist," Adela said. "I've told her the same thing, it's mesmerizing."

"Thank you," Renee said.

"You mean compared to other dealers?" Chris said. "Or just the clumsy general public?"

"I'm impressed by all of them," Adela said, "and the men too, they have a different style. But Renee's our favorite, not just her dealing skills."

"She is," Mike said.

"We try to get her table," Stan said.

Renee finished loading the new shoe and a new player joined the game and forked over a hundred dollar bill for chips, and Renee stuck the hundred in a different slot than the smaller bills people laid out, and it was slightly under the table and when she reached down there Chris had a different angle on her now and he could see she did have a black eye.

It wasn't smeared make-up and it wasn't the funny light. In fact there was cakey *white* make-up on her cheeks and extending up to her eyes, likely trying to tie the whole thing together and mask the fact that someone hit her.

Halfway through that shoe Renee tapped her palms together like the dealers did when they were taking a break, and another dealer Sandra, a heavy-set blonde woman, took over.

"What do they get, like twenty minutes?" Chris asked Stan.

"Normally," Stan said, "unless they're shorthanded."

"She okay?" Chris said, to whoever might want to answer.

No one did for a minute and then Mike said, "I think she's been better."

"Is she . . . like, married and stuff?" Chris said.

Something you wouldn't normally put out there to three strangers--four including the dealer, and actually five including the new guy who'd joined the game and dropped the hundred, though he'd just lost his 3rd or 4th hand in a row and was getting up to try a different table.

But in a casino town, Chris figured why not speak your mind, and when you dug under the surface probably most of the locals *had* ended up here, one way or another, looking for that fresh start.

Meaning they'd been *through* stuff, and you probably weren't going to shock or insult anyone by running your mouth at a blackjack table.

"Not sure if she has been," Adela said. "My sense is right now she has a live-in situation . . . one that may not be the wisest."

"She *okay*, though?" Chris said, repeating the question, throwing a little more weight behind it, letting it hang there.

"I think she's been better," Mike repeated. "Just my opinion."

"She's been a *lot* better," Sandra the replacement dealer said, not adding anything, but letting it linger.

Chris didn't say any more on the subject, continued pushing out his \$1 bets, winning and losing about half just like he figured, and the others didn't bring Renee up again either, and her twenty minute break went by and she was back and the conversation turned to the new motor vehicles office they were

breaking ground on, Chris learning that there wasn't one before and you had to go to Winnemucca to deal with your car stuff and everyone was real happy about it, and even Renee said it would help out.

After a half hour he said goodnight and swung by the lounge and the three button-down guys were in the middle of a Chris Stapleton song, *also* pretty amazing, though not quite in the league of Terri where you had to scratch your head because you really *couldn't* tell the difference.

Chris got into bed and started flipping channels again, this time not needing to think about calling anyone else tonight, and glad he returned to the casino, it lifted his spirits, took his mind off his *own* situation.

Except . . . you're out here on essentially a vacation--not quite that simplistic but in the ballpark--and now you're going to have to get involved looking into something out here?

You've *got* to be kidding.

It was pretty obvious he wasn't going to fall asleep that easily now, and he tossed around for a while, the TV off, the TV back on, then the radio, a late-night talk show, and none of it worked.

So he took a shower and got dressed *again* and headed back across the parking lot for the *third* time.

Renee had out-last-ed Stan and Adela and Mike, and there were four new players at the table, a young couple and two flannel shirt-guys who had the look that they'd put in a full day doing something physical.

Renee spotted Chris watching and said, "Hey stranger, you can't stay away then."

Chris told her the truth, he couldn't sleep, and joked that maybe he'd see her again tomorrow when she felt like dealing more aces, and what time's her normal shift start?"

Throwing that in as casually as he could.

"This week I'm on 6 to 2's," she said, dang friendly for someone grinding out the job *period*, without getting hit in addition.

Chris said that sounded good and he didn't feel like going back in the lounge so he made a loop of all the table games, and he couldn't understand the appeal of roulette, and craps seemed stacked against you but you did have the spirit going around the table when the dice got hot and the players started whooping it up.

He checked his watch and it was 12:35, so he had a while to kill, and he sat in the main lobby and read a travel magazine that was laying there, and there was an article on the *Sights and Sounds of Spring Training in Scottsdale*, and they did make it look appealing, you're sitting there watching games up close and frolicking in Old Town at night, and maybe hiking up Camelback Mountain in the morning.

Mainly it got him thinking about Floyd, that he'd never followed up to make sure the guy at least got *home* after the Ned Mancuso incident, since Floyd had looked a little shaky at the wheel . . . but obviously he did or he would have heard, and either way you can't worry about *everything*.

It was after 1:30, a little more time to kill, and back in the casino Chris could see Renee's profile across the floor, dutifully dishing out cards and trying to do her little part to take the edge off people's days.

He figured it was a good idea to find the employee parking lot. Or maybe the dickhead was going to pick her up, that would even be better, you get a look at the interaction . . . *as well as* the person you're potentially going to have to visit.

It wasn't complicated, you had the three lots actually. A VIP one close to the main doors, and there were some valet guys who helped you with that.

And then the pretty enormous main parking lot for everyone else, and then past that, the north end, where you could see the lights of Interstate 80 whooshing by, the employee lot.

There was a low fence between the general lot and the employee one, with openings to walk through, and Chris was a little worried about being conspicuous out there.

He could pretend to be looking for his car, but you could only keep that up for so long, and you didn't know how long it would take Renee to get out here, maybe there was paperwork or some sign-out procedure she had to go through . . . or maybe she'd have herself a drink in the god dang lounge.

It was close to two and he was thinking should he go back in and try to follow her out, but she'd probably go from the tables into an employee area and out that way, so that probably wouldn't work.

Chris walked around to where the cars exited the three lots, thinking maybe you stand here and try to spot her driving out? That seemed like a dumb idea, you might not get a good enough look at the drivers barrelling out of there to recognize any of them, and again it felt awful conspicuous.

Chris decided the best idea was maybe catch her out here showing up for work, tomorrow, but just then a group of a half dozen employees, all wearing the same black and white, are coming out of the main building into the parking lot, and there are some words exchanged and everyone disburses toward their vehicles, and Chris spotted Renee getting into a light blue Toyota Corolla.

## Chapter Five

Chris slept late, he wasn't used to going to bed at 2:30, and it was a fitful night, his bio-rhythms screwed up, and by the time he ambled into the casino Starbucks for the first cup of coffee it was close to noon.

"Well look what the cat drug in," someone said, and it was Terri, enjoying a little joke at his expense.

"I look that bad?" Chris said. "This high desert air, you're supposed to benefit, I thought."

"A Capris show can have that effect on people," Terri said, and she laughed again.

She seemed a bit wired, probably on multiple cups of coffee by now, the way drinkers and gamblers often are to start the day.

Last night Chris thought when he'd see them again fresh, Terri and Carl, meaning now, he'd try to teach them a little blackjack strategy, so at least if you had a need to throw your paycheck around you'd have a fighting chance.

But he couldn't pinpoint it, but that wasn't going to work. These guys were going to do things their own way, even if they knew intellectually there was a better option--so you needed to stay out of the way and let them be.

Probably not that different than telling someone they're too fat. Karen Carpenter herself, sadly, everyone told her she was too *thin*, and then she gets thinner and dies.

Might as well try to jump start the conversation a different way though, so Chris said, "You guys hook up with each other on the road, or it's not like that?"

Terri nodded and said yeah, they were good friends.

"You and Carl . . . or you and the other guys too?"

"Me and Carl."

“So . . . what happened to the husband back home in Reno? Or that’s your story, you use it to keep away the riff-raff.”

“Head ‘em off at the pass, yeah,” Terri said, smiling, but sort of maniacal at the same time. “There is a real one of those though, a significant other . . . Except he’s two-timing me. I’m doing something about it.”

*Jeez Louise.*

First of all, she’s *already* doing something about it, isn’t she, if she’s making it with the drummer?

Wouldn’t that put her in the two-timing category *as well*?

But did she mean something else too?

Chris lowered his voice and said, “Don’t talk stupid, if that’s what you’re doing . . . You’re making me a little nervous here.”

“I got someone who’s gonna talk to him,” Terri said. “It’s not *just* the two-timing. There’s a whole laundry list.”

Chris didn’t know what this meant, though he could take a reasonable guess, and it sounded a little ominous.

“Okay let’s back it up here,” he said. “Is this like a lawyer, hopefully?”

“A guy from Bakersfield.”

“An old friend then? Or something?”

“No, I don’t know him.”

Chris could see Carl coming across the casino into the Starbucks, and Carl stuck up a hello finger and got in line.

“Carl know about that?” Chris said. “Those plans.”

“No . . . Are you always this nosy?”

That was a good question. On the one hand, what *was* it with the women out here . . . *another* woman now? With another rotten husband? . . . or boyfriend, live-in, same difference.

On the other . . . yeah he did stick his nose into shit, didn’t he? Looking for it. It may be subconscious, but who was he kidding?

“Look,” Chris said, “you have to take my word for it. Please don’t dabble in what I think you’re dipping your fingers into.”

“Well that’s kinda interesting,” Terri said. “What does *that* mean--*your* word for it?”

And here you were again, having to go back on defense because you opened your mouth, the bigger picture being you really did have an issue with minding your own business.

“I’ve *seen* it, is what I mean,” Chris said. “This isn’t the movies. Things don’t work out clean.”

“You’re telling *me* it’s not the movies,” she said. “In the movies things turn out happily ever after.”

He said, “You’re copping out, dancing around what I just said . . . Why not stick with Carl, and forget going back to Reno? I mean unless you have a gig or something.”

“Oh are you kidding?” she said. “That would never work.”

It seemed like Chris was getting that answer plenty, various situations, but no one ever expanded on *what* wouldn’t ever work.

One example that came to mind was Chandler’s Craigslist thing, Chris chiming in he thought Chandler would have brought Ned Mancuso to meet the scumbag who was fake-advertising his motorcycle, and Chandler’s reaction was the same as Terri’s.

Chris wondered what he was missing--it *wouldn’t* help to have Ned Mancuso there when you were shaking a guy down?

Anyhow, Carl got his coffee and sat down with them and Chris changed the subject to what do you do all day typically when you have these evening shows, and Carl said one thing, more like every *other* day, he’d go for a run, at a high school track if there was one convenient, which he said there was here, Bingham High School, and it was a nice soft man-made surface.

Terri said she liked to take walks, photograph local scenes, and go back to the room and try to capture them in watercolors.

*Jeez* . . . none of that sounded too bad, all pretty resourceful actually, and Chris felt a little guilty last night thinking of them as degenerate gamblers who drank too much . . .



Which kind of motivated Chris--he'd take his time finishing his coffee first, he wasn't *that* motivated--but to get off his rear end and do a little something more today than he had been . . . which was essentially drift around downtown, expand it into the residential neighborhood here and there, spend some time at the Northern Nevada Historical Museum they had here, which was pretty well put together, and the best thing, it was free.

One problem with the museum, especially when he came a back a second and third time, was they'd latch on to you, the volunteer docents, who seemed in their 80's at least, and in good shape mentally and with all the energy in the world to follow you around and supplement your experience.

Which shouldn't be a *problem*, you should welcome it . . . except it was tough to break away and leave when you'd had enough.

Besides that there was a movie complex with bargain matinees and and old-time bowling alley, the *Tough Guy Lanes*, with neon on the outside and giant bowling pin replicas out of the '50s, and during the daytime when he stopped in it was all leagues, people taking it seriously, and Chris enjoyed watching them go at it, and he gave it a try himself but hadn't bowled in years and his finger starting acting up where you release the ball.

There was a nice park off downtown as well, plenty of shade trees for when he assumed it got hot as hell here in the summer, and interestingly there was an old weird-shaped cement court, which looked like an oversized handball court except it was missing the other side wall.

Chris found out it was a fronton court, on account of the Basque population in Bingham, something he hadn't thought of, but yeah, there was a Basque restaurant on the other side of Highway 80 that had apparently been there forever.

So that was one question Chris asked at the museum, and the guy gave him a long-winded answer but essentially Basques began settling in northern Nevada 100 years ago as shepherders. Not as many of them in Bingham any more, but a lot in Winnemucca, the guy said, and still more, thousands of Basque-Americans, further north in Boise.

So you had those things to keep you busy . . . and of course hanging around the casino, the coffee shop counter, striking up conversations with strangers, that kept a wanted man busy enough, Chris supposed.

But he hadn't been to a library, meaning he hadn't checked a computer in two weeks, and he'd been on his phone twice, the two calls to Chandler, the one from Reno and the one from outside the prime rib place at *Jake's House*.

Today it was low 50's, a stiff breeze out of the west, but sunny and clear, and a good day to extend his territory and check a few things out.

The town was laid out logically, numbered streets east-west, named ones north-south, and you had a real downtown with a big clock and bank still in operation that looked like it went back to the Gold Rush days. There were a couple businesses boarded up but Main Street was still reasonably active, though you did have a Walmart throwing a monkey wrench in, 3 miles out of town on Highway 85.

The nice thing, it was a real town first, and then the casinos came in, not the reverse which a lot of towns were.

The library was modern enough where you could put on headphones and watch documentaries and movies, and Chris made a mental note, and there were three public computers, though when he tried to get on it asked for your library card so he tried GUEST which he remembered working one time somewhere else, and it did.

On instinct, the first thing he did was google *Christian Seely* and then *Chris Seely*.

Jeez . . . quite a few of them, starting with a guy in Australia.

So he added San Francisco and Manhattan Beach to the searches and there was still too much . . . so he tried adding the Broderick address, and the *Cheater Five McLellan Lane* one.

Nothing on the MB one, and just a generic white pages thing on the Broderick Street.

So . . . a little more caution to the wind, he entered *Chris Seeley police* and *Chris Seeley Modesto* and *Chris Seeley Horace Williard*.

Zippos. Maybe not the optimum searches, but not particularly encouraging that nothing at *all* showed up, meaning if they had something on you you didn't want them *hiding* it . . . but it would have been extremely *dis-couraging* of course if something bad *had* showed up . . . so you couldn't have it both ways.

He had the normal 95 percent confidence that no one would ever trace his library computer activity once he signed off, but he didn't quite have the guts to type in Chris Seely Jerry Smith or Chris Seely Mason McCall.

The Modesto googling seemed a little more harmless, mainly since he didn't kill anyone up there . . . right?

So he went to the online newspapers--the Press Examiner for Smith and the--Chico Record for McCall--and searched for the two dead guys that way . . . not a lot more secure, he supposed, than what he was just worried about, but the main thing, there were no new articles on either one that he could find.

That probably meant the enterprising reporter's attempt to link Smith to the indicted Miami financial guy didn't have any legs, but Chris expected that anyway . . . the positive part was *his* name wasn't currently linked to it, and he prayed it would remain that way *behind* the scenes as well.

He thought of one more angle, way out of left field, but Chris Seely Lowell High School.

And then boom . . . three results, but all of them his name in various captions as part of group photos from the 25th reunion, nothing more.

Dang, that had to be Gloria, getting that all organized and submitted, and Chris had to smile, and even if it *wasn't* her, she did a ton for the class and he had to give her credit *period* . . . though he had no interest beyond that and didn't click on any of the photos.

Before you got out of here you might as well check the *Chronicle*, first to make sure there was nothing new there involving *him*, which was unlikely if the two local papers hadn't picked anything new up there first . . . and luckily there was not, just the original *Chronicle* report from back on November 1st about civic leader Gerald Smith having been fatally assaulted.

Chris figured while he was here, let's see if the Giants made any decent off-season moves, and he went back to the main page to find the sports section link, and there was a bad article that stopped him, and he hated to but he had to read it.

The story was from yesterday, and the headline read:

**Car Thief Kills Dog on Union Street**  
*by Whitt Holmb*

and the article read:

**Thursday, November 30th, 2017**

**One man was taken into custody Wednesday night after allegedly breaking into a parked Cow Hollow vehicle and killing a dog with a crowbar.**

**The man was identified as Jeramiah Towne of Daly City.**

**Police said Towne broke the passenger window of a late model Jaguar, parked on Union near Octavia, at about 9:10 pm in an attempt to steal an iPad, and encountered the dog on the back seat and struck and killed her.**

**The Jaguar owner, who did not wish to be identified, said she is heartbroken and that the dog, a 3 year-old miniature poodle named Gem, was the most loving animal she'd ever known.**

**The woman had parked on Union to go to a convenience store, police said, and she'd been gone five minutes.**

**Gem's squeals alerted a man across the street who then called 911 and gave chase, police said.**

**Towne was apprehended four blocks away, at Van Ness and Green.**

**Charges are pending.**

This just ruined your day.

There was no way around it.

It made you so sick, you couldn't take it, but at the same time you couldn't help picturing it.

Oh my God . . .

And why did they have to throw in the poor thing's squeals?

That obviously meant it took more than one blow to finish the job . . . this was just brutal to even know about.

Chris was upset with himself now for screwing around, not going straight to the sports page . . . and really, who *cares* if the Giants made any off-season moves?

He signed off of the computer and went outside.

What made it even more vivid, this terrible story, was Chris knew the area, could picture the block. You likely had a fancy Pacific Heights woman, the Jaguar and the poodle, and he knew the type well, he'd done yard clean-up jobs for some of them as a kid . . . and some of those people could be a little highfalutin, and out of touch with the common man.

But who did *she* ever hurt? . . . And the main thing, what could poor Gem have possibly done to deserve this?

Ah man.

What crossed Chris's mind now as well, there'd been another dog incident he'd read about . . . hadn't there?

Out in the Richmond, maybe Clement Street, two drivers getting into it and one of them throwing the other's dog into traffic?

That one even jumped on and off his list for a while, he realized now, so he was a little surprised it took a minute to keep it straight.

Obviously he'd had a lot going on, and it was low priority he supposed, and he never followed up, and you probably weren't going to now . . . but God *damn* it, *this* one at least, yesterday's, someone was going to have to do something about.

And as he walked back to the Quality Inn he couldn't help wondering: why didn't this kind of stuff *bother* more people?

He knew it did of course, on a normal rational level . . . but no one took it further.

Wasn't taking it further rational too?

## Chapter Six

Chris hadn't done *much*, comparing yourself to Carl who apparently had the discipline to run around a quarter mile track, which was just about the most boring thing you could do.

Or even Terri, with the photos and art and crafty stuff . . . You could make fun of it, but she can probably sell some of it on ebay and make more than I'm making, Chris was thinking . . . which was even worse, *negative income* being pinned on him out here, and it was starting to get old.

On top of staying busy, Terri and Carl were grinding out shows, so when you put it in full perspective, Chris concluded he was even less a responsible member of society.

The thing now though was, you got in the tub, and the Quality Inn room had a decent one . . . a little tight but excellent temperature control and you never ran out of hot water like he had once in a Super 8 when it seemed like the bozos upstairs were showering day and night.

And if you were lucky, you could fall asleep in the tub, which happened tonight, and by the time Chris got out and shaved and splashed on the cologne he felt like a million bucks, and he headed next door.

There'd been an incident today apparently, two guys trying to do something with slot machines, and they'd had an electronic device, and the guys had been removed but the cops were still around, Bingham PD plus a couple state troopers and of course in-house security.

Chris figured not the greatest idea to break a law inside a casino, since you undoubtedly had multiple jurisdictions coming after you, maybe even a federal one . . . and when all of *those* were finished, then the Mob might take over.

Hard to say if the Mafia was as influential as it once was, especially when you got away from Reno and Vegas, but Chris figured don't bet against it.

*Luella and the Capris* were on a break and he didn't feel like mingling with Terri or Carl at this point, so he found Renee's table, which was on the other side of the blackjack pit tonight, and sat down.

He never thought he'd see it this way, but it was a little like Cheers, the TV show. People knew you and said hello. How bad could *that* be?

Renee was pretty quiet but doing her job, and Stan and Adela were there, same seats, and Mike was missing but there was another woman, Dee, who they were friendly with and was probably a regular.

Chris said, "So, a little action in here today I see."

"Oh yeah," Stan said. "Every couple months, someone pulls something. Part of doing business, I guess, they have to expect it."

"The previous one though," Adela said, "the dealer was in on it, didn't they think? The roulette thing."

"They didn't prove anything, from what I understand," Stan said. "It was quite a scheme though. Hard to see you pulling it off *without* some inside help."

"What were they doing?" Chris said.

Stan said, "It was complicated, but I think calling out the colors late was part of it. The guys they apprehended, one of them went to MIT."

"Jeez," Chris said. "That sounds like it could have been sophisticated then . . . what do they do with guys like that?"

"You sure you're okay hon?" Adela was saying to Renee now.

Renee nodded she was and straightened up the house chips in the metal tray and continued dealing.

Looking at Renee now without overdoing it, Chris *didn't* think she was doing okay.

The black eye was still visible under the make-up if you had the angle right, and there were no apparent *fresh* problems . . . but yeah, it wasn't her best night, was all you could say.



After a half hour Renee patted her hands again, signalling her break, and it took a moment for the replacement dealer to come, and Chris asked Adela if anything new was up.

Adela got off her stool to keep it quiet and came closer and said that domestic situation, it's looking pretty *dicey*--that was the word she used--and as much as she enjoys Renee, it's getting harder to watch it unfold.

Chris asked if Renee had kids and Adela said she did, but not with this guy, this was a secondary deal.

Chris said that's a tough one, but people have to work out their own issues, you unfortunately can't tell them what to do, and he made a weak joke that his brother's been telling him what to do for 30 years and it continues to backfire.

Adela nodded and got back on her stool and Chris asked what the story was with that fronton court in the park, did anyone ever use it, and this set off a much lighter discussion, which evolved into local town politics, so again a little more serious at *that* point, but a lot tamer than focusing on a well-meaning card dealer who was getting beat around.

Twenty minutes later Renee returned from her break, and a little after that Mike from last night showed up too, and the conversations started up again, and Chris waited for the right time and threw in, "I'm just talking hypothetically? Like when you watch House Hunters, and project yourself living in one of those places? . . . But if I was going to look for somewhere to live in town, where *would* you?"

"By yourself?" Stan said.

"Yeah. But, you know, cashing in from California, all that, it doesn't have to be a studio apartment, it could be a regular family neighborhood."

"You're a good guy, we won't hold it against you," Adela said. "But when Californians move out here, they rent a car in Reno first."

"That makes sense," Chris said. "Not a bad idea actually. Might help negotiate a better price."

"Most definitely," Mike said. "Someone sells their house out here, they don't want to tick the neighbors off, leaving Californians in their wake."

“Better to fake it,” Stan said. “Then once you’re in, they realize you’re okay, just like we do with you.”

Everyone was getting at least a little kick out of the direction of the conversation, even a new guy at the table that the others didn’t seem to know.

Except Renee, she looked pretty grim.

Obviously you can be grim for a lot of reasons . . . one of your kids is giving you trouble, it’s your time of the month, you have a dental bill you can’t pay.

All a little more palatable though if you weren’t carrying around that black eye.

Stan said, “We’re giving you a hard time. If it were me, I’d look at that new development out there toward the golf course. They should have waited until they sold more of the A section before they added the next phase . . . My sense is you can get a good deal.”

“Thanks,” Chris said. “Always good when they have too much inventory.”

“I like our neighborhood,” Adela said, and Chris hadn’t tried to put it together, but he assumed by the interaction, that meant she and Mike. “We’re on Princeton,” she said.

“I’m over there too, it’s not bad,” Stan said. “Penn Street . . . you know what it stands for?”

Chris guessed Pennsylvania, and Stan said correct, but a little trivia, that neighborhood, the streets were named for Ivy League colleges.

Chris said that was interesting, not necessarily something you’d expect out west . . . and he asked Renee if she had any neighborhood recommendations.

It was clear Renee had no interest in this discussion tonight, and she probably said the easiest thing, which was that the Sand section was pretty okay . . . and Chris was hoping she mentioned it because that’s where she lived.

Stan and Adela agreed that was a nice neighborhood as well, and meanwhile the players were enjoying a pretty good run, Renee had broken twenty-one the last four hands and everyone’s chips were starting to stack up nice, and Chris picked up his and bid everyone good night.

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The motel lobby had a local map that was actually the paper placemat for the little continental breakfast they served between 6:30 and 9, which Chris rarely stopped in for.

This morning though, since he was in here anyway, he might as well eat.

But the map was poor, not much street detail and there'd be a big star for various locations, where a business no doubt paid to be on the map, and the stars would block out a lot of the rest of it.

You didn't want to exactly ask the desk person where the Sand section was, but Chris noticed behind the front desk they had a much better map on the wall, one of those hanging laminated wooden ones, and he asked if he could take a quick look and he figured it out.

The Sand section was not too far from *Jake's House*, on this side of it and then a little west toward the fairgrounds. It looked like it went for maybe ten blocks north-south, and then three or four east-west.

You better have another neighborhood in mind too, for the cab driver, and that wasn't hard, you had the one with those Ivy League streets.

There were a half dozen taxis lined up in front of *The Palermo* and Chris got in the front one and told the driver--Jeez, a very large masculine-looking woman with aviator glasses and a buzz cut around the sides of her head and wearing a camouflage vest--to please bear with him, but he wanted to cruise around looking at real estate opportunities, and it could take a little while.

"Best kind of fare," the woman said.

Chris asked if there was an hourly rate type-thing, and she said there wasn't but how does \$60 sound, and Chris said that'd be fine, though he cringed a little bit, thinking he hadn't added up his finances in a while and that wouldn't be a bad idea.

He told the driver--who had introduced herself as Dolly, and was definitely friendly and a live wire--that some people at the tables recommended the Ivy section and the Sand section, so those would be good for starters.

“The first one, you talking about Harvard and all *that* shit?” Dolly said, Chris saying yes, and thinking, she’s a little colorful, fine, but not a problem as long as we get there smooth.

When the light changed Dolly didn’t fool around, she put her foot down hard, and Chris found himself hanging on a few times, especially when she was making turns.

When they got to the Ivy section Dolly explained that some of the streets are a little more modern than the others, and as they cruised around he figured out what that meant, that they built one entire street first and then added on, maybe waiting a few years in between. Harvard did look like the original street, and then you had the lesser-known Ivies like Brown and Cornell the furthest away, and as Dolly pointed out, those houses were somewhat newer.

Chris pretended to be interested and asked a few questions and they stopped a couple of times and Chris would get out and pick up the little flyer from the box on the lawn of a house for sale.

He had no idea what any of the prices were even though the numbers were staring him right in the face. This wasn’t why you were here.

Chris told Dolly it was an eye-opener and would she mind swinging through that other neighborhood now, so he had something to compare.

She said *You bet*, and peeled out of there and at the same time cranked up the radio, and you would have expected country, or right-wing talk radio or something, maybe even one of the religious stations, but no, she starts blasting heavy metal, Motley Crue or AC/DC or one of those, Chris could never tell any of them apart, and so loud that Chris decided he was going to pay her off and get out of the thing, if they didn’t run across Renee’s car pretty dang soon.

And that was the idea of course, which was building the last couple nights, you figure out what she’s driving and hopefully what part of town she lives in, and then take your shot at finding the house.

If she’s parked in the garage or off at a yoga class then you’re screwed . . . but again, what else do you have going that’s so important?

Dolly made a left onto a main drag type street, two lanes each direction, some weak excuses of cactus decorating the center divider, and then a quick left into the neighborhood. There was an overhead arching gateway welcoming you to it, with a sign, though the paint was peeling pretty bad.

The Sand was more modest than the Ivy section, not necessarily older, but the houses were mostly identical tracts and some you could tell were renovated but most of them had seen better days.

One thing about a neighborhood like this, from Chris's experience, almost *no one* parked in the garages. They typically jammed the garages full of shit . . . almost like that's what they were required to do.

In fact, this first block alone, they were already passing a couple houses with the garage doors open,

Chris said to Dolly, "What specifically do they accumulate, do you think, that they pile up like that?"

"I'm the same way," Dolly said, "Me and my hubby. We love yard sales and the flea market--ya ever been? Sunday mornings?"

Chris said he hadn't and Dolly continued, "Our deal, and we can't help it, we over-pick shit up--and then we have to keep having yard sales."

Chris was first of all amazed that Dolly was married to a *guy*, it was hard to picture, but that was none of his business. What he shouldn't have done though, was ask the question about the hoarding, because now he got her going.

"Your TV programs," she was saying, "your Pawn Stars, your American Pickers . . . those get us fired up, seeing the items folks pull out of their attics and bring in, and they're shocked to find out what they're worth."

"Or *not*, sometimes too," Chris put in.

"You're darn-tootin'," she said. "Me and him love it when they bring on those experts, that's the best part."

"Well, sounds like a nice hobby," Chris said, hoping to wrap it up and not lose focus on the people's driveways they were passing.

“We have some other hobbies too,” she said, “a little on the kinkier side.” And she laughed a big deep bellow and took her hands off the wheel for a second and made a loud clap, that for a second outdid even the heavy metal music.

Chris opened the window for a little breathing room, even though it was chilly out, and told Dolly if she didn’t mind to please systematically cover the neighborhood so he wouldn’t miss any potential houses for sale, and no need to stop when they *did* see one but he’d be taking notes.

This seemed to get her re-focused and she knew the streets and was doing a good job, except Chris hadn’t seen any light blue Toyota Corollas yet . . . until they finished off Jackson and doubled-back on Ferguson, and there one was, the fifth house on the left.

When they got to the next corner Chris started to get a little saturated, the streets were running together on him, and she might as well swing a U and they can think about getting out of here.

So on the way back he got a better look and it was pretty strong that it was her car. On the way out of the employee parking the other night he’d caught part of her license plate, just the last two numbers, which were letters actually since Nevada reversed in on you . . . but he’d picked up BK as the last two and that’s what you had here now, passing by 138, a little painted mark telling you that on the front curb, meaning 138 Ferguson.

It was crazy to ask, but you only lived once, so Chris asked Dolly if she was hungry, and she blurted out a racy expression, the equivalent of *Is the Pope Catholic?* and Chris said it’d be his pleasure to buy her lunch at *Jake’s House*.

“Well now you got your finger on the pulse,” Dolly said, “that’s one of our Top-5 favorites in town.”

Chris was tempted to ask what the other four were, figuring that *would* be good information to have, and from a reputable source, but he didn’t want to get too far off track, and they both got the prime rib, and the whole experience wasn’t bad, Dolly talking the whole time but still managing to eat much faster than he was, and she had plenty of good stories.

She was from Arkansas originally and for a while was on the rodeo circuit as a barrel racer and then spent time in Alaska working on a sardine fishing operation, and then the shocker . . . what brought her to Nevada was an opportunity in a bordello.

At that point she abruptly shifted gears and asked *what about you*, and Chris did his best to fill in a few blanks but whatever he was inventing was sounding pretty tame by comparison.

Dolly got a toothpick going, and then leaned back in the booth and Chris thought Jeez she's going to fall asleep, but just as quickly she snapped out of it and said she needed to get back to work, and good luck with the home search and when he was settled down she wanted to reciprocate the generosity.

Chris got up and they said goodbye, and Chris was pretty sure she'd be good for her word if it ever happened, which it wouldn't.

Meanwhile . . . now that you were here . . . your established location for checking in with Chandler . . . should you?

It wasn't the worst thing, frankly, not getting any updates, which at least kept you in limbo as opposed to getting a *bad* update.

But it had been nine days, if Chris was putting it together right, and what time did we have, not quite one?

You might catch him on the way to the courts, and how bad could it be, one call . . . so Chris took the phone and battery out of the little plastic bag he'd been carrying and lined everything up and it rang and a guy answered sounding a little off.

"That you?" Chris said.

"Bad cold," Chandler said. "But who else would it be?"

"You're playing too much tennis," Chris said. "You're wearing yourself down obviously, and it's a young man's game."

"Fuck you," Chandler said. "On what you're calling about though, my understanding is you can come back."

Chris knew they dropped the phone sometimes at these moments in the old movies, and then the phone dangled there on the old landline cord.

He wasn't about to drop his cell, but he understood how you could.

"Huh?" he said.

"The autopsy came in. Not the full monte yet, but the prelim. Which was significant. The old man had morphine in his system."

"Oh," Chris said. "Huh?"

"My guy looked into it a little deeper, the backstory. Your *Zodiac* was under hospice care.

*Jesus, my guy now.* Wasn't Chandler a retired dude himself who structured his week around the bargain matinee? Now he's pulling strings like a CEO?

Chris reminded himself again, you needed to lose the cynicism . . . you'd probably have to kiss the guy's feet at some point . . . particularly in light of this monumental development.

Chris said, "That part though, I have to admit, he didn't look under any major care."

"That's the thing," Chandler said. "He'd been in and out of the hospice system. He was apparently one of those tough old birds who got diagnosed but then didn't get worse."

Of course this was a reminder Chris didn't need, his own situation, being diagnosed and so far--though you had to keep knocking on wood--*him* not getting worse *either* . . .

But forget that. He said, "So, what then . . . he just happened to have a batch of morphine laying around, and self-medicated himself into a heart attack? After I shook him up?"

"Don't joke about it," Chandler said. "They're not going there. Unless you tell them they *should* . . . When you're on hospice care they give you a laundry list of meds, whatever you want, like a candy shop. I know because I went through it with my mom and I was always questioning them on it, wasn't that irresponsible . . . Yeah, stuff lays around, nobody's particularly keeping track."

"Holy smokes then," Chris said, processing the fact that he could actually get on the bus . . . and go *home*?



“Well enjoy the rest of your day,” Chandler said.

“Jeez, that’s *it*?”

“What else you want?”

“I don’t know, nothing I guess.”

Chandler said, “Was it really the *guy*, do you think?”

“The *Zodiac*? . . . We’ll never know for sure, probably.”

“Well I wouldn’t mind tossing it around with you . . . when you get back.”

This was as close as Chandler was going to come to telling him he maybe enjoyed his company a little . . . and it caught Chris slightly off guard.

Chris supposed *he* enjoyed the guy too, in a strange way, but yeah, same thing, you weren’t going to admit to that.

Chris thanked him for the information and said he’d be in touch.

*Wow.*

And dang, now Ken, he could call him too. In fact, could he call from *anywhere* now, such as the comfort of his motel room?

He figured why jinx it until you’re a 100 percent out of the woods for sure . . . and *that* you should follow up on one more time with Chandler on the bus ride home . . . so for now, yeah call the kid but do it from right here.

“Boss!” Ken said. “I . . . miss you so much.”

Now this was a little more genuine sentiment, wasn’t it, than he, Chris, was typically capable of, and he felt like a jerk.

So he said, “I miss you too, kid. A lot . . . I’ll be back. It’s over.”

There was a delay on the other end, and it sounded like Ken was clearing his throat, and Chris thought, could he be tearing up on me? That this was getting embarrassing.

“Y’okay there?” Chris said.

“Yeah . . . I’m just fine. When will you be here?”

“Pretty soon. I got one thing I’m looking into, and then I’m at the mercy of the Greyhound system I guess . . . Which I wouldn’t recommend, necessarily . . . although everyone does do their best . . . When I get back, how bout we go the *Crowe’s Nest*, see what’s cooking?”

“Anywhere you want, absolutely,” Ken said.

“And I hate to bring it up,” Chris said, “now that I’m out of the woods . . . but the cops never came by, right?”

“No they *did*, a couple days ago.”

Chris was worried he might start hyperventilating here.

*Another* set of cops? For something *else* now?

“Well,” Chris said, “I mean what did they want, who were they?”

“They didn’t tell me what they wanted, and they didn’t give their names,” Ken said, “they just showed their badge and asked for *you*.”

“Okay, let’s calm down here for a second,” Chris said.

“I’m good Boss . . . on *my* end.”

“Ooh boy . . . what did they look like, if you can describe ‘em?”

“Two guys. One of them was plainclothesed. He was bigger than the other one.”

“A *lot* bigger you mean? . . . Like a real outsize head, and hands like clubs? And that indentation some people have in the chin?”

“Yeah, that was more or less him, to a T.”

Chris let out a big, whooshing exhale. At least it wasn’t something new in the hopper, you’d hope and pray.

He said, “So what did you tell them, though . . . after they asked for me?”

“I told them the truth. You weren’t here right now.”

“And then . . .?”

“So they asked where you were, and I said I didn’t know.”

“Ah.”

“And they asked when you’d be back, and I said later.”

“That was it? They were satisfied?”

“They didn’t seem to be. So they asked me . . . actually it was the other guy now, the little one . . . was I born an asshole, or did I just become one when I started hanging around you?”

Chris was locked on every word here . . . but at the same time, he couldn’t help wondering, was there some way you could get this uniform prick into your

storage unit, the way it worked with the CraigsList art guy? It might be worth exploring . . . that is, if they weren't there to arrest him first.

"Very sorry you had to go through that," Chris said, "but how did you answer him?"

"I told him he was correct the first time, I was born an asshole."

Holy Toledo.

Chris said, "I don't want to ask . . . but then what?"

"They stared at me for a while, and then they left."

Wow.

"Kid, listen to me . . . if I ever say anything bad about you again, promise you'll dunk my head in a toilet bowl."

"Boss you're too much . . . But you're not sure when you're coming home? You must have an *idea*?"

Chris said, "I gotta call Chandler real quick. Just make sure of a couple things."

And Chris hung up and re-dialed Chandler.

"I was about to make my bus reservation," Chris said, "only a small monkey-wrench turns up, the cops were back looking for me."

"Couple days ago you mean?" Chandler said. "That was nothing, they were just clearing you."

Chris had tensed up so much in anticipation of Chandler's reaction that it didn't register right away.

"Wait," he said, "so you're saying . . . what *are* you saying?"

"They'd instructed you to sit tight, correct? They're releasing you from that now. Decent actually, that they showed back up, a lot of cops don't bother with it."

Now Chris was ready for a stiff drink, on *multiple* fronts. First the celebration, then everything turning upside down, now the relief. All packed into about 20 memorable minutes.

He told Chandler how Ken had stood up for him, with the police, never giving an inch.

Chandler took a moment. “He’s a mensch,” he said.

“Wait a second,” Chris said, “you’re Jewish? Did I ask you that once before?”

“I’m not. But I’ve worked with a lot of guys that are. It fits.”

“It does,” Chris said, and they hung up and he headed back into *Jake’s House*, this time straight to the closest cocktail area and he ordered a double old-fashioned and it went down easy.

There was a 49ers playoff game years ago and there was a running back named Garrison Hearst who had a badly pulled hamstring but played anyway, when most guys wouldn’t, and he went as long as he could and ran for 128 yards and the 49ers won the game.

When he finally had to come out, John Madden the announcer quietly said, “That’s a man,” and that’s what Chris was thinking about Ken right now.

## Chapter Seven

Jeez, they had Ubers here? It was 2:30 and Chris was back outside *Jake's House*, a pretty strong sun in your face for early December, though it was hard to warm your fingers up, and that's what he was getting used to it being like in the high desert.

But some guy got out of what looked a civilian vehicle, a little hybrid something or other, and paid the guy, so Chris asked and the driver said it was more of an occasional one man Uber service, whatever that meant, but the guy took him to the library for 5 bucks so it worked out.

Chris wasn't used to hard liquor in the middle of the day and it took a him a little while to get his bearings on the computer, but soon enough he pulled up **138 Ferguson, Bingham, Nevada.**

There were the typical realtor pages, which they apparently put up whether your house was on the market or not--and wasn't that some kind of invasion of privacy? Of course that was irrelevant at the moment.

You had Zillow and Realtor.com and couple others, and Chris scanned through them all, and you had some photos of the property and a StreetView link and even a satellite job--man what happened to basic privacy!--but there were no human names associated with any of it.

You learned the house was 1257 square feet, built in 1974, lot size, parcel number, yada yada.

He tried a reverse directory where supposedly you enter an address and come up with someone's phone number, but he was being shut out here.

What time did we have now, close to 3? He knew where City Hall was, but where was the assessor's office, there too?

He googled it and it was good he did since that office for whatever reason happened to be in the school administration building, on Jeppem Street, by the Saturday night raceway they had in town. That was apparently a dirt track with sprint cars that had two-speed transmissions, and people kept telling him he should check it out, though he hadn't yet.

Anyhow, he was placing that administration building about eight blocks from here, so he half-walked, half-jogged it over there, the jogging part something new, since he'd retired from running, but Carl the drummer had him feeling guilty, so he gave it a little more effort.

That was one thing he learned from that year of doing real estate back east, tracking distressed properties, the whole experience pretty unpleasant--but that the most surefire way to find someone was the property tax office.

Hard to hide from anyone there, even if you wanted to. Sometimes the mortgage company would escrow for taxes and *they'd* be listed, but usually the owner would be too.

If all else failed, you could check the water billing department, or the building department file itself, but it didn't usually come to that, and here now, they had these big binders on the central counter that you flipped open bottom to top, and they were set up by block and lot, and there was another binder you checked first to obtain *that* stuff . . . and the owner of 138 Ferguson was listed as Delbert Rice.

Hmm. Just one person named . . . Either way, not much more you could do here . . . so, you could call it a day, work on this maybe some more tomorrow, and a nap was sounding real good right now . . . or you could walk-jog back to the library, which wasn't the easy move, but it was the right one.

Delbert Rice was listed as Del, the seven or eight places he appeared online, all except for his divorce papers--when Chris added the Recorder's Office to the search--where things stayed formal.

What you had to make sure of obviously, was that this was the *guy*.

Del could have been the *landlord* for instance, not the guy living with Renee smacking her around underneath the eyes, meaning Renee and the batterer were tenants at the property, not the owners.

But as you clicked around you came up with town photos here and there, events, 4th of July parades, a charity softball game put on by the casino, and Del was captioned in a few of them, and Renee was next to him in at least two of them, and you found out that he owned a fireplace store, DJ Warming Trends, that Chris had passed by a few times but obviously paid no attention to.

The last thing he felt like doing was trying to wade through a guy's divorce papers, but Chris figured you better, you never knew, and he signed off the computer for a minute, got a long drink of water--man he was thirsty from that prime rib--thumbed through a couple of magazines and settled back in.

It was impressive but also surprising how thorough the online governmental functions were out here in largely rural Elko County.

You try to find stuff in Marin, for example, where they have more money and resources than God, and good luck. And San Francisco County . . . all you have to do is experience the overpowering red tape in any administrative office there, and you'll say forget it.

And a lot of places, even if you can find the documents online, there are issues, such as you have to register and sign in, and then if you do all that and get what you're looking for you get a message a quarter of the way down the document, that it's available in its entirety in such and such a department.

Maybe they had less caseload out here per employee, or maybe the work ethic was better . . . but anyhow he was looking at a Petition For Divorce, from 2014, Carla Ellen Taylor versus Delbert Joseph Rice, and Jeez, both of *them* listed at that same address, 138 Ferguson.

You had the legalese, mounds of it, and irreconcilable differences as the basis . . . and then way down, you had substantiating documentation, but buried in there was "*multiple instances of verbal and physical abuse*".

Dang.

And then way down, under Exhibit E, photocopies of two police reports, both from 2013, one Bingham PD from and other Tuscon PD, meaning they must have been on a trip then or something.

And plenty of clipped law enforcement terminology in the document, but the essence was Carla had called the police twice, saying Rice beat her up.

Now you were getting into more work, digging out police records, and the Tucson database kept giving Chris the runaround so he got off, but the Bingham PD database was simpler, and he ran the guy's name twice, two different methods, and it came up empty.

Chris figured this went back to what Chandler was saying that time, about his *own* situation, that if you were investigated for a crime but never charged with one, your name wouldn't show up in the official records.

It didn't matter right now, but Chris couldn't help comparing that, where he was relieved the Redondo officer wouldn't see his name popping up, simply because they had him on the radar for a while in Rohnert Park.

Of course that was California Chandler was referring to, but Chris suspected most states handled it the same way, it made sense, and they might be violating some federal civil right if they *did* you put you on a list and you hadn't officially done anything wrong.

The bottom line, Del wasn't charged with anything, at least in Elko County.

Which didn't mean jack shit of course. He could have had a good lawyer, or she backed off, or he agreed to go to counseling, or he bought her a new ring--whatever the fuck.

But it didn't mean jack.

Especially . . . when you looked across the green blackjack felt at Renee's *freshly* administered abuse.

What was it with these women? *Why?* You're not an idiot, you had to know what happened, why it fell apart with the one before--and then, la-di-da, you move in with mutant? And move your kids in with you?

Chris knew one thing for sure, he couldn't solve the world's problems if they didn't *want* to be solved.



But . . . would it honestly kill anyone, if this particular Delbert J. Rice had never been born?

It was 4:40 and Chris figured might as well go visit the fireplace store.

It was on B Street, the oldest commercial part of town, a movie theater across the street boarded up and a few stores looking a little shaky, but his understanding was the area was making a comeback, and Chris appreciated that they apparently respected the old buildings out here and the history and tried to make them work, even though you were fighting the Walmart and the other box stores and strip malls scattered around.

DJ Warming Trends sold wood stoves and pellet ones and all kinds of fireplace inserts and even some solar-based contraptions, and through the window Chris could see a guy who looked a lot like Del's picture standing there helping a customer.

Hmm.

No sign of Renee in the place, if maybe she helped out there, and even if she did she'd probably be starting her shift now, if she was still on her 6 to 2's.

Chris went to the corner, looked in a few windows, crossed over, doubled-back a block and when he got to DJ Warming Trends again the customer was gone, and Chris took a second and figured what the hay, and went inside.

Del was doing some paperwork at his desk and without looking up said, "Hi, can I help you."

Chris didn't answer, and the guy kept doing the paperwork for another minute and when he *did* look up Chris said, "Didn't want to interrupt your train of thought there."

"No worries," Del said. "What were you looking for, in the heating department?"

Chris hadn't noticed it when Del was with the other customer, or he'd maybe he changed clothes when Chris was walking around the block, but Del had on a nice pair of sweats, and and an official-looking athletic jacket.

Chris said, "What are you . . . playing something, coaching it?"

“Reffing it,” Del said. “Soccer. Mostly Sundays, but we have some Saturday night games . . . That way, in spite of tire kickers like you, I get a little supplemental income.” Del giving him a big fake smile, like he’s obviously joking.

Chris could see his point actually, a business like this would be kind of like selling cars, fairly big-ticket items that your average customer would have trouble pulling the string on, at least the first visit. You probably *did* need some supplemental income.

The interesting part was, Chris had refereed a little soccer himself, that year he spent in Teaneck. His neighbor talked him into it, said they were short refs, which Chris quickly figured out was because the parents and coaches yelled at you the whole time. The experience was very unpleasant.

Chris had reffed Class 4, strictly the rec league, which only required one night of training, and he never ended up with a uniform like this guy, with various apparent merit badges sewn onto the jacket, Chris was noticing now.

“So you saw right through me then,” Chris said.

“Pardon me?” Del said.

“That I’m not a real buyer . . . I like to shop, think about upgrades, but I’m kind of frugal, what it boils down to.”

“*That’s* fine,” Del said, “we got a lot of deals we can work. Just holler if something strikes you.”

There was some amateur art on the walls, local scenes, but way too much color for what was really there. Behind Del’s desk, on a little section of the wall, there were framed photos and Del noticed Chris looking at them, and said “Help yourself,” and Chris went back behind the desk.

Three of them had Del shaking hands with someone, looking like a ceremony, and Chris couldn’t care less about those, but the fourth one he had his arm around a woman, at a fair or amusement park, a big ferris wheel behind them, and that was definitely Renee.

“Nice shots,” Chris said. “Everyone looks happy.”

“They are,” Del said. “That last one, that’s my walking-around double.”

That was a weird thing to say. Chris said, “Your sister, you mean? You guys are twins or something?”

“No, my honey. We’re so much alike, it’s spooky sometimes.”

“I get you now,” Chris said. “I had someone like that too . . . on the one hand you’re on the same page, on the other, it can be frustrating arguing with *yourself* sometimes.” Chris laughed.

“Well, yeah, there’s that side of it too,” Del said.

Chris stared at the guy for a second and said, “You have a good evening. I appreciate the flexibility, if I’m ever ready to commit.”

Del told him if he was shopping it around other places, which he knew he *was* doing, come back here first, and Chris said it sounded like a plan, and when he got outside he wondered if it was too late for the library again.

It was after 5:30 and it was obviously Saturday, the guy pointing that out, with the soccer get-up.

That was the thing about a casino town. *In* the casinos, they got you conditioned so you didn’t even know what time of day it was after a while--but *outside* too, you could easily confuse a Tuesday and a Saturday.

Maybe the library closed at 5:30 tonight and that’d be it . . . but you might as well see . . . which at this point meant jogging back over there didn’t it, and Jeez, this Carl business was getting out of hand in a hurry.

They were open until 6, and Chris had 12 minutes when he got in there, and he was sweating, which wasn’t good . . . but the reason he was checking, was soccer leagues, at least from his limited experience as a ref, typically put the games and the referees online.

You could have to sign in, he hadn’t thought of that . . . but fortunately out here they weren’t paranoid about that kind of security apparently, and the BYSA had a tidy web page and a link to *Schedule*, and there they were, the games for Saturday December 2nd.

Chris was also thinking, dang, isn’t it a little chilly for outdoor soccer this time of year? But he justified it, he supposed . . . that people were hardy out here and didn’t let the weather bother them.

There were four games on the schedule tonight, two each at two parks.

Del was listed on the second game, the 6:30, at Locust Park, which Chris recognized as being the main one, where they had that old fronton court.

Should you go over and take a look?

Chris figured why not. He was getting hungry again, despite the prime rib effort with Dolly, which should still be holding him, except for the dumb running he'd been doing which he wasn't used to and obviously upped his metabolism.

So he moseyed on over there, it actually wasn't far from the library, and when he found the field they were just getting started, there was a procedure you went through as a ref and then you put the ball down and gave a signal and started your watch.

This was two adult teams, which Chris hadn't expected, he figured the league on the website was all youth soccer. Some of the players were pretty dang overweight, especially on defense, so it clearly wasn't a high level of play, but good for them for getting out here.

Another thing Chris noticed, there were no AR's, meaning assistant refs who handled the sidelines and the offsides calls.

Del was on his own, which was probably fine with him because you probably made a few more bucks this way.

The field was lit, though not very well, and the rest of the park, including the basketball courts and the cement area around the fronton court, was pretty deserted.

In fact that seemed like a decent idea, watch the game from in there, so Chris went through the gate into that court area and sat on a bench and kept an eye on it.

Del wasn't a bad ref. Some of his calls did look a little suspect, at least from this distance, and there seemed to be contact he was letting go, especially in the box, which you could have blown the whistle on a couple times and awarded a penalty kick.

But he hustled and stayed close to the ball, didn't try to call the game from midfield like the lazier refs did. Since it was a casual adult-league game no one

argued with him much, so that part was easier, and Chris wondered how Del handled it when he did get heat from the players and sidelines, which you'd get in a higher level game, and in a youth game at *any* level.

You had remedies, you could warn people, card them, eject them if you had to. The main thing was not to let them get to you and lose your poise out there, and yeah, it would be interesting to see Del in that situation.

Or maybe not. Maybe he'd be meek as a fly when he was dealing with other males.

That could easily be the case with wife beaters.

There was a halftime, and then the teams were back on the field, and man, it was sure running long now, but mercifully, a little after 8, Del blew the final whistle three times with his arm extended, the way you did it to end the game.

Now what?

The way Chris remembered it, teams would often have sideline sit-down snacks after the game, but tonight it was too cold for that apparently, or they were headed out to dinner together, or maybe nothing, just getting out of here.

Either way, everyone dispersed pretty quickly and all you had left over there, really, was Del, crouching down by his bag behind the far goal and writing something down, and Chris remembered that, you had to fill out a game card, and there was a short version and a long version, and if you carded any players during the game you had to account for all that stuff and it could take you a few minutes.

By this point Chris was back out the gate and circling around the west side of the field, and Del was still in his crouch and diligent about his business, you had to give him that, and there was a stand of trees further back behind the goal and Chris went in there.

There was a short dirt path, and then a shed, made of cinder block, a more modern version, Chris was thinking, of McCall's office back in Chico, except smaller, and Chris thought, Jeez, maybe there's a loose shovel around or something.

Because it sure felt like an equipment shed for the gardeners, and you wouldn't think they'd lock this kind of stuff up in Bingham . . . but son of a bitch, that's what the door *was*, locked.

Nothing else laying around that he could see, and this was getting very unfortunate, Del wasn't going to be wrapping up that game card forever, and in fact through the trees now you could see that he'd finished with it, and was sitting down pulling on his sweats and, Chris knew the drill, getting ready to take off his cleats and change to the sneakers, and he'd be out of here.

There was a birdbath sitting there outside the shed, freestanding cement, and you could see a pretty good crack in the bowl, and Chris figured someone had brought it over here to repair it.

He had one of those things in the backyard one time, when he was living in Marin, and it was deceptive, they were heavy but they weren't in-your-face ridiculous like you might expect . . . though he'd never hoisted one all the way over his head before . . .

And he reached down and got a good grip, and started walking the birdbath out of the trees toward Del, who had one cleat off at the moment and one sneaker on, and he came up behind him and was a little surprised you didn't need to get it all the way over your head like a powerlifter finishing his move, that most of the way seemed good enough . . . and he crashed the birdbath down on Del's skull.

## Chapter Eight

By the time he'd showered and had a hamburger it was 10:30, and wow, plenty of action in *The Palermo* tonight, so yeah, of course there was a difference then between Saturdays and Tuesdays.

You still didn't know what time it was once you were in the casino, but everything *was* stepped up on the weekends.

*Luella and the Capris*, for example, had an extra guy with them tonight, playing a saxophone, and their set list seemed a little different, more geared to working him in, and the guy was great, honestly sounding like John Coltrane when he soloed and let loose, and there you were, again with the same question you had about Terri and Carl--what was *this guy* doing here in Bingham, Nevada?

Chris ordered a beer and settled in for a while and listened to the band, and Jeez, even the cocktail waitresses seemed to have stepped it up tonight, royal blue outfits instead of the normal maroon, cut a little different, parading a trifle more skin around the lounge, unless it was his imagination, which it could have been, but you could be in worse places.

The Capris launched into a 70's soul set, the Spinners and the Chi-Lites and that contingent, and pretty amazing, but Terri could knock *that* stuff out of the park too. A simple white gal from Reno, or wherever the heck it was before that, he was getting her story mixed up maybe with someone else's, but the fact was this was a *lot* different than Karen Carpenter tonight and she was still nailing it.

Chris thinking--especially impressive if she has a drinking and gambling problem . . . and a jerkell at home she's hiring someone to rough up.

*That* part had to be manufactured . . . didn't it? Some guy from Bakersfield she was pulling out of a hat?

When you think about it, where would she even get the money to *pay* the guy, if that's what she implied was going on, since she was obviously dropping it all at the tables.

Anyhow . . . you felt bad for people, they all had *some* backstory, that was for sure, but this one didn't ring quite true.

The band finished the set and they got a good ovation, but Jesus, they should have been bringing down the house, and Chris stood and clapped and Terri saw him and waved as she was coming off stage, and now seemed like a reasonable time to check out the casino floor and see what was going on in the blackjack department.

Renee's table was in full swing, you had Stan and Adela and Mike, as well as that new gal from last time who knew them all too, and Chris got the nice greeting again as he sat down.

Different topics came up, one of them was there was a college basketball tournament in Las Vegas next weekend and Stan was going.

"Are you driving?" Chris said.

"Oh yeah," Stan said. "I love the open road. I can go all day. When I have someone with me, it drives 'em crazy."

"I'm the same way," Chris said. "I keep thinking in my next life I'm going to be a long distance trucker."

"You want to come?" Stan said.

And Jeez . . . that couldn't have been more out of the blue, but did it make any sense to actually take him up on it?

"Very kind of you to even offer," Chris said, "but when would you be leaving?"

"Thursday. Crack of dawn. There's *pre-lim* games Thursday night. I'm one of those guys, when I pay for an event, I don't miss a minute."

Chris was like that too. He'd never in his life walked out of a game early, like the herds did when one team had a big lead, at least not a game he paid for.



“I’m putting it all together,” Chris said, “but I think I’m going to have to take a rain check. I kind of have it in my head I’m going to leave Monday, and I guess I better stick with that.”

What he’d wanted to do, when he first got back to the room, was get the hell out of here, which meant tonight.

Even now, just a moment ago, in response to Stan he was going to say he was leaving tomorrow, Sunday, that was the plan . . . but then Monday popped out.

Something told him if you announced you were leaving *tomorrow* that sounded a little too much like you wrapped up your business *tonight* . . . so he delayed it a day.

It was a tough call actually. On the one hand, announcing you were out of here tomorrow, matter of fact, shouldn’t be a problem, since after all, here you were playing cards right now and not off disappearing somewhere.

But you could give yourself a major headache going back and forth on it, and now he’d issued his statement and it was what it was, and you’d have to kill another 24 hours here.

“Does that mean the house hunting is off the table?” Adela said. “You’ve got second thoughts about our little community now?” She was smiling, didn’t mean it seriously.

“Actually,” Chris said, “I had a nice tour today. Those two neighborhoods you guys gave me.” Looking up at Renee, to see if that would get her to say anything, but it didn’t, she seemed as pre-occupied as the last few nights.

“Oh yeah?” Adela said. “What was your verdict?”

“I could see myself in either one,” Chris said. “Hard to know.”

One thing that hadn’t dawned on him really, was man, he was spending a lot of time faking being interested in houses lately, wasn’t he?

The Chico deal was a little different he supposed . . . because he was an *investor* there, as opposed to an *owner-occupant* . . . Wasn’t that the gimmick?

“Jeff strikes me as a thinking man,” Stan was saying, and it took Chris a second to react to who *Jeff* was, since that was his fake Bingham name but he wasn’t used to being asked it, or called by it.

“Oh yes it’s good to take your time,” Adela said, “we’re talking a major lifestyle change from California.”

“Or anywhere,” Mike said. “There’s a guy in Vegas, makes these videos, sticks them on YouTube?”

“I think I know who you’re talking about,” Stan said. “He goes down the abandoned mine shafts?”

“I think that’s another guy, but same idea,” Mike said. “My guy likes to go to Area 51, stop right at the gate, plays cat and mouse with the security guards.”

“I think I’ve seen some of those as well,” Chris said. “I like the way they film the views from the dirt road going out there. It’s amazingly high-def.”

“Good money in YouTube actually, you develop enough followers,” Stan said. “You get some kind of percentage, based on the views.”

“What was your original point thought, about the video guy?” Chris asked Mike.

“Oh, only that at one point he was talking about how cold it gets in Las Vegas, which always surprises people . . . but then he says, that’s nothing compared to going north, places like Ely and Bingham.”

“It’s true,” Adela said, “and Jeff, something to keep in mind, this has been an abnormally mild season so far.”

Chris was thinking it was plenty cold a few hours ago on that soccer field, but he could see her point.

“Well I do like to stargaze,” Chris said. “I’d like to be able to go in the backyard and just sit there and soak it in. That guy in Parumph, on the radio, that’s how I got the bug in the first place I guess.”

“Art Bell,” Mike said. “Guy’s gotta be a millionaire, but he has a double-wide out there. That’s all he needs.”

“He does the show right from his living room,” Stan said, “or at least *did*, I think he’s retired . . . That appealed to me too, sitting there in your slippers taking calls from all over the world.”

Someone was standing behind Renee now, one of the regular pit bosses that Chris recognized, and he waited until she finished the hand, which had her showing a five, and all the players standing pat, and Renee flipping over the hole card which was a ten, and hitting it with a king, so everyone won the hand and was happy.

At that point the pit boss tapped her on the shoulder and whispered something to her, and she patted her hands together for the players, and she followed the guy out of the blackjack pit.

Chris figured, her giving her normal signal, that the pit boss hadn’t told her anything specific, probably just, we need to speak to you for a minute.

It did seem logical, small town like this, that Del would get identified pretty quick if someone found him out there tonight, not like how all the red tape tended to clog up police work in the bigger communities.

Chris felt pretty at ease, sitting here at the moment, pushing his dollar chips around, shooting the breeze with the others, drinking a rum and coke that the friendly cocktail waitress brought.

*Should* he feel more nervous?

He probably should, yeah.

He’d been through a few of them now, the aftermath, so maybe you started getting conditioned, just like when you get enough experience with *anything*, less tends to throw you off.

He was thinking, too, maybe I’m not taking this one as seriously because you didn’t have the normal build-up. The planning, the deciding back and forth, the following guys around then thinking about it some more, all the work involved.

Here he was, laying low for a couple weeks, minding his own business and this falls into his lap. Maybe there’s a lesson there, the less anticipation the better.

At any rate, this was a rare instance where the casino seemed to be caught off guard. Every move seemed to be organized and orchestrated, and there was rarely a delay on a shift change, and now they were all just sitting there, him and Stan and Mike and Adela and the other gal who didn't say much.

"Wonder what happened," Stan said.

"Yes, we certainly hope it's nothing serious," Adela said.

"I've only seen that once before," Mike said. "One time, over in Sparks, the old John Ascuaga's Nugget, I was playing poker and a pit person came up and walked a dealer off. But she had a wardrobe malfunction she didn't know about."

"That's interesting," Adela said. "So she returned? What was the malfunction?"

"Not important," Mike said, "I *had* noticed it myself too."

Chris figured he better throw something in, so he said, "Jeez, hope *Renee's* okay though," and everyone agreed.

After a couple minutes a different pit boss came and told them they were a little short handed tonight, and we apologize, and would they mind joining one of the other tables in progress, and they could just bring their chips with them.

No one got up, what was the urgency, and eventually a new dealer showed up, a man this time named Joerg--and his name tag had him from Germany, and Jeez, the surprises kept coming in the northern Nevada desert--but meanwhile the game picked up and it was more or less a regular Saturday night again.

Chris went back and forth to the lounge a couple times, got a piece of pie at the snack bar and tried a little KENO which was a dumb game, checked out the pai gow tables, and that was making inroads, a lot more of those now, and he had no idea how the game worked but tonight he learned enough to know it was a version of Chinese dominoes.

What he was really doing of course, was killing time, trying to avoid returning to the room for as long as possible in case he couldn't sleep.

But around 2:30 he made his way back over there, and surprisingly nodded off within a couple minutes of hitting the pillow, and no bad dreams in the way, at least nothing bad enough to wake him back up.

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Sunday was a little awkward, being here.

Bingham wasn't exactly one of your big church towns, which wasn't surprising, gambling being the only real industry, and the underbelly that went along with that. You could feel the place slow down though, people taking it easy today, whether they were actively observing something or not.

Chris overheard someone in the casino last night mention a fronton tournament taking place this afternoon, part of a fundraiser, and it was hard to believe there'd be competitions going on on that funky court that looked like some kind of relic from ancient Rome, and he thought that would be fun to check out.

But . . . just happening to be sitting on one of those benches again, where you waited last night while Del finished his reffing duties, that didn't sound like the brainiest idea.

You didn't really want to take a long walk either--even though that would feel good, shake out the cobwebs--since there weren't a whole heck of a lot of people around who *did* take long walks, and why thrust yourself on anyone's radar.

So Chris stayed where the people were, which was the vicinity of the motel, which included a couple smaller casinos, not as interesting as The Palomino or Jake's House, but they kept you occupied, and by dinner time he had played more blackjack almost than he ever had in his life.

He liked to keep track of this stuff, and since he'd sat down that first night after watching Terri and Carl play, he was in the hole a grand total of \$17 dollars. Which reaffirmed that you play the basic strategy, when to hit, when to stand, you can pretty much break even over multiple sessions.

There was news about Del that expanded as the day went on. Not as much as Chris would have thought, you weren't inundated with it like you'd expect in a small town where people didn't normally get killed, but he supposed it made sense that the casinos were essentially isolated from the outside world, and news of any sort didn't make much headway.

The local TV station said a man's body was found in the park late last night and there'd been questionable circumstances, and by mid-afternoon they'd made the announcement that it was local resident Delbert Rice, 42, of 138 Ferguson Street, the owner of DJ Warming Trends fireplace shop in town.

Funny, Chris was thinking, no mention of the guy in his soccer gear or that he'd been officiating a game, and in fact not much else in the report except that police suspect he was struck with a blunt object.

Chris had to shake his head at that one, since he'd left the birdbath right there, by the guy . . . and had been sensible enough to have his gloves on--which you needed anyway around here and he should have been wearing more often.

That was another thing. When he'd been at the library, just for kicks he went on one of those Zodiac websites that are so active, and there everyone is, arguing whether a hair fiber from back then down in Riverside can yield DNA, and so forth.

And of course, nothing about the thing actually being maybe *solved* recently.

Chris was roaming around the site reading all the ongoing theories and speculation thinking, Jeez, I found the guy, I'm pretty sure, you can ease up now.

But he was also thinking, you can probably turn *anything* today into DNA . . . the important thing was to keep *your* DNA out of it . . . so that if they did find a trace of your fingernail cuticle or some shit at one of the scenes, you've at least kept *you* out of the *someone's* they can match it against.

Or so you hope.

Another thing he'd thought of for a while--why not take everyone's DNA when they're born?

Don't they take little babies' footprints and stuff?

Forget doing *that*, just take a harmless saliva sample or something, automatically, and then the rest of their lives everyone's in the system.

Wouldn't that deter some a-hole in 20 years from doing something bad, knowing full well if he leaves anything at the scene, they got him?

Really . . . why *don't* they do that?

Probably there's some civil rights violation involved, would be Chris's guess, because otherwise it seems so simple . . . something he'd have to ask Chandler about.

In any case, he supposed he was fortunate that it doesn't work that way, at least for now, and again it was curious about the no soccer mention and the blunt object, but the police were probably playing it coy.

That, or else they had no idea what they were doing on a murder case because most of them had probably never seen one.

Chris figured you might as well leave that local news station, Channel 10, off for the rest of the trip, and stick with lighter fare, and he'd never used it but they had a movie thing you could pay for, selecting from about 8 million of them it felt like, and then they add the \$2.99 to your bill.

For Chris there *was* no bill, since he stopped by the office every day and added the next day in cash, so he went down there now and forked over the three bucks so he'd have access later tonight.

He considered going for the \$5.99 deal, which would give you a porno flick, but he thought one of those might make him depressed tonight, not sure why exactly but that was his hunch.

Now it was dinner time and he'd been getting used to *The Palermo* coffee shop--they had two actually, but one was a little more upscale, Chris liked the no-frills 24-hour one, and there was a waitress working the counter most evenings named Gina, and she was fun to talk to, and he felt like an idiot watching her rear end do its thing as she passed by, and he kept trying to remind himself not to.

Gina was from Indianapolis and had a twelve-year-old she said, and dang, she didn't look old enough to have one of those, but Chris thought, well if she was 16, 17, she'd be 29 now so maybe so.

Naturally Gina was divorced, or never married, but either way the dad wasn't around and she was another story of someone who ended up in this unlikely place.

Tonight Chris said, "I'd invite you to come out to California with me . . . Except you've got that kid you keep mentioning."

Gina had some personality, despite the grind of the job and tough hours, and she said, "What makes you think I like a man that's so full of himself?"

Chris said, "You ever been there?"

"Indeed," Gina said. "Disneyland, and the Golden Gate Bridge. We had a church group in high school. They did a whirlwind tour. Someone started throwing up, and the next couple days it got passed around, stomach flu, and there was a carameltcorn place at Fisherman's Wharf, and that was the last thing I ate before I got sick too."

"I'll take a wild guess," Chris said. "You haven't been able to eat that stuff since."

"Not only carameltcorn but I have a hard time with regular popcorn too," she said.

"I've had a couple of those experiences myself," Chris said. "One is sauerkraut. Took me a couple years to be able to eat it again. Even now I'm shaky."

"That wouldn't be a problem with me, since I hate sauerkraut to start with."

"Yeah, well. The mind can do a number on you. We understand such a tiny percentage of the brain."

"Did you hear we had a murder though?" Gina said, and Gee, quite an abrupt change of gears.

"I did," Chris said. "That's a tough deal, it sounds like."

Gina lowered her voice. "The person they found, he's the boyfriend of one of the employees. It's been a little subdued here today."

"Ah man . . . do you know the employee?"

"No. She's over in gaming."

"Wow. Did the guy have enemies or something? . . . It said late at night in the park right? Maybe drugs?"



“It could have been. No one seems to know much. The boyfriend had been at a soccer match earlier.”

“Anything else ever happen like that in the park?”

“I’ve been here for going on six years, and I only remember one other murder.”

“Yeah? What was *that* one?”

“That one had to with a casino. A small one, no longer there. Somebody accused somebody of something.”

Chris said, “Well hopefully there won’t be a third one for a while. A nice place like this, folks get a false sense of security.”

“You got that right,” Gina said. “Plenty different than the real world. Probably why I stay here.”

“Like I said,” Chris said, “come out to California. Expand your horizons.”

“Yeah right,” Gina said. “How about some more coffee.”

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It was a whole new look in the lounge tonight, some guy up there telling jokes at the moment, a comedian, which Chris had never seen in one of these places.

Though after a couple minutes you could see he was adding in music as well, going to the piano and singing, the songs supposedly humorous tie-ins to the stand-up comedy he was going back and forth with.

Some guy with a thick New York accent, although as Chris stood there a little longer he was damn good with a Texas one too, and then a Boston and then an Aussie one.

The guy was pretty funny at times. One of his routines was a supermarket checker, and Chris wasn’t particularly in the mood for laughing tonight but he couldn’t help it after a while, and it did feel good once he stopped restraining himself and let loose.

Following this guy, according to the sign, there was another new act, *Pioneer Daze*, and you figured from the photo they were country or some close variation.

Of course this meant that Terri and Carl were gone, and if Chris had it right they were headed first to West Wendover, and then way down to Tonopah, three-night minimums was how she portrayed their life on the road.

It had to get old, didn't it? Then what, back to Reno, unwind for a while . . . maybe hustle up some music lessons at the local guitar store? Sell your CD's at the flea market on the weekends, when you didn't have a gig?

Chris was looking at it a little different now. These people had all that talent, which really could blow you away at times . . . but maybe someone like Renee, or Gina, they had it better off . . . Not something you can measure, so who knows for sure.

Chris eventually had enough of the comedy guy, he was bringing volunteers up on stage now, incorporating them in, and that was Chris's signal to move on, and he went back out into the casino and figured he might as well check on Renee's table.

He didn't expect her to be here tonight of course, but you might hear something . . . even though he didn't want to pile anything on to his own concerns, he couldn't help being curious if there was some information floating around.

Sandra was dealing tonight, the heavy set blonde woman from a couple nights ago who'd replaced Renee on a break.

Chris sat down down at his usual spot, to the right of the dealer and one seat in from the end, and only Stan from the regulars was here tonight, and Chris reached over and shook hands and he was thinking again about Stan going to that college basketball tournament and that he was probably a pretty good guy, upfront and no nonsense and knew how to enjoy himself. At one point, when Stan had offered to drive him to Vegas, it had come up that Stan used to teach school in Seattle, and Chris never pressed him on how he ended up in Bingham, and what he did now, if anything.

Sandra said, "How are *you* tonight?"

Chris said, "I'm fair to middling. Thank you for asking."

Stan said quietly, "What Sandy's not going to tell you, in her official capacity, is there's rough news in here."

"Uh-oh," Chris said.

"There is," Sandy said.

"Renee's partner," Stan said, "he was the one they found, that's been on the news."

"Ah no," Chris said. "*Wow* . . . the waitress in the coffee shop, she told me it had to do with an employee . . . Jesus, *Renee*, that's hard to wrap your mind around . . . how is she?"

"We don't know," Stan said, looking at Sandy, "do we?"

Sandy said, "She's in quite a bit of shock, is what I'm hearing. I mean who wouldn't be?"

Chris said, "Yeah, but is it like . . . is she scared herself, do you think?"

"That's an interesting angle," Stan said, "and hopefully way off . . . but you're saying, could they be *targeted* somehow? That'd be crazy to think."

"Strange things happen though," Sandy said. "If I was Renee, I'd at least stay with a girlfriend for a while."

"I think I would too," Chris said. "Though logically . . . could it have just been a crazy homeless person? Robbing the guy?"

"That could be too," Stan said. "It's normally pretty tame, but yeah there is an element in that park."

"Ooh boy," Chris said. "Now I'm leaving on a down note, that's for sure."

"*Where* you going again," Stan said, "from here?"

"Well, my original thought, way back, was Boise. But I wanted to look around Nevada first. So I'm thinking Winnemucca, maybe Sparks."

"Southern Oregon's nice too," Sandra threw in. "Corvallis, Roseburg, that area? US 20 out of Boise, if you *do* head up there, it's a straight shot."

"You're not travelling by vehicle though, right?" Stan said.

"Yeah, I was thinking of renting a car out of Reno though."

He wasn't really thinking about that, but that might actually make sense . . . except with the fake ID and so forth could you do it? Didn't you need a credit card?

The reality now of course, the reason you'd had to fake your way out here, you were under suspicion and were supposedly on the lam. Now that you were off the hook . . . did it matter anymore?

Except now you'd spend 2 and half weeks as Jeff Masters, so you better finish it off like that . . . or could that backfire a different way?

Too confusing. For now get the hell out of here in the morning, and you want to make adjustments along the way, deal with them then.

"Beautiful country up there," Stan was saying. "She's right."

"People too," Sandra said, "real different than Portland."

"Well you're giving me a lot to work with," Chris said, "I appreciate it."

"I never got into it with you," Stan said, "but you look a little young to be retiring."

"Yeah I'm still working," Chris said, "sort of."

"Sounds mysterious," Sandra said.

Chris figured you better not screw around here, so he said, "I got a little lucky. I got a buy-out, and I have a couple properties in Florida that keep me going."

Which was pretty much true, he did take the buy-out the Chronicle offered him, which was smart, because the ones that waited, the offer was a lot less in a couple years, with the newspaper business tanking fast all of a sudden.

And he did have the rental houses in Florida at one time, though he sold them, but he was still holding the paper which gave him a few extra bucks every month.

Hopefully Stan and Sandra weren't going to press him further, to where he'd have to make up the name of the company and what it did, but Stan half-smiled and said, "I could kind of see through you, when you were asking about neighborhoods. Not surprising, rental property is what you've got your eye on out here. Not *settling down* property."

“Honestly I could go either way,” Chris said. “You never know.”

Stan said, “You’re keeping it close to the vest, *whatever* you’re doing . . . Not a bad way to be. I was like that way myself when I was younger.”

After a couple more minutes, Chris had had enough blackjack and said goodnight to Sandra and Stan, and told them hopefully they could pick up the conversation on a return trip, that it had been a lot of fun.

## Chapter Nine

It wasn't as clean timing the Greyhound out here as it was from downtown LA, since that was a starting point and Bingham wasn't, and the 7:53 westbound Monday morning didn't roll up until close to 10.

But the main thing, he was on it, and moving, and thank God that extra day he had to spend, post-Del, didn't seem to open any of the crazy doors you tended to be worried about.

Not that he did anything stupid, meaning his handling of the matter Saturday night, he was pretty sure . . . but you get someone who happens to see him walking around Sunday and it triggers the guy thinking, Gee, I think I noticed that guy walking out of Del's store yesterday . . . still not a problem, most likely, but why put more pieces on the table.

But yeah, spending Sunday seemed fine, and in the end it looked better to be *told* what happened and have to *react* to it, and he felt he handled that part pretty well, the acting.

Sunday night he picked the wrong movie though when he got back to the room, the pre-paid one, he went with Rear Window from Hitchcock which he'd seen years ago, but now the touches and details seemed a little artificial.

Of course one thing nice was it was filmed in that early Technicolor they had, more vivid somehow than modern color in movies. And Hitchcock did know how to build up the suspense without necessarily scaring you, or resorting to cheap tricks, though it was scary at the end when the guy figures it out and comes over to James Stewart's apartment.

It *was* realistic, unfortunately, that some demented lunatic could want to eliminate his wife--and sadly those mutants exist obviously--but the part Chris couldn't buy was having her disappear right out of the apartment and thinking you're going to get away with it.

Separately, in his own case, with Del . . . you never were a hundred percent sure you did the right thing.

You could second guess yourself until the cows came home . . . and sometimes, like with Chip, you might later regret it . . . or at least regret the trouble you had to go to.

In Renee's case, the hope was you gave her a second chance.

It wouldn't be surprising if she'd already had second chances, and for whatever reason kept gravitating toward--and standing by--men who beat their girlfriends and wives.

But you used your best judgement . . . and you hoped you've given her a fresh crack at it . . . and Chris figured that's all we can do, there's no manual on life.

At any rate, the sign on Highway 80 not too far out of Bingham said 238 miles to Reno, and Chris put it at five hours in a car, so you better more or less double that by Greyhound . . . so he estimated if all goes well you'll be in Reno by 7 . . . and then you could make whatever further decisions you needed to.

Right now the angle of the seat wasn't bad, there was no one next to him, the heat was coming in decent and the scenery was soothing, and you felt you could let the tension of the last 2 and a half weeks go, and Chris slept like a baby all the way to Locklock, which was two hours from Reno . . . and for some reason, maybe because he had to use the rest room, the driver stopped at a McDonald's there, and everyone got to get out and eat real quick, and that sure hit the spot.

Unfortunately the bus he was on was a Denver to Reno run and that was it, and there was a layover in Reno and you had to change buses. The decision for Chris was not about trying to rent a car and go up to Boise, which was a fabrication.

Though that wouldn't be the worst idea, jump in something with cruise control and a satellite radio and bomb it on back to MB with no more outside interference.

But the bus was doing the job, you were almost in California and he could handle that part the rest of the way, plus, unlikely you'd be able to pull off the rental without a credit card, who was he kidding.

So okay fine . . . but one option--should you go to San Francisco first and check on that dog guy?

The San Francisco bus left Reno at 8:10, in an hour and a half, and the LA one left Reno at 9:40.

*Dang it*, there were too many decisions these days, and Chris wanted to confirm *something* and be done with it, so he bought his ticket to LA, and now he had about 3 hours . . . and this time he paid for one of those lockers they had, and stuffed his shoulder bag in there, not quite as worried about it this time, plus he'd spent a fair amount of the cash that he'd been guarding on the way out.

The Greyhound station was on Stephenson Street, which was a few streets over from Virginia, the main drag, and a half block from where the Truckee River runs through town.

One thing Chris wasn't excited about was killing time in another casino, but there was a bit of an arts district now along the river, not bad, reasonably tasteful, and there was a cafe that was pretty active for a Monday evening, and there were tables outside and Chris figured people imagined they were in Paris along the Seine, except here they looked like they were freezing their asses off.

So he went for a glass of white wine which he rarely did but it seemed appropriate, and he took in the atmosphere and reflected back a bit more on his experience and in particular that last conversation with Chandler, running it through his head and making sure he didn't miss some basic reason why he shouldn't be going home yet.

But nothing jumped out and he ordered another glass of wine, and most of the doofuses in the place were on their phone in some capacity, even the ones who'd come there together and were sitting right across from each other.

There was a kid to his left, who had a couple of textbooks on his table, and a laptop open, a college student you'd think, but what had he been doing so far, the half hour Chris had been here . . . typing away on the phone.



So Chris asked if he could borrow the laptop for a minute and without missing a beat with his texting the kid said sure, no worries and passed it over.

Chris of course was normally wary of using someone else's device, but there'd be no real intent behind this, and certainly no trail he was worried about leaving.

Still he took the one precaution of going into Chrome incognito mode, and he googled **Luella and the Capris**.

There were a surprising number of results, most of them from posts people had made from various venues, commenting on their music.

There were also newspaper reviews of past performances that showed up, not major papers, but Las Vegas, Oklahoma City, Bakersfield, Tucson, Tulsa . . . that level.

And Jeez, Bakersfield, *was* there some kind of connection there?

And then pretty far down the page was a website. Poorly done, since first of all it looked they tried to save a couple dollars and instead of using their own domain name they were using one of the free sites, where there's a whole bunch of gobbledygook *before* the name you want your fans to remember.

Man, terrible way to do business, no one can find you without having to work.

Anyhow the website itself was pretty rudimentary and needed to be updated, since under *Upcoming Shows* the most recent one was 2016.

But there was an About link, and that's what Chris was looking for, and when you clicked on it and sub-clicked some more there was an email address, but also a name, next to *For further information please contact:* and the name was Terri McDaniel.

So Chris googled *that* . . . and boom, good old *white pages* gave you the whole shebang, even her age, 36, but also a phone number and an address, 664 Epps Street, Reno.

Chris handed the laptop back to the kid and said thanks and asked where Epps Street was, and the kid said which part?

Chris didn't have an answer for that, and the kid explained there were some streets over there, the highway split them up, 395, and it was configured funny, the other half of the streets didn't pick up for a mile or so . . . so Epps and what?

Chris borrowed the computer again and came back with Epps and Slater, and the kid said that's not as close then but he'd be happy to give him a ride, he lived over that way, but he had about twenty more minutes of work first.

Chris said he'd appreciate that, and the kid went right back to the phone, whatever work he was doing was on that apparently . . . and Chris daydreamed a bit and wondered about Rory for the first time in a couple weeks, what the real story was there . . . and separately, should he ever try surfing, or that would be a joke at his age?

The kid dropped him off at the corner of Epps and Slater and Chris took stock of the situation for a minute, and asked himself, *what the hell am I doing here?*

There was no specific answer to that. What he thought he'd do, addressing it only superficially, was ring the bell . . . and then . . . well, depending on who answered, if anyone, you could maybe throw in your two cents to diffuse a situation . . . if something like that was actually on anyone's radar.

638 was across the street and three houses in. Everything was new, it felt like the whole street was just developed, and a lot of the front lawns were still dirt, and some of them had those little flags sticking up that contractors use to mark underground lines.

The houses were narrow, more like townhouse size, as were the lots, with your neighbor literally a couple feet away from you through two windows, rinsing out his Cheerios bowl in the kitchen sink.

There was a car in the driveway, a white late model pickup with the extra seats in back, and you could see smoke coming out of the chimney, doubtful they allowed fireplaces anymore in new construction, but something was on, so someone was there.

Chris was getting cold feet here. He wasn't nervous or scared the normal way, but it was the unfamiliar feeling of not knowing what your purpose was.

You weren't going to strike anybody with a silly rock or anything when they opened the door, it was nothing like that.

One more time, what *was* this all about?

The most honest answer would be, he had time to kill and anything beat hanging around a bus station.

The second would be, he was curious. After all he was human . . . but curious about specifically *what*?

You have this Terri gal back in that lounge, plenty of mystery to her already . . . and was most if not all of what she laid on you BS?

Now she's got some enigmatic person who's going to pay a visit to this guy and negotiate on her behalf? Did that mean shake the guy down, kick him out, smack him around? Or make some *other* kind of point?

What was her exact issue? He's two-timing her? Chris wasn't even sure if he had *that* part straight.

He admitted he was here partly for his own amusement. This gal put on a great show, and likely she was putting on at least a partial one *offstage* as well . . . I mean you send a guy to mess with your spouse or boyfriend because he's cheating on you . . . that sounded like something out of the movies.

Especially . . . Jeeminy . . . when you're going to town yourself on that Carl guy.

This was how you got headaches.

But it was . . . 8:19 at the moment, and you had an hour and twenty minutes before your bus left for MB . . . and you'd gone to the trouble to come out here.

Still, it would be nice to at least make sure you had the right place, and as he approached the front door there were unfortunately no indicators, no names on the mailbox, no redwood carved thing that you got at a summer fair, that some guy in a booth put your names on with a router and you nailed up.

So . . . here goes . . . and Chris didn't know what he was going to say until the guy opened the door, and he said, "How you doing tonight. I believe I met a Terri that lives here . . . and if I got the wrong house, very sorry to bother you."

Nice enough seeming guy, a little older than Chris expected, if Terri was in her 30's this guy had to be closer to 50, but you saw that more and more, so no big deal.

This guy was fit-looking, standing there in a white t-shirt despite it being pretty nippy out, and the tip of a tattoo protruding from the bottom of the sleeve over the left bicep.

"Not at the moment," the guy said, kind of automatic, like a phone person taking a message, "can I tell her who's inquiring about her?"

"Yeah, sure, it's Jeff from Bingham," Chris said, extending his hand, the guy ignoring it though.

"Uh-huh," the guy said. "And?"

"And . . . you kind of *got me*, I have to admit," Chris said, regretting this rapidly. "I'm passing through, I had a little time window. Sorry to bother you."

"No bother at *all*," the guy said, not exactly inviting him in, but in no apparent rush to wrap up the encounter. Chris also felt like the guy was narrowing his eyes.

"Okay . . . well," Chris said.

"What I may be putting together here," the guy said, "you're messing with my lady . . . Or if you're not there yet, you're trying to be."

"No, no *Bud*," Chris said, "nothing at *all* like what you're saying."

"Yeah? . . . Fuck you doing out there in a pit like Bingham?"

Jeez, he might have expected those questions from the authorities or something, if he got very unlucky, but now from *this* guy?

Something about the guy did remind him of Kyle, and the Bethany situation in Anthem.

This guy was bigger and a little gruffer . . . but Kyle was plenty asshole when he opened the door too, and put on the same tough guy act.

In fact it looked like this guy was in the middle of eating something, just like Kyle was.

And Chris wasn't in the mood, not even close, for wasting much more time dancing around the subject.

So he said, "Bottom line? I'm checking up on her, make sure you're treating her okay . . . Fair enough?"

The guy started rubbing his lower lip, taking in this unexpected piece of information, hard to read, but Chris guessed he wasn't shocked, that this had been on the table for a while in one form or another.

Rather than get mad or more hostile, the guy appeared to ease up . . . so maybe he *had* been down this road recently and was relieved that this was all it was.

The guy raised his hand, like excuse me for just a moment, and went in the other room, Chris figuring he had something on the stove he had to turn down, or his cellphone was buzzing.

Now he was a little more glad he came, that he was doing the right thing airing it out for what it was worth . . . and the guy was a good sport obviously, and furthermore probably was treating Terri fine . . . and the more he thought about it, she was probably a major bullshit artist.

If he didn't come out here and see for himself, especially having the extra time on his hands, he would have felt bad about it . . . so there you were.

The guy came back and he was carrying a fireplace log, and Chris's first reaction was, so they *do* allow fireplaces in new construction?

He was pretty positive those days were over in Marin, and Petaluma and the city, and anywhere else he lived in California. And even the ones that were grandfathered in, they restricted you now, about a hundred Spare The Air days a year, so you couldn't ignite much of anything anyway.

Or, was the guy holding some sort of pellet-stove type job, or something that fit the energy-efficient criteria and was okay.

But no . . . it looked pretty organic and had old-fashioned bark and some yellow fibrous stuff clinging to it like you see, and Chris was trying to figure out

exactly what was going on, when the guy reared back and hit him in the head with the log.

Later on, he remembered falling backward and then that was about it.

He didn't remember the neighbors starting to gather, the ambulance arriving or the squad car pulling up as they were loading him in.

He remembered waking up when the ambulance was nearing the side entrance to the hospital, because there was a speed bump you had to go over . . . and why the heck would they have one of those?

Unless the ambulance took a different approach through the parking lot or something . . . Either way, that woke him up, but it was strange, he was acutely aware of not being real alive.

Or at least those were the tricks his mind was playing on him.

They wheeled him in, there were a couple people in scrubs waiting, and they transferred him to a table, which hurt like hell, and they cut off his shirt and started checking him out.

Even not feeling real good there Chris was thinking, Jeez, you can't take a little longer and unbutton the thing and not wreck it?

Then they went to work on the side of his forehead, there was bleeding that hadn't completely stopped, and they wheeled him away for a CAT scan and brought him back and stitched him up.

The whole time, in his mind, he was going in and out of where he was. He was pretty sure he wasn't going to die at least. The ER doc and the nurses had given him the impression he might at first, since they were in a scramble, move-quick mode, with the doc calling out stuff to the others.

Probably that was their normal way, when someone comes out of an ambulance who they don't know much about, and the urgency seemed to let up after a few minutes.

Now Chris was in a side cubicle off the main ER, and he figured this was a temporary intensive care type deal, since you were right there where they could watch you, no door and even the wall had a big glass window.

After a half hour laying in that little room he felt things stabilizing in his brain . . . to an extent.

He could remember back to being a kid, no problem, and he could mostly remember moving to Manhattan Beach, but his short term memory was erratic, which scared the hell out of him.

For instance he remembered getting off the bus, but nothing after that until he woke up bouncing over that speed bump.

Wait a second, trying to dredge it up now, that was wrong . . . he remembered the guy in the doorway hitting him with something, but he had no idea what he was doing there . . . and you had a lot of other breaks in the chain, one of the bad ones being he couldn't remember where he'd come here *from*.

Eventually the doctor came in. "Mr. Holmes, I didn't have a chance to introduce myself earlier, but I'm Dr. Wolfe," the guy said. "Our evaluation, besides the laceration, is you've sustained a class 4 concussion."

"Oh," Chris said. The Holmes part wasn't quite making sense, but he put it together--sort of--that they must have asked him his name at some point and he gave them Ray's.

That was another thing . . . he'd left his bag in that Greyhound locker but he had his wallet with him, which something vaguely told him contained both his real and the fake IDs.

And just to make sure, right here with the doc talking to him, he reached down and checked . . . So that was good at least, no one lifted that information from him when he wasn't in a position to stop them.

"So," the doctor was saying, "considering the possible severity of the head injury, and in light of the fact that it resulted from an apparent assault, we're going to admit you overnight."

"Okay hold on there," Chris said. "If I could get a couple things straight . . . Did I speak to the police?"

"You might have, at the scene. We have no information on that."

"How about here?"

“Generally, an incident like this, an officer will take a statement from you within the hour.”

“*What* hour?”

The doctor said, “You’ll be here for a while, so everything will work out. May I ask why you’re so concerned?”

“Yeah,” Chris said. “I can’t remember what happened anyway, I’m mostly going by what you told me . . . so what would I be able to add for the police?”

“I wouldn’t worry about that, Mr. Holmes,” the doctor said. “it’s routine.”

“Ah . . . let me ask you this, then. What’s my first name?”

The doctor didn’t react funny, since he probably dealt with that often, a common side effect of a head injury. “Ken,” he said.

Chris said, “Okay good then . . . At least my noggin, it’s got that part right.”

“Indeed,” the doc said. “And again, rest is the best remedy at this point, so please don’t concern yourself with anything beyond that scope.”

“You admit me . . . that mean a room and everything?”

“Yes. You’ll be right upstairs. The neurologist will be by tomorrow, and you’ll be re-evaluated.”

Chris said, “Well thank you. Would you have another shirt or something?”

“We really don’t, I’m sorry. But you can talk to our in-patient services coordinator when it is deemed appropriate to facilitate your release.”

“You guys always talk like that?”

The doc at least had a sense of humor. “Depends on the med school. Some are more formal than others.”

“Where’d you go?”

“I went to Vanderbilt.”

“Where is that--Nashville?”

“You got it.”

“Let me ask you this then . . . how is it living down there?”

The doctor said, “I can see you’re a spirited individual. My answer would be complicated, and would take more time than we have right now.”



“I’m looking to reinvent myself,” Chris said. “What happens though, I gotta keep re-reinventing from the last effort . . . if that makes sense.”

“Not at all,” the doctor said. “We’ll check on you in an hour though.”

“Sounds good,” Chris said, and he tried his best to size things up.

First of all, it was interesting that he apparently combined two of his favorite people’s names, Ray and Ken. More importantly, you’d hope no one had any more information on him than that.

He wasn’t sure if he told the doorway guy his name, but he was pretty darn sure if he did, he didn’t blurt out Chris Seely.

So . . . his ID still on his person likely meant no one knew who he was. At the moment he couldn’t remember the fake name he’d been using, the Jeff Masters business, but he was pretty positive he had his real name right.

Could they have checked his ID in the ambulance? Taken his wallet out of his pants pocket, looked inside, and put it back?

He decided that was unlikely because this doc kept calling him Mr. Holmes--which could have been his fake name on his fake ID, the one he couldn’t remember, but he doubted it . . . and Jeez, just check . . . and he would in a minute.

Plus . . . maybe there was some civil rights deal, where you couldn’t check someone’s ID without their permission except in certain circumstances. This would be one more example, of course, of common sense run amok, with ordinary law-abiding citizens usually paying the price--but that was another discussion.

Bottom line . . . the thing now, would be to get the fuck out of here.

Soon enough you *would* have the cops asking you your version of what happened, and how you were acquainted with the individual . . . and you’d have insurance people sticking you with paperwork and wanting information and who knows, maybe even some news people would show up.

Chris was groggy-headed and his memory was unfortunately selective . . . but for sure he knew this could not be good.

They left him in the little side room for a couple more hours, and the doc was good for his word, he did check back every hour, but both the other things happened too.

First, a petite older woman with a Texas accent shows up with a clipboard and a folder full of forms she's going to fill out in Chris's presence. Chris gave her his name, Ken Holmes, and she began the process by writing that on the first line of the first form. Then Chris said, "Beyond that I can't give you anything, but I'm pretty sure I'll have it all straight by tomorrow, can you come back then?"

"That's not ideal," the woman said, "but we at least need your insurance carrier tonight."

Chris told her to come back in 90 minutes in that case, that he was doing the brain exercises the doctor gave him and should be clearer on everything by then.

It was pretty obvious the lady knew when he was full of baloney, but she picked up the paperwork and left.

A few minutes later a policeman comes in. He was an older guy, uniform, no hat, not looking in a good mood, like he'd nearly done his shift and was getting ready to go home and then this pops up.

"Sorry for your situation," the officer said, no formalities, getting right to it.

"Well thanks for coming by," Chris lied.

"Now we have a Robert Jordan," the cop said, flipping open a notepad, "involved in a confrontation with you. Not much to go on past that, other than what a resident said they saw."

"What'd they see?" Chris said.

"How bout you tell me."

"If I had it clear upstairs in my frontal lobe I would," Chris said. "I believe I was looking for an address . . . and I might of rang the wrong bell. What'd that guy hit me with anyway?"

"So *that* you do remember," the cop said. "A piece of wood."

“Either way . . . let’s just wrap it up, how about? I’m not interested in pursuing anything. So can we do that?”

“No,” the cop said. “There was an alleged assault. I’m required to make a report. Otherwise, I got better places to be wiping my ass.” Though Chris was pretty sure the guy didn’t *have* to make *any* report if he wasn’t pressing charges, but the guy had his attitude regardless.

“But see?” Chris said. “That’s what I was just thinking when you walked in, this guy’s *already* pissed off, he’s had enough for one day.”

“Well you’re a genius then . . . You got some ID on you there pal?”

Chris said, “Nah, not on me, no.”

The guy stopped with the pad and gave Chris his full attention. He said, “You some kind of prick now? I ain’t got time for this.”

And of course in the old days of police work a guy with this kind of chip on his shoulder would make sure no one was looking, and close a curtain if they had one, and stand Chris up and spin him around and pull out his wallet.

Chris was thinking overall, the big picture, that was probably the best way to conduct police work. A little force when someone who should have been cooperating wasn’t. Yeah, there’d be some mistakes made and a few people jerked around unfairly . . . but you’d avoid a lot of legal red tape and solve more crimes.

But how to conduct effective police work was none of Chris’s business . . . far from it. His main concern was how not to cooperate.

He said, “Welp, I feel bad you had to make the trip out here. I’m fine though . . . no harm, no foul. Does that make sense?”

“No,” the cop said, putting his notebook away. “I’m rolling it over to my lieutenant. His name’s Selby. He’ll be in touch. You’ll find out, he’s not as patient a man as I am.”

When the guy left Chris pulled out what he did have in his pockets, since he wasn’t a hundred percent clear, and yes, back to back in his wallet there were the Chris Seely and Jeffrey Masters drivers licences--and dang, Booker’s guy really did do a job, you couldn’t tell them apart.

In his other pocket was his bus ticket, Reno to Manhattan Beach. He was still hazy on those details, why he'd gotten off here, wouldn't you stay on your bus all the way to LA?

He knew there was a logical explanation, and not worth worsening your already massive headache trying to figure it out, but the bad part was the 9:40 that his ticket was for was history, since it was 10:17 at the moment on the overhead clock in his cubicle that wasn't very hi tech at all considering the rest of this place, and was pissing him off because you could hear a click every time the hands moved.

The doctor came in once more with a nurse this time, and they took his blood pressure and vital signs, and something else occurred to Chris, since he hadn't been examined by anyone since that last time back in Steiner's office in February, when Chris was pretty convinced he might not live out the year.

"Doc, let me ask you this," Chris said, after they'd made notes on his chart, and of course a handheld device was in play now too, the nurse typing God knows what into *that*, but it took a while, and she finished and left the room.

"Certainly," the doctor said.

"Okay, well . . . how am I overall? I mean pretty good shape and everything?"

"Excuse me?" the doctor said.

"No, I mean forgetting my head thingamajig . . . if I walked in here cold and you examined me . . . what would you have?"

"That's a strange concern right now, I must admit," the doctor said. "But your basics seem fine. Especially for a patient who's endured a significant trauma."

"Okay fine, but what beyond the basics?"

"Mr. Holmes, I'm afraid you'll need to be more specific."

"Okay here's the deal . . . Some guy death-sentenced me, let's see what it was . . ." and Chris started counting it off on his fingers, "Jeez, going on 10 months ago now. At any rate, it was supposedly a stage-4 deal, and grim."

"I see," the doc said. "And you've been undergoing treatment?"

“Nah. They couldn’t come up with one victim like me, who they cured with the treatment they wanted to hammer me with . . . So I said Fuck that shit . . . Sorry about my language.”

“Uh-huh,” the doctor said. “Well naturally we’d need more information.”

“You think I’m full of crap, don’t you?” Chris said.

The doctor didn’t say anything.

Chris said, “My doc back then, he’s an old friend of mine I grew up with. He had a voluptuous receptionist I was pretty sure he was banging on the side, and that strained the relationship. After a certain point, I never went back.”

Chris knew he was talking kind of funny, shooting from the hip, figuring they probably shot him up with multiple meds when he was groggy or even before he woke up. But it was good to at least get some positive feedback from this guy.

Whether he believed him or not the doctor politely said, “What you point to is why we recommend against engaging practitioners who you have an outside relationship with.”

“Fine,” Chris said, “ignoring that--do I look to you like a guy on the way out?”

“Head injuries are tricky,” the guy said, “I’m going to level with you on that. We’re just scratching the surface, I’m afraid, of understanding the long term effects. At the moment, you appear stable and relatively coherent.”

“Forget the head business,” Chris said, “could someone have screwed up in a lab? Worked the wrong microscope? Halfway looked at a text message when they were entering my name into some shit . . . and mixed me up with someone else?”

“It can happen, I suppose,” the doctor said. “We’re all human . . . if you’re concerned--and you really *are not* concocting this--your test sequence can be easily repeated.”

“Yeah . . . so I’ve heard,” Chris said, and he said thanks and the guy left.

So, putting it all together . . . he’d had a rudimentary physical tonight, and nothing jumped out that moved the needle haywire.

Which you'd have to call not a win, exactly, but at least a positive. Just too bad it required getting hit over the head to obtain that information . . . but it was what it was.

The crux of the matter, once again, how do you get out of here?

One way . . . you could get up right now, a little wobbly admittedly, but stagger right out the front door?

You'd have to pull the IV out of your forearm, or if that didn't work disconnect the bag on the other end. No one could legally stop you from doing all that, right?

A couple problems with that though . . . they might unfortunately be *able* to stop you, because you need to pay for your damn stay. You were enough of a jerk to brush 'em off when they politely asked for your information, so they could likely detain you now, just like some doofus who tries to skip out on his dinner bill.

Not only that, with it likely being categorized an open crime case, the cops would get a call pretty quick, wouldn't they? If you decided to end your visit prematurely?

So all Chris could do, if he wanted to keep it sensible, was wait.

And not surprisingly, things didn't happen quick in hospitals.

Whether he wanted to or not, but him being right there facing into the center of the ER, you observed the workings of a typical Monday night in early December, no major incidents but a lot of minor ones, kids with fevers, someone who got a piece of a q tip stuck in their ear, a guy with part of a finger cut off and the rest of it wrapped in a napkin, hoping they could sew it back, one real fat guy who looked dead coming in from the ambulance but the staff trying to shock him for a few minutes before calling it.

The doctors, including his guy, sure spent a lot of time on the computer. There was a station right in the ER and Chris supposed they had to document every detail in case they got sued for malpractice. An unfortunate side effect of trying to keep people safe, you couldn't effectively practice medicine anymore without looking over your shoulder, it seemed like.

Finally at 5 in the morning two orderlies showed up with a doctor, a new one, and the doc said they were officially admitting him now and moving him to the third floor, and to try to get as much rest as possible.

Everyone kept telling him to rest, like a broken record . . . but wasn't there something he'd heard, when you have a concussion you try to stay *awake*? Which would mean *don't* try to get all this rest . . . but whatever.

The orderlies got him in and out of the elevator and into the room, there were two beds but the other one was empty, and soon a nurse or assistant nurse or whatever she was came in--that was another thing, you couldn't tell what anyone *was* in this place. The orderlies were wearing the same scrubs as the docs, but maybe that was the idea, keep you confused as possible so you give up and don't act difficult and question them.

The nurse or assistant was cute, bubbly personality, big mop of blonde hair piled up high on her head.

As she was straightening out his pillows and showing him how to adjust the bed and work the TV changer Chris said, "I'm gonna say something, and you tell me if I'm wrong . . . your name is Kay, and you have rosy cheeks."

Kay smiled and said, "That's very perceptive of you Mr. Holmes. You read my name tag very well."

"How'd I figure out the cheeks?" Chris said.

"That would be a mystery, I guess," Kay said.

"Because my cognitive abilities, they're supposed to be impaired. But this just shows, I'm fine."

Kay kept going about her business and said, "Well you seem like a person who wouldn't get into a fight. What happened to you?"

Chris said, "Are you asking me from a medical standpoint? Or just from the couch, unofficially, like someone watching Dr. Phil?"

"The second one," Kay said.

"So . . . let me out of here, and I'll buy you dinner and tell you."

"Very funny."

Chris said, “What you’re saying . . . that might make sense, except it’s breakfast time at the moment . . . the answer to your question, I don’t *know* what happened.”

“See then? That’s why we need to keep an eye on you.”

“What I meant was, I remember what happened, but not why . . . though it’s starting to come back to me, bit by bit.”

Which it was, he remembered now that he was at that house looking for Terri the singer, though he couldn’t remember her name or the reason he was ringing her bell.

“How about *this* then?” Chris said. “We go out the back door, down the emergency stairwell or some shit, we get in your car and you drive me to California . . . What would you charge me to do that?”

Kay said, “You’re a nut.”

“You just tell ‘em you had a little situation, and you needed a few days off, spur of the moment . . . How about two thousand dollars?”

“Yeah, right,” she said.

“Make it three. Take you about 12 hours total, there and back.”

“I must say,” Kay said, “this discussion, would be considered an atypical interaction with a patient.”

“I know what you mean,” Chris said. “Four.”

“This is outrageous,” Kay said. “And I can’t believe you’re half serious.”

You could tell now though, whether she was sure he was serious or not, the wheels were at least turning, and on some level she was addressing the possibility.

“What kind of car do you have?” Chris said.

“None of your business,” Kay said, and Chris enjoyed this defiant side surfacing.

He said, “Because I might up my price, depending how comfortable the ride would be.”

“You’re *very* strange.”



“You know how they conduct auctions?” Chris said. “Though not as much that way any *more*, they’re pasteurizing the spirit out of them now. I went to a real estate auction, not a municipal thing but a private one, condos that didn’t sell and got repossessed.”

“And your point?” Kay said.

“The auctioneer, he didn’t put on any act. That used to be the best *part*. The: *Do I hear two, diddy-diddy . . .* a good auction presentation is an art form, kind of like a good horse race announcer when they’re thundering down the stretch neck and neck.”

“Hmm,” Kay said.

“What I’m getting to,” Chris said, “at the end, the going once, going twice . . . sold.”

“They’ve gotten rid of that part too?”

“No, that’s still there. So here’s your chance . . . Four thousand, going once . . . going twice . . . *oh*, sorry, time’s up.”

“I can’t think it over at least?” Kay said.

“No. You gotta act quick, when an opportunity presents itself . . . Keep that in mind in the future, from an old guy who’s lived a little bit. I’m not joking.”

“You don’t look that old.”

“I turned 43.”

“Yeah, well, that’s about right.”

“Jeez, you’re supposed to phrase that a little differently . . . I’ll spot you though, just tell me how to get out of here, where I’d be causing the least disruption.”

Kay looked at Chris and waited for more, and Chris kept his mouth shut and waited too.

Kay said, “You’re serious, aren’t you? Something tells me you were serious before too.”

“Indeed. That part, you blew.”

“Mr. Holmes . . . let me ask you this . . .”

“Call me Ken.”

“Ken, is it you’re worried, someone . . . might be looking for you?”

Chris hadn’t thought of that angle, but that was good. He said, “That’s the way it works, yeah. Unfinished business.”

“Well Gosh,” she said, starting to look genuinely concerned now, “are you sure?”

“No I’m not,” Chris said. “But I have a bad feeling . . . This IV, can you pull it out, for starters?”

Kay took a moment and said, “I’m sorry, I can’t help you with that.”

“Okay thanks anyway, you’re a good sport,” Chris said, and Kay was at the door, and he said, “You happen to have an extra set of scrubs or something?”

And Kay said she didn’t . . . but as she was leaving the room she added over her shoulder that they kept them in the closet past the water fountain . . . and to be sure and get some rest, and she’d check on him in an hour.

A few minutes later Chris was down the hall and into the nearest stairwell, and he’d gotten the dang IV out of his forearm no problem, he’d been overthinking it, and he had the scrubs on, which were at the very least an improvement over the hospital gown, and luckily he had his shoes, they didn’t get lost in the ER and they were in the room with him.

And when you got to the bottom of the stairs you could exit on the ground level, or go another flight down to the parking garage.

That seemed like a good option, keep going . . . not that he was about to carjack someone or steal a car down there, but what it let you do was walk up the ramp, nice and civilized, if a little awkward, and then you were on the street, not having to cross the hospital grounds in full view of anyone to get there.

The only obstacle was the parking attendant, not used to seeing a human walking up the ramp, but Chris gave the guy a smile and a little salute like they knew each other, and the guy seemed to react okay, and then Chris was in the middle of the street you fed into, Staggs Boulevard, making sure he didn’t get hit by a car since it wasn’t that light out yet--and wouldn’t *that* be an irony.

## Chapter Ten

Chris found a 7-11 and wanted to call a cab. He remembered the bus station, what it looked like inside, but he had no idea where it was, or where downtown period would be, his sense of direction was all screwed up.

They did have an old fashioned physical map of Reno in the 7-11, in fact it was a freebie with a bunch of advertisements on it front and back, mostly for casinos and who was in the upcoming rotation headlining the various shows.

There was no Greyhound depot on the map though, but Chris figured if you got to the main drag you couldn't be too far off, and he didn't have his phone with him and there was a rare payphone outside and he stuck in some quarters but it seemed messed up.

This wasn't what he needed right now, and a guy pulled up in a pickup to buy a pack of cigarettes, and when the guy got back outside Chris said he'd give him 20 bucks for a ride downtown, and the guy sized it up for a second and said fine.

When they got going the guy asked did you mean downtown Sparks or downtown Reno, and Chris realized Jeez, they must have taken me to a hospital in Sparks then, the next town over from Reno, the outskirts connected to each other, but still, a ways.

Chris told the guy Reno please and the guy said that'd be forty then, and Chris thought Jeez, what a tough negotiator, though he couldn't blame the guy, picking up a doofus stranger in hospital scrubs who was likely mentally ill . . . and he said fine, and the guy dropped him off behind Harrah's.

Chris asked the first person who passed by where the Greyhound station was, and the guy didn't know, and it actually took until the 6th person before he got the answer, the others either not knowing or being afraid of him and not answering and walking faster.

As he got closer to Stephenson Street it started coming back to him and he was getting his bearings, but the big sudden concern he hadn't thought of was getting out of these scrubs and getting some real clothes, and he wondered, everything else being 24 hours in the casinos, could any of them have a menswear type place that'd be open this early?

He was getting ready to ask people that question, and then . . . wait a second, he had his *bag* for Gosh sakes, stuffed into one of those lockers at the station. Jeez.

Then he started feeling around in his scrub pockets for the key to the thing, panicking now, wondering did he leave anything behind in the hospital room, but when he checked his wallet there it was, one of those magnetized plastic cards like they gave you in hotels.

There was no number on the card, and Chris was thinking oh boy, one *more* adventure . . . but when he got to the lockers he remembered the approximate area and had to try three that weren't it but then he found his and it opened.

He felt a lot better getting back to normal attire, though admittedly--and even a bit glaringly when he looked at himself in the bathroom mirror--he did stand out because of the head gash and all the dressing, though of course you had a lot of people running around Greyhound stations who didn't look all that different themselves.

But just for the heck of it, he had a wool ski hat with him, which he hadn't used in Bingham but could come in handy now, not a ski hat so much as an NFL warm up beany, and for whatever reason his said Kansas City Chiefs, and he pulled it down and it covered most of the damage, though it sure was scratchy against the area.

Still, your best bet would be hightail it out of here the earliest way, and there were no buses heading west until this evening, not great to hear, but there was one going east, boarding right now as a matter of fact . . . and ah man, unbelievable, was he actually going to get on the thing?

It didn't take much deliberation, and Chris bought his ticket and found a seat halfway back, and he told himself this is insane but you really need to go with the flow here.

This thing was going to take you back to Bingham if you let it, but you could get off in Fernley or Lovelock or Imlay, he was seeing now in the Greyhound brochure . . . little dinky towns though, so you might as well at least stay on until Winnemucca, much larger, easier to blend in if you were still worried about that, plus you'd have the option then to go to Boise *after all*, which the brochure was saying would take you 5 hours and 32 minutes up US 95 North.

The bus pulled out of Reno and pretty soon you had the familiar wide open spaces and the desert sagebrush and Chris could relax a bit for the first time in about 12 hours, and there was no sugarcoating what an idiot he'd been . . . And he still didn't recall the specifics of what he was bothering the boyfriend about, but his head was continuing to come around and he was getting the idea . . . but either way, what was he thinking?

But you couldn't alter dumb behavior after the fact, you had to deal with it, and having the police on him, even as the good guy who got clocked, could never be a good thing.

Sooner or later they figure out you happened to just show up out of the blue from Bingham . . . where nobody spends two weeks . . . and speaking of that, what were you doing there anyway?

In other words, what were you running away *from*, that put you in a middle of nowhere place like that?

And the correct answer to *that*--running away from something I didn't end up *doing*--just wasn't going work in your favor, was it . . .

Since the logical follow up is . . . fine, so what'd you do *previously* that spooked you into running away from something you *didn't do*?

And on and on.

Chris was thinking . . . just like he dished out that advice to Kay about not getting paralysis of analysis when an opportunity presents itself . . .

That his advice would be, for a young guy coming up, who maybe reminded him of himself--that even if your heart's in the right place . . . don't kill anyone.

There are a lot better ways to do the right thing. Stuff lines up on you like a chain reaction--and look what happened, these last two times, essentially a good citizen minding his own business and not *doing* anything . . . and you take all this heat, which could just be the tip of the iceberg.

Of course by referring to *these last two times*, he forgot about Del in the middle, where he *wasn't* just minding his own business obviously . . . but the concept is the same.

Maybe because he'd traveled it so recently, or more likely, because they were going *the wrong friggin way*, it seemed to take forever to get to Winnemucca.

But finally there you were, pulling off 80, and you could hear the repeated click of the driver's turn signal way back in his seat, and Chris said to himself when I start dwelling on stuff like that I really gotta get out of here.

Winnemucca was a little bigger than Bingham, you could see it extending further into the foothills, but the main difference was it had more of an old western feel. It was hard to tell if that was natural, meaning there were saloons and gunfighters here back in the day and that spirit continued on, or if the old west angle was artificially created and maintained to help the casinos and draw in the tourists.

Either way it was definitely different being here than that time on the road trip with Allison and Monica, because without a vehicle you had no control, and even though you had the burden of other people then, coming off the bus now you sure felt more helpless and limited.

Which was all the more reason to straighten that out, and when he thought more seriously about the Boise option, would would you do up there?

Yes, you'd be getting lost again for a while, but that didn't seem as big a concern this time as when the LA cops stopped by the pool.

You'd accomplished the main thing, after all, which was getting out of Reno before you seriously landed on anyone's radar, and they'd obviously make the token effort to find you and follow up, the cops and the hospital people, but they should run out of steam.

So as long as you didn't bring a bullhorn and open the window and make an announcement as the bus rolled back *through* Reno you should be okay, and Chris looked on the big board behind the clerk at the Winnemucca Greyhound station, and there weren't a heck of a lot of interesting options going back west, but there was the daily Salt Lake City to San Francisco run leaving this evening, and you'd have to kill the afternoon, but the alternative was the Denver to LA run, which had already come through today and required staying overnight, and that prospect was just too much.

Chris asked the clerk if you had to get off in Reno and change buses or anything, and the guy said no, straight through, and Chris bought his ticket, and the rest of the afternoon went by like grains drizzling out of hourglass but finally he was back on board trying to piece together what happened today, much less last night, which his head was still throbbing like a mother from.

An hour back toward Reno some guy in an SUV apparently did something the bus driver didn't like, and the driver let the guy pass and then swung into the fast lane and gunned it, he had to be 25 miles over the speed limit, and he started riding the guy . . . and Chris tried to close his eyes and block out yet one more thing that was going slightly haywire today.

And this was the problem . . . people had no idea what you had to go through with this stuff, and half the precautions you took were probably unnecessary--but you had no idea which *ones* were unnecessary so you ended up making a lot of dumb moves.

And now, when the dust settles you're back in the Bay Area instead of LA, not the end of the world, you'd figure it out from there . . . but since you were there anyway should you at least look into the dog guy?

The easiest thing would be not to address *anyone* else--look what just happened--but the description from the guy across the street of the dog

squealing in her last moments of life was tough to take, and once again you might have to override your common sense.

Reno went by uneventfully, Chris stayed on the bus during the stop and slumped down just in case, and it was good it was dark . . . but now everything was feeling worse, not just the head where they stitched him up but his neck, shoulders, chest, and the old groin wasn't feeling too spry either for whatever reason.

There was a general crummy feeling of malaise that was hitting him big-time, and he supposed that's how it worked, 24 hours for everything to get worked in good, kind of like when you cook a big chili from scratch it's more flavorful the next day.

What it meant was sleep was impossible and he found himself mad at the doctor, the ER guy who admittedly stood there and listened to him and answered his questions, but really, what did he *do* for him, weren't they supposed to fix you up better than that so you could at least close your damn eyes?

Chris knew he was being irrational, the guy wanted to admit him after all, meaning he wasn't ready to be running around yet . . . and that's what you get, he was paying the price now.

There was snow in the Sierras and the bus had to stop while they put chains on to go over Donner Summit, and you had to go through the same routine on the down side to take them off, and that added an hour, and what else could you pile on, except mercifully you finally had the Bay Bridge in the distance and the bus pulled in at the Folsom Street station at 3:52 in the morning.

You were a few blocks south of Market and in from the Embarcadero and this had always been a crummy part of town and still was. They'd converted the printing factories and the old coffee mills and beer breweries to condos and low-rise brick office buildings, so you could try to dress it up but it was still a scuzzy area.



But who *cared* about that . . . Chris hailed the first cab he saw and told them Fillmore and Lombard, not knowing where else to go and definitely not wanting to rack his brain, and there was going to be no trial and error this time, he went to the one place he'd stayed last time, hoping again for some kind of discount, since they were into early December and well past the big fall tourist rush.

Not only did the guy *not* give him a discount, he charged him an extra half day to check in now, since it was so early . . . so this little nap he was going to take just ran him \$248.20 plus tax, paid upfront.

If you'd just held your poise there, and hadn't bothered trying to find Luella or Terri or whatever the heck, and not run into that clown's fireplace log, you would have saved all that . . . plus the extra bus fares, which weren't worth figuring out.

What really could have gotten you in trouble, of course, was if the nurse gal accepted your offer to drive you to MB, and you had to fork over the 4 grand.

So luckily that wasn't tacked on . . . though she was awful nice and he was stupid to at least not find out what her story was, forgetting the drive part, but you couldn't think of everything.

This time on Lombard Street you had the same traffic blazing outside as last time, and soon you've have the morning commute on top of it, and Chris thought oh boy and got in bed and started flipping channels, but luckily soon enough you could have driven something right into the room and he wouldn't have moved a muscle, and he didn't wake up until after 4.

He showered and shaved and they had some little complimentary colognes on the dresser so he picked one and splashed some of that shit on, you might as well pretend you're getting your money's worth, and fortunately he'd done a laundry before he left Bingham so he had all fresh clothes laid out, and he looked at himself in the mirror and the gash didn't look all that terrible, though the discoloration was fanning out pretty substantially.

But now what?

You had Weatherby's of course, just a block over on Chestnut, but happy hour wasn't his favorite time in there, it was too Millennial heavy, not that it wasn't later *on* too, but at least there was a little balance by then.

But then again . . . it had been a long time . . . and you never knew exactly what you were going to get, and you could easily end up regretting it . . . but there was Joyce.

Chris dug up her number, which he was a little surprised he didn't still know by heart, and maybe it was the concussion but more likely she was off the radar.

"Hey Babe," Joyce said.

"That's it?" Chris said. "That sounds like I just checked in with you 20 minutes ago."

"I'm a little pissed at you," she said. "Needless to say."

"Well that's on me . . . Things have shifted around a little. But what are friends for, right?"

Joyce said, "Something's up, I know you. You'd better spit it out."

"Well . . . I'm *around* right now. My old stomping ground, actually . . . What are you up to? Anything?"

"Yes I heard you moved," she said. "It would have more respectful to hear it from *you*."

"Oh yeah? Who'd you hear that from then?"

"Your friend Booker mentioned it."

Now that was interesting. First off, he didn't recall telling Booker he was going anywhere, but he could be mixed up, or someone else could have passed it on. Not worth trying to figure out.

But secondly, had Joyce *banged* Booker?

The first time he'd taken her there, the Booker Lounge, which was probably back in about March, Booker had come over and said hello and when he left she'd commented that he was a handsome man.

Which Chris supposed he was. Big imposing black guy, looked like he could have been a retired linebacker for the Raiders, but a calm demeanor, smooth.

Chris guessed it wasn't always that way, and Ray had mentioned something as well, that there'd been some difficult business once upon a time in Bayview, but Booker'd gotten through it and in this next stage of his life was running his version of a jazz bar, doing it his way, at his pace.

Old-fashioned cool.

And Joyce . . . she was an old-fashioned nymphomaniac, that had been proven more than once . . . so you could easily have a match. Booker had said something to Chris as well the next time, that he had good taste and that had been a foxy lady.

"So come into the city," Chris said. "We'll go there."

"Where? Booker's place you mean?"

"Yeah. I'm right on Lombard. Too early for Weatherby's I realize."

Joyce said, "Doesn't sound good tonight, frankly . . . all the options in San Francisco."

Chris was pretty sure now his hunch could be right, that either she had something currently going with the guy or did at one time. Otherwise, what's the problem with them stopping over there for a drink?

Chris said, "But coming in *period* sounds good?"

"Fine. Give me 15 minutes to pull myself together."

Chris told her he'd wait in Peet's, on Chestnut, which he never minded doing, the people watching being plenty lively.

Something else too. He was starting to become convinced he'd never find the complete package in a woman, and that was his fault, he knew it, he could waver between being a nice guy and self-centered bastard, and he always kept the other person off-balance, and eventually drove them away.

Which isn't exactly what happened with Joyce, they'd tried a relationship for a while and butted horns every chance they'd get.

She did have some nice qualities though. One of them, she was good in a crisis. Not that they'd encountered that many, but Chris could tell she would be, and he admired that about her.

She also could get ready fast. His mom told him one time when he was a teenager and was starting to go out on dates, to stick to the ones who didn't keep you waiting all night.

That wasn't bad advice. He didn't like to think of it these days as *life's too short*, but that was the idea.

It was kind of like people who commute to work. You add up all the hours in the car, multiply them by the week, the month, the decade . . . and that's a chunk of your life down the drain. You marry someone who needs an hour and a half to do their hair and make-up every day, you do the math, you're gonna come up short.

At any rate . . . it was unseasonably warm for December, and a few people were moaning that the drought was back, and Chris went out front where they had some chairs, and he had only sat his rear end down for a minute when boom, there's Joyce.

She was a half a block away, west, toward Pierce Street, across from the theater that they converted into a major fitness studio, and not surprisingly most of the Millennial women prancing around Chestnut Street right now had yoga pants on.

Joyce looked better than that, Chris had to admit, her spotting him now and smiling and waving, a jean jacket, a tasteful blouse, and dang, a leather skirt that fit her pretty well.

Chris got up and there were the obligatory hugs and Chris said unfortunately he was starved out of his mind and could they continue catching up in a restaurant, and Joyce said she knew that would be the case, he wasn't complicated, and she had one picked out half a block away, on Steiner.

They started you off immediately with a loaf of homemade sourdough bread, and Chris felt a whole lot better, though it was hard getting butter for it,

these places had all shifted to making you dip the bread in olive oil, which was dumb.

“Something about the atmospheric conditions,” Chris said, when the butter *did* come and everything was good, “is apparently the key to great sourdough.”

“I’ve heard that too,” Joyce said. “I believe the fog is a factor.”

“Right. Except in Manhattan Beach there’s a Ralph’s, one of those specialty supermarkets, and I tried theirs and they don’t know what they’re doing. No bite to it at all.”

“Tell me about Manhattan Beach,” Joyce said. “What’s a typical day like for you?”

“People keep wanting to know that, and it’s embarrassing not to have a good answer . . . Let me ask you something more relevant.”

“Certainly.”

“Have you had work done? Since I saw you last?”

Joyce put down her red wine, dabbed her mouth and said, “Chris, for Christ sakes here.”

“You look amazing,” he said, “it’s not a negative. You were coming down the street there, and the light was hitting you perfectly, and it was like one of those TV game shows, I had 10 seconds to figure out whether everything was real, and what parts.”

“You are so pathetic, I’m not even going to attempt to dignify that.”

Chris said, “Well let’s shift gears for a second. I don’t even want to get into it, but out of curiosity, what happened with that baseball field naming deal?”

“It wasn’t the field, it was the home dugout.”

“Oh yeah.”

“They voted it down, 3-2. The board.”

“Well that’s great news then, it meant a lot to you. Congratulations.”

Chris was thinking one more thing too, that the *result* didn’t matter . . . what *did*, was it was over, meaning it, and Donny, were at least out of the damn news.

Joyce said, “It appeared to be going the other way. I had to . . . make a backdoor promise, to one of the board members, to swing the vote.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Chris, will you cut it out, please? What do you think I am?”

Chris didn’t say anything and waited, and Joyce said, all it was, she promised to organize two Saturday baseball clinics every year for low income kids. She was stumbling around a little though, like she didn’t have her story straight, which could have been Chris’s imagination, but not likely.

The food came and it was great, and Chris had cannelloni, which was always hard to get right, and this definitely was making up for some of what he’d gone through, and he thanked Joyce for coming down, especially on a school night.

She said, “If I say you’re worth it, please don’t read too much into that. Meanwhile though, your *head* . . . I know you have a mystery life, and maybe kill people and things, but didn’t this happen once before?”

Chris almost regurgitated his bite of broccoli rabe.

“Jesus, *Criminy*,” he said. “You have to keep your voice down, I’m not joking here . . . But don’t be tossing around ludicrous statements from Mars, what’s wrong with you?”

She said, “Well last time I met you down here, or one of the last times, you’d gotten socked in the face, as I happen to remember it.”

“Yeah. And that was *your* guy, as *I* happen to remember it.”

“You’re blaming *me* now then?” Joyce was fairly quickly onto her third glass of red wine, and she could handle her liquor and the food was there to balance it out, but she definitely had a little more edge to her.

“No I’m not,” Chris said. “But speaking of *that* guy . . . and the *other* one too, the guy that lived with his parents . . . what happened to them?”

“First you need to tell me what happened to *you*.”

Chris didn’t feel like bullshitting his way through the evening and maybe it was *his* wine too now, but he didn’t see a lot of harm, or risk, in actually answering the damn question.

He said, “Now that I have a little distance on it, it was a Keystone Cops bit, I totally realize . . . You know who they are?”

“Yes, I know the expression. They were incompetent policeman in old silent movies.”

“Yeah,” Chris said, “bumbling. Comedic. I met a woman--and not what *you* think--she was a performer in a band, and I let myself get jerked around into worrying she’s going to do something bad to her husband.”

Chris hadn’t quite put two and two together until now, but this was a common theme lately, wasn’t it, Emma similarly bad-mouthing *her* husband, and Chris probably getting duped there as well.

“I’m listening,” Joyce said. “Shall we order desert?”

“Fine, whatever you want . . . in fact you’re looking a little skinny, one of the impressions I had when I spotted you coming, so that’ll be good for you.”

“Chris. You’re an idiot. You keep that up, I’ll kill *you*.” And she smiled ear to ear like it was only a great big joke.

She’d done it a second time now, this was pretty dang bizarre, and yeah, hopefully it was just the liquor talking.

“Anyhow,” he continued, “and really, there are too many parts to this, and they’re boring as hell . . . but I’m up in Reno and I decide I’m going to be a big shot and get to the bottom of it, and the guy knocks me *out* . . . I’m assuming it was the right guy, but even *that* I’m not sure of.”

“Gosh. You mean unconscious? *Really* out?”

“The one and only. That only happened to me once, in a touch football game that turned pretty heavy-duty. Some guy ran into me from the blind side, a total accident, but I saw stars. Back then the playground director brought out some smelling salts and I woke up. Not a huge deal . . . Now they ambulance you and not only tell you you had a concussion but grade it as well, and hold you for observation.”

“Okay I don’t mean to downplay that part, but skip past it for a moment. Do you think the lady really was, or is, in danger?”

“Wait a second . . . it was the *guy* in danger, supposedly. She was going to hire someone to deal with *him*, and I was trying to intercept that, I think, and help keep the peace.”

“I see. So she *wasn't* in danger.”

“You know what?” Chris said, thinking the whole thing was so fucked up, now *I'm* totally mixed up.

Two generous slices of cheesecake came, the waiter finishing them off by drizzling some fancy mocha and raspberry goo on top.

The waiter left, and Joyce said, “I need you to make love to me. When we finish desert.”

Someone else might have started to choke on the cheesecake, but Chris had been down this variety of road enough times with Joyce that he wasn't totally floored.

Plus . . . who was he really kidding? He invited her down, very short notice, she was fun and it was nice to catch up, but the idea hadn't been they were going to spend the rest of the evening discussing the pros and cons of the GOP tax plan . . . had it?

Still, did she have to be so forward, and blatant . . . and man, where other diners might be able to hear part of it?

Chris said, “I'm going to pretend I didn't notice you saying that.”

“I'm just casting it out there,” Joyce said.

“And I'm going to finish this meal off properly, what I see that guy over there doing, a coffee with some brandy laced in.”

“That's Irish Coffee, I think,” Joyce said.

“You're even more naive than I thought. Irish Coffee, you need whiskey. Plus they add brown sugar. Different animal entirely.”

“Well you're the boss then,” she said, and he could feel her foot now under the table, her shoe off, rubbing the bottom of his leg.

Chris said, “You were going to tell me about your two friends up there, once I explained away my wound that you seemed so interested in.”



“There might be an update or two, nothing much,” she said. “But I’d rather wait, and get into it a little later.” Giving him a look.

Chris didn’t necessarily *like* the idea of updates, but at least there was no apparent alarm bell going off . . . but this was why you were better off *not* asking these questions in the first place, because an answer, period, could trigger you starting to worry when it wasn’t warranted.

But fine, no point fighting her on that, and they sat there another half hour and she kept wanting to hear about it so he covered the basics of the Manhattan Beach lifestyle and his daily routine, such as it was.

He left out most of the specifics but he did mention Ken, and Joyce said she thought that was wonderful, because she’d never felt he interacted that well with other men.

Chris said he must be maturing then, but at the same time was thinking what did she mean by that, am I that flawed?

He decided she was probably jerking his chain which she’d been known to do . . . but maybe not.

At any rate, Chris took care of the check, and Jeez it was up there, he should have known it was a red flag when they started you off with one of those daily handwritten menus with no prices on it . . . but what could you do.

Joyce said, “Let’s take a drive.”

That didn’t sound bad, except of course he didn’t have a vehicle and he normally liked to be the one driving, but he said fine and they got in Joyce’s KIA SUV, which was more like a glorified VW Beetle, and they drove down to Fort Point under the bridge and there was enough light that you could see the waves crashing onto the rocks and it was pretty impressive tonight.

Joyce parked and shut off the engine, and soon she’d slid over against him, and Chris put his arm around her, and as far he was concerned that could be the extent of it.

He said, “I’m good right here. Let’s not up the ante tonight . . . what do you think?”

Joyce said whatever he wanted, that was fine.

But the problem was, Joyce in principle wasn't Joyce in reality, and one thing started to lead to another, like the stages of a chemical reaction, and Chris knew he was kidding himself. You didn't just cuddle up with Joyce . . . typically.

What he wasn't crazy about the idea of, was taking her back to the motel, since then she'd probably stay all night and hustle back over the bridge to Terra Linda in the morning.

He didn't necessarily want her around all night, that was too big a dose, but that's probably where it was headed.

But Joyce said, "Let's go up in the hills, and take a look at the lights."

So they drove up to the top of Divisadero, and he had to hand it to her, it was a world-class view, no fog at all and enough of a stiff wind to make everything shimmering and clear, way up in to northern Marin and the east bay hills as well.

Chris asked her if she knew a piece of San Francisco trivia, that the cocktail party in the movie Bullitt with Steve McQueen took place on the terrace of that house right there.

Joyce said she didn't, and she drove the three blocks west to where Broadway dead-ends at the Presidio, and they got out and you were on top of the Lyon Street steps and the view was little different but equally dramatic tonight, more of the flatlands of the Marina district and the edge of the bay added into the mix.

Chris said, "One valuable part of this--do you remember the Zodiac killer?"

"Of course," Joyce said.

"I got a little more interested in the case this year. I go on some of these forums and lurk. I'm telling you, some of these true crime buffs, they attack each other savagely, when someone disagrees with them."

"Uh-huh," Joyce said. She had her hand under his shirt and was stroking the small of his back.

"What most of them are way off on," Chris continued, "the guy's *escape route* that night . . . You're not listening, the cab driver *murder* is what I'm referring to."

“Presidio Heights,” Joyce said, and she surprised him sometimes.

“Yeah. Different theories on that. The cops themselves seemed to think he stayed in the Presidio all the way down to where Letterman Hospital used to be, before he exited . . . Which seems crazy, since you remember it was an active army base back then, activity all over the place.”

“Hmm,” she said. She was trying to work her hand from his back to different places, and Chris kept holding her off.

“What I’m building up to,” Chris said, “I think he exited right here. The Broadway gate . . . And then had his car parked right along *there*, and drove away and the rest was history.”

Joyce took her hand out for a moment and actually seemed to be considering it and said, “He wouldn’t have attracted any attention?”

Chris looked around as though to make his point. “These big mansions, there’s no sign of life. And no one parks on the street, look how wide open it is.”

Which was true, in fact it was a little spooky standing here right *now* if you thought of it that way, amazingly quiet for a major city, and some deranged killer emerging from the Presidio through that gate twenty feet away.

Chris said, “I mean nowadays this is on the tourist list, and you see these double decker buses showing up here and people posing for photos. But what we got at the moment, this is typical. Zippo.”

“Let’s go *in* there,” Joyce said.

“Wait a second,” Chris said.

“What’s the problem?” she said. “He came *out* of there, you say, your big tough guy. So we’re going *in* there.”

“Aah,” Chris said. He didn’t have a great feeling about this, since it sort of fit with Joyce’s MO. She could be adventurous, no doubt about it, and a risk taker . . . There’d been that time for example, the alley next to the bar on Union Street, and they’d ended up wedged in to where one person could barely fit, much less two. Somehow it had worked out all right . . . Nothing to do with it, but Chris remembered Vida Blue the Giants pitcher being there that night, in the

bar, a woman on each arm, nice enough guy, not full of himself like some other ex pro athletes were.

“You’re stalling,” Joyce said. “Is it *me*?” Putting on the act most likely, but you didn’t particularly want to hurt her feelings . . . and maybe you could get on board with the idea at that.

“Two things first,” Chris said, picturing what this was going to come down to in there. “Do you get poison oak?”

“What a strange thing to be worrying about,” she said. “But to put you at ease, it’s dormant in December.”

Chris wasn’t sure about that, maybe the poison oak wasn’t *visible* the same way, with the leaves, but he was pretty sure you could still get it. The second thing though, he said, “How about mountain lions? You scared of those at all?”

Joyce had her hands on her hips now. “Why do you insist on throwing up roadblocks Chris? It *is* me, isn’t it?”

“It’s not you. There was a guy, not too long ago . . . pretty sure it was right in one of these houses . . . could have been down Pacific along the wall too . . . but *bottom line*, he sees good sized one, coming out of the Presidio, crossing his driveway on his security camera.”

“Gosh,” Joyce said. “Now I *am* scared. I had no idea they were around here.”

“So . . .” Chris said, “we can . . . go for ice cream or something.”

“Or you can protect me,” Joyce said, and she took his arm, and he could tell she meant it, and she marched him over to the pedestrian gate, which for a second didn’t open . . . but then it did, it was just a little stiff.

## Chapter Eleven

Chris made it to Weatherby's a few minutes before midnight, and that was fine, they didn't normally close until 2 and he didn't want to be rushed.

Although now and then, a slow weeknight they shut down a little sooner, and you weren't quite into the Christmas drinking season yet, but either way the timing was okay.

Joyce had insisted on coming back to the room for a while afterward, Chris thinking that's a little odd, but she unfortunately had something to tell him about those questions he had earlier.

Plus it got dang cold in the Presidio, so it wasn't the worst thing to blast the heat and warm up.

What she told him was she'd lost contact with the two ex-boyfriends, the wine guy and other one, and she knew nothing more about the Donny deal . . . except . . . a detective came by her house and spoke to her a couple weeks ago, a new one.

"Hold on now," Chris said, trying to keep it rational in his head. "You mean Terra Linda? Marin? . . . Or all the way from Sonoma County?"

"Sonoma County PD is what he introduced himself as."

"Jeez. In person. *Wow.*"

"He said he was in the area on another matter. But still, he said he'd taken over the case and they were working some new angles, and did I have anything to add that I may have suppressed at the time.'

"He used that word? Suppressed?"

"I believe so."

Chris was thinking this must be the guy who took over for Cousins, and just like Chris sort of feared, he could be *re-energizing* the son of a bitch case . . . It was kind of a leading question he asked Joyce, *wasn't* it? Almost accusing her

of intentionally holding something back the first time. Chris decided he didn't like this guy.

"So what'd you tell him?" he said.

"I asked him if he wanted some cookies. I'd just made some chocolate chips, they were cooling on the rack."

"That's it?"

"Yep. He took a handful and gave me his card if I think of anything."

"Oh."

"So mainly . . . I wanted to give you a heads up on that."

"Very considerate of you . . . But I gotta be honest . . . it's extremely disturbing, the implications you keep tossing around, no big deal, like confetti at a parade."

"You mean about you being a murderer?"

Chris was wondering, could you maybe hypnotize it out of her? Drug her somehow and take her to a therapist and have the guy do a past-life regression or some shit . . . *that once and for all gets that notion out of her friggin mind?*

He said, "Okay, that's enough . . . I'm thinking you have an early start tomorrow, right?"

"You're getting rid of me then. Chris I actually had a really good time tonight."

He realized, if you put a gun to his head, he did too. It was nice having someone you could talk to, on an old-friends level, without having to fake too much.

"It's not that," he said. "I'm heading home tomorrow, I wanted to make a little time to visit with my old friend Shep."

Joyce got up and put on her jacket and told Chris if he decided not to be an asshole and leave tomorrow, to give her a call, and she was out the door.

That *was* the thing about Joyce though, she tended to throw in that little salvo at the end, since what did leaving tomorrow have to do with being an asshole?

The other thing he'd been mulling over, possibly you *don't* leave that quick after all.

Which meant maybe you investigate the dog guy, we'll see. Tomorrow's another day.

Right now a different bartender he'd never seen set him up with a beer, and he was tempted to ask if Shep was even here tonight, but it felt good being on familiar turf either way, he wasn't about to leave, so he kept his mouth shut and a few minutes later here comes Shep lumbering out of the kitchen through the double doors.

"I *named* you, it hit me just now," Shep said. "The ultimate customer."

"Coming from *you* I'll take it," Chris said. "No double meaning I have to try to interpret."

"I gotta tell you though, my brother, I thought I was losing you there. Now I'm seeing you on a semi-regular basis."

"I know. This one, it tops 'em all unfortunately. I came off a bus."

"Uh-oh." Shep lowered his voice and leaned closer. "Is this . . . are you saying you still have that . . . *list* . . . working?"

"No, no. I mean not really. This was a totally different deal. A side trip."

"Whoa mother," Shep said. "So you're saying . . . something happened, like by *accident* then?"

"I don't know," Chris said. "I guess . . . At least it was definitely an unexpected, that presented itself."

"Okay . . . what I'm picking up, you're *not* retired then."

"Nah, I think I *am*. Stuff just keeps getting in the way."

"Holy *shit* . . ."

Chris said, "But I've brought this up before, you're one of those rare guys, it's all about the *other* person, never about *you* . . . I wish I could conduct myself like that."

"Well I appreciate it . . . I'll give you one though, something that happened to me today."

"Oh yeah, please."

“Okay . . . Guy comes in after lunch. He’s got a twin brother comes in too sometimes, not quite identical but very close, but you can tell ‘em apart. Anyhow this guy tells me his brother is trying to re-write the parents’ will behind his back.”

“Dang,” Chris said. “That sounds illegal.”

“It does to me too, but maybe not, depending how the brother works it.”

“Yeah, but aren’t there pretty rigid elder abuse laws these days?”

“There are, but there still might a loophole. At any rate, we’re tossing it around, I’m making a few suggestions, not to screw the other brother, who like I say is a customer too, but then the guy asks what I’d *really* do in the situation if it were me.”

“Pretty sure I know what *I’d* do,” Chris said.

“You and me think alike, I’m kinda guessing,” Shep said. “I told him, *honestly?* Brother or not, someone screws me like that I’m making up for it double.”

“Yep,” Chris said. “Did that surprise him?”

“I’m not sure . . . I had to cut it short, the conversation, the end of the bar was filling up . . . but then he asks me what my hourly rate is, if I were to look into it for him, dig deeper.”

Chris processed this for a minute.

“You know what?” he said. “That’d be a pretty dang good fit, as I picture it. I mean Jeez, you listen to these people all day, you give them your full attention . . . you’re like their *psychiatrist* . . . Except with more flair, more like Magnum PI on the other side of the mahogany.”

“Get out of here.”

“It’s a thought,” Chris said. “Not that ridiculous. People don’t want to go to the cops, fill out the paperwork and get in the system . . . Sensible mediation can go a long way. And the thing is, the ones with the problems, they’re caught up too deep to think straight.”

“Yeah, well, in my next lifetime maybe,” Shep said. “What else you got cooking, anything?”



“Well one thing, speaking of brothers, I don’t have to keep asking you if you’ve seen mine in here. He came down south. We had a solid meeting of the minds.”

“Nice to hear. You look *good* by the way. That medical shit you were worried about . . . is that rear view mirror now?”

“Oh, that’s another thing, I got checked out.”

“Wow.”

“Not the full monte, no, just the vitals. Those didn’t seem to alarm anyone, unless they were lying.”

“Yeah, I didn’t want to bring it up,” Shep said, “but when I said you look good, I meant except for that dent in your head.”

“What I should have done,” Chris said, “and I’m kind of kicking myself, was stay in the hospital, don’t fight it. There was this nurse, and who knows?”

“I hate hospitals. They’re liable to kill you in there. You did the right thing, it sounds like.”

“Can’t second-guess it now, no.”

Shep said, “What you do, on that other concern, you call the hospital, tell ‘em you need a specific nurse to call you back to clarify some instructions she gave you, and you describe her. Sooner or later you’ll re-connect.”

Chris took a moment. “See this is what I’m saying,” he said. “You’re a natural Private Eye.”

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Without a vehicle the dog guy was going to be tricky, but you might start off at the good old Funston library, which Chris did Thursday morning, mentally committing to at least researching the guy . . . and that would mean another night at the motel, but what were you going to do, you definitely weren’t going to impose on Gloria this time.

The place did have a decent continental breakfast, which of course they should for \$159 a night, and Chris lost his self-control with the waffle machine, where you dole out the batter into a cup and pour it in and flip the thing over and let it cook until the bell rings.

But he put too much batter in the first time, or somehow screwed it up, and the waffle came out under-done but he ate it anyway, and then he cooked up another one more carefully, and polished that off too, and the syrup wasn't that sweet, probably an off-brand they got in discount bulk and you needed an awful lot of it . . . and by the time Chris out of there and back to the room he needed a nap even though he'd just gotten up.

So it wasn't technically morning when he got to the library and Jeez he was wasting time.

So what did we have here again?

Chris pulled up the article, and Jeez, it was only last Thursday, the 30th, though he realized it was *reported* on the 30th but the incident happened the night of Wednesday the 29th . . . which of course was this scum of the earth breaking into the car and battering Gem, the poor miniature poodle, to death.

The scum was Jeramiah Towne, and there was one of those he found on Facebook, but no photo, no *About*, other than listing him from the Bay Area, and the last post was from 2014, where he posted 'Fuckin-A!' under an angry video someone made accusing Sony of using faulty technology.

The video was juvenile and profanity-laced, though Chris did have to agree with the thrust, that these companies keep putting out variations of what's already out there, and then you have a new learning curve every time and the new thing doesn't always work right even when you figure it out.

No Twitter or other social media that he could find. The article said he lived in Daly City, but Chris's normally reliable white pages searches didn't turn up a Jeramiah Towne there, or anywhere else in northern California.

There was no follow up article in the *Chronicle* or any of the Bay Area news outlets . . . and this was part of the problem wasn't it . . . this prick would have had some sort of court date by now but nobody cared enough to tell you what happened. Was he being held, did he take a plea, did he make bail, did he have an attorney . . . something.

Nobody, including the police apparently, put a high priority on car break ins, even when an innocent dog gets destroyed during one of them.

Chris thought of something and tried the San Francisco Superior Court website, but it seemed a bit overwhelming to navigate and he didn't feel like getting started with that, plus he had a hunch you'd need to show up in person to view the actual paperwork, and the courthouse was all the way down on Bryant Street . . . and not having a vehicle was starting to throw up roadblocks.

So for the heck of it he googled the guy's name straight, no location or anything added, and those results were muddled and would need de-tangling . . . and he thought of one more thing, and there was that top bar where they had *All, Images, News, Maps* and so forth, and he clicked *News*.

You figured there might be something here that didn't make the *All* section yet, and Chris was thinking maybe a follow-up article from a more obscure publication.

And there was none of that, but there *was* one thing.

Someone had come up with a blog, pretty clever actually, that called people out on various stuff. It was kind of rinky-dink, limited to the Bay Area, but the guy's name was there.

A lot of the blog was directed at public officials getting preferential treatment, such as reportedly getting parking tickets fixed, or ending up in courtside seats at Warriors games, or having renovation permits expedited through, on their personal residences.

There was a limited 'crime blotter' as well, and they briefly recapped the car break in incident and asked readers to boycott Jeramiah Towne's place of employment, which was a deli on 24th Street.

So . . . kind of a strange back door route, but you had *something* at least.

Which got shot down pretty quick when Chris stuck two quarters in the old-fashioned pay phone they had in the lobby alcove of the library and called the deli and asked for the mutant--and was told he no longer works here, and before Chris could ask a follow-up the gal added that they have no idea if he's employed elsewhere and she hung up.

That was that, then, but one thing it did illustrate, he wasn't the first one to be calling them up pissed off, if the woman had it all rehearsed and delivered it like a script. Probably not even *close* to the first.

But the fact was you were at a dead end so far. Chris had never tried one of those Spokeo-type sites, where you give them a name and pay a fee and they supposedly run it, and produce a report for you.

So what the hay . . . except you needed a credit card. All he could think of, was the Marina Safeway, over on Laguna and Bay, and they had a section with the cheap phones and related stuff, so maybe you could find a prepaid Visa card . . . and Chris hustled over there and for 25 bucks that's what he came back with.

Now the issue was the first two sites he tried didn't *accept* prepaid cards, they needed a billing address from you, for whatever irrational reason--but finally the third site did take it, and it spit a report back, not much, but likely some family member's address in San Mateo, with Jeramiah listed as an 'associate'.

It would have been nice if they threw in a phone number but they didn't, so Chris tried a white pages for *that* guy, Roland B. Towne, and zippo, and this was getting like pulling teeth, to where maybe you just go back to MB now . . . and he tried one more thing, a reverse phone lookup, and bingo, there at least was a number for the guy. A 650 area code, which sounded in the ballpark.

Chris was wondering, a conversation like this, should you work it from the pay phone again . . . or was it safe enough to use the Go Phone he'd picked up at the Rite-Aid in Reno and still had plenty of minutes left on?

He rolled it around and couldn't see the problem using the cell, but first he was starving, that hustling to Safeway and back plus the whiff of the deli in there on the way to the Visa card section was affecting him too, and he figured he better get his energy back up first.

Not to mention his *story* straight, if someone happens to answer.

And dang, Marina Junior High right next door, the scene of a lot of history including his early encounters with Ray, and they had one of those food trucks now, right in the yard if you could believe it.

It was around 1:30, and it was surprising the kids were still on lunch, though they probably gave them lunch periods in shifts, he sort of remembered it that way, and he figured why not, and the gate to the yard was open and he went in there and lined up.

It didn't look bad at all, watching kids come away with their orders, the preferred item apparently being these huge tamales, and Chris's mouth was watering when he got to the front of the line but then of course there was a hitch, they didn't accept cash and you needed a card that they punched dollar amounts off of.

Chris said that counts him out then, but the guy asked if he was a visiting administrator, and Chris said yes, a visiting teacher actually, which he supposed wasn't a total lie, and the guy said don't worry about it then and handed him a tamale.

A woman answered and Chris asked to please speak to Jeramiah and the woman said he was at the gym and should be back by three. That was it. No who are you or does he have your number, just the facts.

Chris said thanks and went back in the library to kill an hour and a half, and he roamed around the online sports pages and then he remembered something Ken had pointed out, no intent behind it other than a *Hey Boss, someone has a pretty good business idea*, and what it was, at least in west LA, there was an airbnb type concept for cars.

Doofuses would rent their *own car* out, just like you'd rent a room above the garage to some traveler, and you went through a main site and searched what you wanted and booked it, and you'd assume the company and the doofus split the proceeds.

Chris knew he was being a little harsh calling them that, but would you rent your own car to some guy you didn't know?

Thinking it a little further, maybe it was a decent idea after all . . . you pick up something cheap at an auction and rent *that* out, and maybe it starts to turn a profit, who knows.

Either way, it looked like they had a couple of similar operations in the Bay Area, again the problem being, just to register to look around you needed an identity and credit card and all that BS--so he thought of it a little different, bypass all that and put his own ad on CraigsList, and he went ahead and created a new gmail address and signed up fresh with CraigsList, and under *For Sale--Wanted* he put **Vehicle to Rent Short Term, Marina District.**

He walked up Chestnut to the end, the Richardson Avenue onramp, and he turned around and started back and checked the time and at 3:20 in front of the cleaners, which was one of the two or three remaining holdouts from the old days of the neighborhood, he tried Jeramiah again.

A man answered and this time when Chris asked for Jeramiah the guy asked who was calling and Chris said Doug Lewellyn from Animal Resources, and you could hear the guy putting a hand over the phone and telling someone what Chris just said.

Jeramiah came on the line and said, "Speaking."

Chris couldn't help thinking, people really *do* need to establish better phone manners, that they don't realize it, but their health *could* be affected.

Chris said, "Here's what we got. I'm going to need you to perform a hundred hours of community service at an animal shelter of your choice, beginning tomorrow morning . . . Can you do that for me?"

"What are you, some clown?" Jeramiah said.

Chris said, "You break someone's side window, fine, you're an idiot but you're not a murderer. What I can't wrap my mind around is the other part."

"The little pipsqueak dog? He was trying to bite me, so fuck you."

Chris had to compose himself for a second. He said, "I'm calling you back at 4:45. I'll need the name of the shelter and contact person where you'll be starting your volunteer work in the morning."

You could hear Jeramiah saying something off to the side, which sounded like *you believe this MF?* And someone else seemed to be laughing and it sounded like Jeramiah snorted a couple times along with them.

He came back on. “Yeah all right there, friend. But what . . . you’re gonna *report* me if I don’t? To your . . . *Animal Resources*?” Loosening up now, like one third-grader who just outwitted another.

“I won’t report you,” Chris said, “but I’ll kill you.”

The dramatic effect would typically be you hang up at that point, to give it the emphasis, but Chris didn’t, he waited, and it took a good 30 seconds but finally the *scumbag* hung up and Chris sure hoped his point had gotten through.

Of course he had no idea if you could call up one of those places and set yourself up as a volunteer on short notice, but Jeez, you *should* be able to, and either way that was the guy’s problem.

This was getting pretty monotonous and meanwhile he wondered if he should check on his sublet guy in the old Broderick apartment, and there was a decent chance the guy’d be there now because he worked at least some of the time at home . . . but then if you ask how everything’s going you run the risk of the guy thinking about it, and *coming up* with something, which would have lied dormant except you were a dodo bird and initiated it.

Dang he was beat, he sure felt like another nap but he was afraid he’d sleep right through the 4:45 deadline he gave the guy, and then you’d lose all credibility. So he went back to Funston, where the library was and things kept changing with the sports fields and the configurations but surprisingly off in the corner behind the baseball grandstand they still had lawn bowling, and you still had those old guys rolling white balls around.

That was like going back in time, since you would have had a very similar scene 50 years ago, except you figured all those guys and their families were driven out of the Marina neighborhood by the Millenials . . . and it was good to see that wasn’t completely true.

It felt good being out here, the smell of the cut grass, reminding him of playing ball on these fields once upon a time. You’d play all day, mix up the different sports, go home all sweaty, and when it rained that didn’t matter, you’d still play all day and go home drenched from the rain.

On a separate note, it gave him a chance to clear his head, and he was thinking back in a little more detail to last night with Joyce.

It was kind of weird, even by her standards, making him go in the Presidio in the dark like that, and at one point to prod him along she said he better cooperate or she was going to *tell people*.

Chris was pretty sure this was an extension of her earlier joke, that she knew he killed Donny . . . but you know what? She probably *did know he killed Donny*. He easily could have talked in his sleep one time, or blurted something out in another circumstance, or quite possibly the denials he was faking didn't ring true, and maybe it was as simple as him not making steady eye-contact when she first confronted him on the possibility.

So, joke or not, that was more than a little screwed up, frankly.

Despite her wild moods and sometimes voracious cravings Joyce was deep down a rational person, Chris was convinced.

Now if she went mentally ill on him, turned legitimately bi-polar or something, that would be a different story and all bets would be off and she could easily walk into a precinct and give them the scoop they were looking for.

But then what?

Chris rationalized it, that he'd been on their radar at one time anyway, and Cousins cornered him twice for God sakes . . . and what would Joyce be adding, that was concrete?

So . . . you had more productive things to worry about . . .

And something *else* from last night that got him thinking . . . stemming from the ominous part of being right where the Zodiac--maybe Mel, but *whoever* it was--came out of that gate with the cab driver Paul Stine's bloody shirt piece in his hand.

The point was, the guy was evil, a cold-blooded murderer, a mistake in the human genetic code . . . but he was *organized*.

He researched his territory meticulously, he planned his work, he factored in what might go wrong.



The Stine murder, around the corner from Gloria, was the closest he came to getting caught.

But look what he was up against. He commits the execution in the middle of a residential neighborhood, walks, doesn't run away from the scene, a squad car passes him heading *to* the scene and he keeps his cool and essentially waves hello to them, and then he makes it into the Presidio and outwits half of SFPD and the US Army too, which Chris found out on one of the Zodiac forums sent busloads of soldiers with M-16s that night helping to hunt him down.

He gets in his car outside the Broadway gate, right where Joyce parked last night, probably takes his time, lights up a cigarette, maybe even tunes in KCBS the all-news station to see if there are any bulletins about him yet.

Chris was by no means trying to *praise* the Zodiac . . . but there were aspects you couldn't deny.

Could *he*, Chris, approach his own work like that? If there *was* more work to be done?

It was something to think about.

The time was 4:40 and walking back across the fields to the library would take 5 minutes, and they had a little patio area out front where you could comfortably call someone.

The guy answered right away, friendly, and gave Chris the name of a shelter, Countryside Boarding and Rescue on El Camino in San Bruno, and the contact person's name, Martha Barr, and he assured Chris, not to worry, he'd be starting there tomorrow at 10.

And Chris pulled out a piece of paper and scribbled down the names, and before he could get a word in the guy told him to have a nice day and hung up.

This didn't sound great, it was too fast and jumbled and confident . . . and shouldn't the guy at least be a little pissed off that you railroaded him *into* it?

Chris considered for a moment calling the guy back, but he decided I'm not these people's keeper, *Jeeminy* . . . that's not my job.

Since he was right there anyway he figured you might as well take one last look at the computer, and luckily these past three weeks whenever he *had* checked his own email there'd been nothing of serious significance.

Now there was another email from Laurel up in Chico, and it was human nature to tighten up for a moment until you read it, and fortunately it was innocuous, a house had come on the market in their neighborhood in case he wanted to have a look, original owner, impeccably maintained she said, nice corner lot.

The other thing you might as well look at was that animal rescue place. There *was* a Countryside Boarding and Rescue . . . but it was in Atherton, a good 25 miles from San Bruno, and very different areas, hard to mix up, Atherton being one of the wealthiest enclaves in the country.

So how about *that* . . . *Hopefully* this guy got mixed up on where he was supposed to be going tomorrow, but if Chris were in Vegas right now he wouldn't bet the house on it.

The third thing before he got out of here, the CraigsList posting.

Surprisingly there were two responses. Both apparently considered themselves in the Marina district, which was pretty laughable, with the first guy at Fillmore and Turk, the Western Addition, around the corner from the housing projects, the way Chris was picturing it . . . and the second guy way off the chart too, in the Richmond.

Chris thought what the heck and got back to *that* guy, figuring if something did come of it and you went there at night you were less likely to get your own self robbed as you could be in the Fillmore.

The problem now, Chris not wanting to do email on any computer other than a reliable public one, unless the guy got back to you in the next few minutes you were going to miss it.

But the son of a gun was on top of it, and 5 minutes later he responded, and they made it for 7 and Chris figured that'd be just enough time to get something to eat before he had to get on another bus.

Before he did that though it seemed like a good time to call Ken, and the kid answered, he was walking home from work, and Chris let him know he got a little sidetracked but should be all done in a couple days, and the main reason he was calling--no one *old*, or *new*, came by for any *reason*, did they?

And Ken said *Boss they didn't*, and to please stop worrying about that, and there *was* one bit of news in town, but nothing to do with either of them, and he'll fill him in when he gets back.

Chris was tempted to press the kid--what could *this* be now?--but he realized Ken was keeping the unnecessary piles of crap off his plate, and you couldn't blame him for that.

## Chapter Twelve

Chris wasn't quite as peppy at the breakfast bar the next morning, Friday, since there'd been a man and woman making a racket outside the room in the middle of the night. Even the steady drone of the Lombard Street traffic couldn't stifle the piercing voice of the woman, which knifed right through it.

He pictured them an older couple, beaten down by life, and you could tell they'd been drinking, and once they woke him up he was forced to listen until they finally went in their room, and it was slightly pathetic, both of them in their own way lamenting the good old days.

At one point the woman accused the husband of something and tied in a comment about 'you used to actually want to *grab my ass*' and the man mumbled some defiant response, and it went on from there.

Chris was thinking, while it was going on, if *I'm* ever in a relationship when *I'm* an old guy, don't carry on about the past, and hopefully end up with someone who doesn't do that either. Jeez.

So he's sitting there in the breakfast nook watching Good Morning America and there's this voice coming from the waffle-making station, and it has that exact same pierce, and Chris hates the thought of looking over there and seeing what they're all about . . . but finally he does, and they're this good-looking young couple, GQ Magazine-type beautiful people, and both impeccably groomed and dressed, and both upbeat and enjoying themselves like last night was a figment of someone's imagination.

Chris went back to his Shredded Wheat and decided we really don't know anything, do we?

The car thing had worked out. The guy lived on 9th Avenue between Clement and Geary, the inner Richmond, not too far from where his dad grew up, though back then you had a lot of European immigrants while now the

neighborhood was largely Asian, on account of the Chinese expanding out of the tenements of Chinatown.

It was a young guy with a pretty impressive operation. He had a two-family house with a three-car deep garage and the back third he used for working on cars. Getting underneath them apparently, no lift or anything, just the old fashioned way.

He also had several parked on the street and gave Chris a couple choices. Chris asked him *did* he actually buy them at auctions, and the guy said no but he hunted them down from private sellers and had pretty strict criteria.

Chris pointed out yeah, but you can obviously *fix* stuff too, and where'd you learn all that, and the guy shrugged his shoulders and said you did what you had to do.

Chris came out of there--in a 2007 Nissan Maxima with 190,000 miles that seemed to run perfect--respecting the guy's resourcefulness and work ethic, and the guy's daily rate included insurance and all Chris had to fork over was the cash prepayment up front and a deposit.

The only negative, the guy said his 'day job' was he was getting his nursing credential at USF. Pointing out that they gave him a generous financial aid package but it was still pricey, and the car rentals helped out.

Good that they helped fund the guy's education . . . but Jeez, why would a guy become a nurse?

Chris supposed it wasn't politically correct anymore and he should probably keep his mouth shut on the subject, but wasn't--what was her name? Kay?--wasn't *she* who you'd stick in the dictionary under the definition of *nurse*?

In fact he never did get it straight, did he, whether Kay was an actual nurse or some sort of assistant or fake one, but the concept was the same, meaning this young car guy had everything going for him, except for that odd choice.

You could apply the same head-scratching question mark to a lot lately . . . and Chris decided he was born 25 years too early.

Anyhow back to this morning.

He didn't have a good feeling about this, but it needed to be done, meaning the first thing was get in touch with Countryside Boarding and Rescue--even if it *was* located in Atherton and not San Bruno--and hope the contact person the guy gave you was legit--and more importantly pray for everyone's sake that the guy shows up and starts his volunteer work.

And for that you'd wait 45 minutes, at least give the idiot a chance to prove he's there at 10 like he said.

Meanwhile you might as well take in the mini-social scene here in the breakfast area, and dang . . . the gal from last night with the terrible voice, every time she gets up and goes for something more, refilling her orange juice or bending down to get a yogurt out of the little fridge . . . it was hard not to take a look.

For what it was worth--and he had no idea if that kind of precaution made a difference or was even necessary--he had been diligent about taking the battery out of the Go-phone every time he used it. What you had to do was shut it off, flip it over and then use your fingernail in the little slot above the charging connector and flip the back lid off and pull out the battery.

And reverse it when you wanted to make a call, what he was doing now, back in the room, the piece of paper in front of him where he'd scrawled Jeremiah Towne's information.

It didn't take long. The rescue center receptionist said for privacy purposes she wasn't able to give information on current staffers, which included volunteers . . . though she was authorized to answer his *other* question, was there a *Martha Barr* there, since it pertained to someone who *didn't* work here, and *no*, no one by that name did.

Martha Barr was the guy's erroneous contact, the place itself wasn't where it was supposed to be, so all you needed now, unfortunately, was to confirm beyond a doubt that the *guy* wasn't there either.

Chris dialed the number from yesterday and the woman answered, and she recognized his voice and said you're the Animal Control person, and Chris

corrected her for what it was worth that he was from *Animal Resources*, and she said Jeremiah wasn't here.

Chris said, understood, but this is an emergency it turns out, and where might he be, and the woman said she assumed the gym and Chris said which one?

The woman said she had no idea which one, and Chris said sorry but in that case that's not good enough, and he'll need his cell.

The woman got a little testy and said she was only his step-aunt and she didn't keep track of him, and what was he continuing to bother *her* for . . . but Chris could hear her looking for it, the number, and she found it and gave it to him and Chris said thanks.

"Dude I gotta tell you," Towne said when he answered, "you really *are*, starting to press on my nerves."

"You're at the place?" Chris said. "Or no."

Towne said, "You're kidding, right? And how about this? Fuck you and your mother too."

Chris said if he changed his mind and decided to go to the animal place, to be sure to call him back within 10 minutes, and that he recommended it beyond belief . . . and he clicked off.

Here you had to cut the guy some slack . . . and if giving him a chance to reconsider meant you had to leave your phone connected and turned on for an extra 10--in fact he'd give the guy 15--then so be it.

Meanwhile--and this was his old stomping grounds for Gosh sakes, but he couldn't place seeing a hardware store around since the old neighborhood one closed maybe 5 years ago--so he asked the guy at the front desk and the guy said yeah, it's ridiculous, but there is still the one up the hill on Fillmore and Union and if you need something basic Walgreens isn't terrible.

Chris wondered how basic a short piece of rope was, and he took a chance on Walgreens since it was only a block away, and they had clothesline cord, bundled up, a lot more feet than Chris needed but he added a utility knife and a roll of duct tape to the mix and figured that should take care of it.

Separately, did people really use clotheslines to dry their laundry any more? Particularly Millennials?

You were at the 12 minute mark and he checked his phone, Zippo . . . and you know what? Enough is enough, forget going the bonus five minutes and he wedged open the phone cover for hopefully the final time and took the battery out and put everything back in his pocket.

He'd written down the San Mateo address for the Roland B. Towne he'd found in that search, and Chris assumed now if the lady was the aunt or step-aunt, that Roland was the uncle . . . but either way it was pretty clear Jeramiah lived there currently as well, and Chris realized when he'd expanded the map at the library that he was familiar with the area.

If he had it right it was down in the flatlands near where the San Mateo Bridge landed on the peninsula side, which was the vicinity of Hillsdale Avenue, and his cousins grew up right around there and he loved to visit them as a kid because there was more action than in his neighborhood. Meaning kids outside throwing balls around, riding bikes, skateboarding, chasing each other around. He actually hated to go back home.

Coincidentally his old friend Ike lived in San Mateo too, but more up in the hills, and of course he'd been on and off Chris's list for a while with the neighbor from hell business.

But forget Ike for now, the other thing Chris was familiar with, there was a shopping center where he and his cousins would go bowling, and now they had a Trader Joe's there too, but there were still mom and pop type stores and likely some gyms had popped up as well.

So . . . he took the Bayshore Freeway down, got off at 92, and the territory was pretty recognizable . . . and sometimes these things weren't that complicated at all.

The step-aunt claimed she didn't know which gym, and Chris believed her, she seemed like a straight-enough shooter, but here . . . in fact more or less half way between Trader Joe's and that bowling alley, next to a nail salon on one side and a ribs place on the other, you had Planet Hero.



Chris didn't know a lot about the subject but his impression was Planet Hero was one of those chains that catered to hard-core bodybuilders.

You had Planet Fit and 24-Hour Fitness, by contrast, and those seemed more geared to everyday people . . . and maybe that's all a guy like Towne wanted too, a place with an elliptical machine and light weights and maybe a nice sauna to close out matters.

But Chris doubted it. He hated to say it, and he could be way off, but he associated hard-core bodybuilders with steroids and major tattoos . . . and if you were unemployed or unfulfilled couldn't that lead to other drug use too, if the steroids weren't messing with you enough . . . further leading to breaking into cars and beating toy poodles to death?

So right now, you wait.

Which he did, in the parking lot, for a half hour, and a handful of people were in and out of Planet Hero, and yeah, they all looked like serious bodybuilders except for maybe one little skinny guy . . . and there was no sign of Towne.

Chris had a pretty strong image of the guy's face committed to memory, thanks to that whistleblower web site that posted his picture and information, and the picture looked like a mug shot, so Chris guessed it was up to date and accurate.

He gave it another half hour and zip. He was being shut out here, this wasn't good, but there *were* two vehicles that had been sitting there the whole time, not far from the entrance, and one was an older Ford Bronco missing the back window and with a bunch of skull and crossbones decals on the tailgate and bumper, including Oakland Raiders ones.

Chris figured you owed it to the guy, and situation--and especially to the anonymous Jaguar and dog owner from that night on Union Street--to at least wait out that one vehicle, if you could tolerate it . . . and dang it those ribs were getting the better of him and he got out of the Nissan and ordered a half-rack to go.

This was one of the aspects people didn't understand, that trying to do the right thing and make the world a tiny bit better place may sound okay on paper--but in reality there was no tidy little script where you untied a ribbon and opened it up and followed along.

When it came down to it, a high percentage was grunt work and dead ends, and then the insane maneuvers you had to make, like going out to places like Winnemucca, and not just once but *twice*.

He ate the ribs in the car and it was messy but after committing more than an hour you couldn't afford to *miss* the guy now, and finally someone came out and got in the car.

Unfortunately Chris was daydreaming by then and he'd let his guard down and by the time he realized what was going on the guy was in the Bronco. You had a little bit of an angle on him through the windows, the guy's profile, but it was hard to tell for sure.

Either way you better follow him . . . and the guy wasn't being fancy, he made a right out of the parking lot and then another one, and this was real familiar to Chris now, he and his cousin used to walk right along here in the summer to get to the San Mateo county fair.

If it *was* the guy--and if Chris had to guess from that profile view, there was a good chance--then you just had to watch for 2887 Vanessa, the address they listed for Roland.

The guy turned *onto* Vanessa and the numbers were getting close, but then the guy *passes* it . . . but only by about 20 yards, and then he stops, big screech, and backs up into the driveway.

Chris had to keep going at this point to not look conspicuous, and he started thinking this could be a real tough process, couldn't it, the guy going inside and eating a box of Twinkies and laying on the couch the rest of the afternoon watching re-runs of Rawhide.

This wouldn't be the kind of block you could park on and wait somebody out, you'd be noticed pretty quick. Same thing to an extent if you kept circling,

you'd get away with it a few times but then you'd look awful clunky coming around again.

You could space it out, every twenty minutes or so, and you might get away with *that*, but you then run the risk of missing the guy when he *does* decide to get off his rear end and go someplace.

Chris pulled over for a second, half a block up and watched in his rear view mirror to at least ID the guy, but the funny thing, the guy doesn't get out of the vehicle.

What Chris realized he was doing, was backing into the driveway so the driver's door was right next to the mailbox.

And then the guy reached out and opened the thing and stuck his hand in, and pulled out a package, one of those soft-wrap deals in the padded floppy brown envelope.

What happened though, when he pulled it out, a couple regular letters came fluttering out of the box too and fell into the driveway, so at that point Jeramiah's plan apparently fell apart, since he had to get out of the Bronco and take care of it . . . and then Chris recognized him loud and clear from the photo.

Chris could see now the plan was *not* to go home, or at least *inside*, but to pick up the seemingly important package without getting out of the car.

Hmm.

If he had to make a wild guess, this was going to involve some kind of distribution, but that wasn't important. He waited until the guy was back in the Bronco and rolling out of the driveway, and Chris made a casual U-turn at the corner and kept him in view.

Now you were going to have to improvise though--and as always, hope for a little luck.

So Chris followed him around San Mateo. And then Burlingame. And then Daly City.

The fucker sure liked his stops, didn't he.

And they were random. A Subway sandwich. A watch repair and jewelry shop. A gas station mini mart. Somebody's apartment. A tire place. Costco.

No idea what the guy was up to, if anything. If you didn't know better he could almost be an upstanding citizen out doing his errands. Maybe that soft envelope was involved in some of the stops, maybe not.

But this was getting ridiculous. And it was getting dark.

And Chris was getting awful antsy.

So he did something a little bit out of his comfort zone, that he'd normally consider a bit too dicey . . . but Jeez, you had to confront the guy at some point, didn't you?

The guy stopped to eat, it looked like, at Joe's in Westlake, which happened to be one of Chris's favorite places too. In fact now that he thought about it, he took Bethany that time to the new re-vamped Joe's in North Beach, and there used to be a half dozen of them around the city and this Westlake place is one of the originals still standing.

Part of why he was going out of his comfort zone was the guy parked in a good spot, in back, a cinderblock retaining wall behind him, and the garbage area, a squared off wooden enclosure where they kept the trash cans, on the passenger side.

So you only had one direction you had to worry about, and there were no cars right around you and no overhead light hovering over your spot.

So there was a possibility.

And if it *wasn't* going to work, Chris hoped you could check *out* of it, like they'd do in a space shuttle launch, where they had a few opportunities to abort the take-off if something wasn't sitting right.

Chris parked outside the lot and a block away, which seemed sensible, no point leaving your own car there for some restaurant patron to absentmindedly remember seeing . . . and he put his gloves on. He was glad he brought them to Bingham, they came in handy a few different ways, not the least of which you'd freeze your ass off in the mornings without them, and even on the buses, when you thought about it, that heat was pretty dang suspect.

He walked back to the parking lot and across to the Bronco. The thought was, which was in his head since he'd noticed the back window missing, you

climb in through there and wait. Which as he approached the vehicle now did look a little tight. You could dive in, he was pretty sure . . . but why put yourself through that if you absolutely didn't have to . . . and he checked the rear door on the driver's side . . . and hey, it opened.

It took maybe another twenty minutes for the guy to come out of Joe's.

The guy was wobbling a little, Chris thought, probably a little boozed up . . . but that could have been something with his leg too, maybe related to powerlifting, and he's got some little sprain, in which case he's limping a little, yeah, but is plenty alert and tough.

That was another aspect coming into view now as the guy got closer, crossing the parking lot, with Chris ducked down as much as he could and still see--that the son of a bitch's arms were huge.

Like Popeye. The rest of the body was small--pin *head*, small *legs*, no *ass* really, but dang it, *huge* arms and chest and neck.

Chris took a deep breath.

Jeramiah fiddled with his key for a second, which was kind of strange since if you left the back door open why would you lock the front, but he got in and closed the door . . . and started the engine, which Chris hadn't expected to happen so soon.

Chris remembered from the driveway though, the guy having to scoop up the spilled mail, and when he did that and got back in he did the same thing, started it up, *then* put his seatbelt on before he threw it in gear and drove away, the guy a law-abiding citizen at least in that regard . . . and Chris was hoping that'd be the case here too.

And then you heard the dull sound of the seatbelt being stretched out, and Chris lifted up, and Jeramiah had his right hand on the thing as he reached down by his leg to stick it into the slot, and his head dipped slightly to find it, and right before he straightened back up Chris dropped the rope over his forehead and under his chin . . . and he crossed his hands and pulled like he was lifting up the front end of a bulldozer that was about to fall on a baby.

Jeremiah grabbed at his throat and at the rope, but Chris had it locked in, and Jeremiah started twisting his head and Chris stayed right with him there too, and finally the guy brought his legs up and starting kicking like mad at the front top of the dashboard and then the front window . . . and the guy was really getting into it and Chris thought the window was going to shatter for sure, though he knew when car windows shattered it wasn't terrible, it was more like plastic crinkling, not like that time as a kid when you accidentally threw the football through the window of your house . . . but even so, if he *did* smash the window you'd have to hope you still had plenty of privacy here.

And just when you thought Jeremiah might be winding up to deliver his biggest kick of the night, his whole body shuddered with a major twitch, and then he went limp.

You'd assume you should maintain the hold for just a little longer, but sometimes you deferred to common sense . . . and this guy was history, no question about it, and Chris took a second to think about the woman, and the dog, and Jeremiah, who he did his best to give a chance to, and for whatever reason it didn't work out . . . and the Bronco engine was still running and Chris got out and walked across the back of the Joe's parking lot and up the street to his car.

## Chapter Thirteen

Saturday morning Chris was in the motel room trying to figure out how to best fill out a postcard.

It wasn't your standard 3 1/2 by 5 or even the larger 4 x 6.

This one was bigger. Chris had gotten a little education on the subject after the Jeramiah episode. You had your normal postcard sizes and rates, then you had oversized and jumbo. Jumbo was 6 x 11, the largest that qualified as a standard USPS letter.

The reason he got into it, Chris remembered liking those real big postcards in the gift shop at the Grand Tetons on a family vacation as a kid. He figured they must get bent up in the mail, to a degree, but still the recipient appreciates the effect.

The advantage was there was extra room. You could speak your mind and you didn't have to reduce your penmanship to microscopic proportions, and Chris could barely read his own writing *anyway*, so the more you could spread out, the better.

These things weren't easy to find. What had happened first last night, after leaving Westlake Joe's, Chris thought it would be prudent to make a deposit in Lake Merced, which was conveniently located a couple miles down the road.

It had worked for him before, and even though you're right in the corner of San Francisco, there were plenty of remote pull outs, especially near the golf course which was dead after about 4:30.

He hadn't needed the duct tape, and hadn't even brought it with him into Jeramiah's vehicle, and he'd purchased the tape along with the cord because he wasn't sure, but now it would come in handy because you could tape the phone to a rock and fling it out toward the middle of the lake.

Which he was getting ready to do, and he was parked in a good spot, except the little gravel area he'd turned out in had a couple of garbage cans, including a blue one that said *Please Consider the Earth*, and was a recycle bin of course.

So Chris felt guilty now firing the phone out there and letting whatever was in it leach into the water, and he was pretty sure there were actual fish swimming around. He thought about it for a minute and fiddled around with the phone until he found that Sim card that people seemed to be alarmed about, that that's how mobile users could get hacked.

Whatever. The rock he was going to use to tape the phone to, he instead put on top of the phone on the ground and stomped on the whole works a few times, hopefully rendering the thing completely unattractive, and he stuffed the pieces into the recycling container.

That left the Sim card and the battery, plus the rope of course, and those items should be easy enough to get rid of in public garbage cans, and for that matter you might as well include the Bingham gloves in the disposal effort as well.

Depending how you pulled out of Lake Merced, specifically the Harding Park golf course section, you could take the straightest shot back to the Marina, which was 19th Avenue, or the scenic route, which was the Great Highway.

Of course you couldn't see the ocean at this hour but he always liked going that way anyway, and when he got to the end where you started climbing the hill toward the old Sutro Baths, Chris thought, *Jeez*, let me try the Cliff House.

By this point he had the idea for the postcard, and was thinking one of those jumbo jobs really would work the best, and there were a whole bunch of tourists buzzing around inside, even on a cool evening in early December, and there were postcard racks up the wazoo plus another section of them displayed flat that you could pick through . . . but nothing oversized.

It didn't seem like the greatest idea to inquire, so he made sure there wasn't *another* area he hadn't noticed, and when he was satisfied it wasn't working he got out of there.



Meanwhile . . . up the hill and over the top and down, the end of California Street they had that big Safeway, and Chris figured that might be a better bet than a Rite-Aid type place where there was less action and you might stand out just a little more purchasing a box of latex surgical gloves.

He got into Safeway and couldn't seem to find them in pharmaceuticals, so he tried the household section and he thought even *better*, just go with those big yellow dishwashing gloves . . . they should work the same, right?

He picked up two pairs for good measure, and, undoubtedly overkill, but to not risk standing out he bought a canister of *Bon Ami Power Cleanser* to finish it off, and a talkative checker said something like 'don't scrub too hard' and Chris tried to laugh.

So where were you . . . you had the home-rental guy's car to return, but you'd need it for a few things tomorrow . . . plus, where the devil were you *going* to find one of those giant postcards?

Chris hated to go down there, most locals never set foot there unless they were compelled to, like having to show someone from out of town around, but his best bet at this point would probably be Fisherman's Wharf.

There were dozens of tourist shops in the area, each one junkier than the last, but more importantly all of them open late, and Chris supposed if you couldn't find what you needed there, then you weren't going to, and you'd have to get by with a normal-sized postcard or a regular envelope and letter.

Fortunately the third place he tried, a poster and art store on Hyde near North Point, had plenty of the 6 x 11's . . . but as Chris was getting ready to pick one out, he thought Jeez, I'm taking all these dumb steps to avoid leaving my DNA and whatever else on the thing when I send it, but like an idiot I'm picking it out barehanded.

So that meant finding another shop that had normal looking nighttime gloves, and you wear *those* to pick out the card, since admittedly you'd be a little awkward sorting through them with the rubber yellow dish ones that came halfway to your elbows.

Chris was thinking the gloves fit better *in* the place than after he paid for them and got out of there, 25 bucks down the drain, but you did what you had to do, and he went back to the first place and selected a postcard that showed that section of the Bay Bridge that collapsed during the 1989 earthquake.

Chris remembered it well, it was during the pre-game of the World Series and he was in high school and watching it at his friend Keenan's house on Sacramento Street, and the neighborhood got rocked but there was no major damage like you had down in the Marina on all that soft land.

One unexpected wrinkle, on the plus side, the postcard was already stamped. Not with an *actual* stamp, but with an official looking black and white square printed in that corner, stating this item included USPS Forever postage, and there was a code.

Which is how they thought they were going to finally figure out the Zodiac, the DNA in the saliva underneath the stamp . . . Not that you did it that way anymore, everything was self stick, but why have to add one more layer of caution if they took care of it for you.

When Chris got back to the motel after all that, he got cleaned up and considered heading over to Weatherby's, but when it came down to putting his shoes back on or his slippers, it was kind of a no-brainer, and he fell asleep a half hour later.

Now . . . this morning, after a nice high protein breakfast and a lot of coffee . . . yellow gloves on to avoid not only DNA and fingerprints but palm prints too, was his understanding . . . pen in hand . . . what were you going to say here?

He was at least part-way there because he'd figured out *who* he was going to say it *to*.

There was a newspaper in the city that either he hadn't noticed before or was new, called *Bay City Beat*.

There'd been a few copies floating around the breakfast nook of the motel, and Chris started noticing them among those stand-up boxes around town, not a ton of them but strategically placed apparently, where you could pull out a paper for free.

He'd taken a look on the library computer too and the operation had a decent online presence. They published four times a week and didn't try to do too much, they essentially covered city politics, crime and sports, and they had a lifestyle section.

It was actually a lot more readable than the Chronicle, Chris decided, which was too jumbled up and took forever to navigate online these days, and you wondered how the *Bay City Beat* could make it work giving it all away for free, but they seemed to have some big hitters in their advertising.

Whether the thing was going to last or not, Chris figured why not give them a little material, and their main crime reporter was someone named Bronson Northfleet, and that's who Chris was writing to.

Obviously this was a polar opposite to what the Zodiac did, but Chris would be kidding himself if he wasn't at least influenced by the method.

You take responsibility, hopefully give the bad guys a little something to worry about, and a side-effect is you're maybe overloading law enforcement's plate just a touch as well.

Chris began--and using his left hand seemed like a good idea, and even *better* was use your left hand *funny*, in case someday someone asked to *see* you use your left hand:

**Dear Reporter Northfleet**

**Please keep up the good work**

**and tell others not to break any more**

**car windows and kill pets.....**

**In fact to please stop breaking windows**

**period**

**Otherwise I will have to return**

**and clean up more messes**

**Sincerely**

**Your Friendly Visitor**

Chris put down the pen and looked it over and thought, is there anything more that needs to be said?

Clearly the police could interpret it as a typical crackpot, and that's fine, but hopefully the *Bay City* paper would be eager to scoop the Chronicle and would at least acknowledge it and hopefully post it . . . as a public safety announcement if nothing else.

Which it definitely was intended to be.

Chris had read an article last month, in the Chronicle actually, and if he remembered it right, the SFPD had under a *2 percent arrest rate* for auto burglaries.

Even now, finishing off the post card, Chris was thinking: Digest that one for a second . . . That means 98 percent of them get away with it . . .

That doesn't register as a civilized society, does it?

So if the post card warning gets buried, and the paper doesn't mention it, Chris figured you'd have to go to Plan 1-A, which was send a follow up and include some piece of information about the Jeramiah situation that might not be so public.

At any rate . . . now you needed to mail it.

And you had to remember to keep the gloves on when you did that . . . though frankly you were in pretty good shape with a postcard anyway, since it would be handled by plenty of people in the delivery chain. The other negative

about sending a *letter*, a little piece of your eyelash could drop in the envelope unbeknownst to you, and unlikely as it seems, you'd be giving them something.

But the *sending* part, he had an idea for that, and it was a little extra work, but you might as well go for it.

The Zodiac's first murders, that most experts agree on, unfortunately took place on that infamous lover's lane on Lake Herman Road, just inside the Benicia city limits. Benicia was in the east bay, adjacent to Vallejo, 25 miles north of Berkeley. You had Martinez and Crockett on the other side of the Carquinez Straits, which was a northern extension of San Francisco bay.

Based on all that, Chris thought Benicia would be an interesting place to mail the post card, and when the newspaper receives it and if the police are interested in it, they'll have a clear record of where it was postmarked.

It was a bit of a pain to get up there, it turned out, the Bay Bridge was log-jammed and he should have trusted his instincts and gone the *other* way, the Golden Gate Bridge to Novato, and then 37 to Vallejo, but here you were and you couldn't switch out of it now.

Finally traffic started to move, and then when you got close you had to take 780 which he'd forgotten about, he hadn't been this way in a lot of years, and he took the West 7th Street exit, and you had a surprisingly sleepy small town that almost could have fit in somewhere in Oklahoma.

The appetite was starting to kick in too, and no doubt there was some joint on Main Street that had been there forever and had some character to it and those were always fun . . . but the goal was not to be presenting yourself in Benicia, but to handle your deal and get the hell out of here.

There was a little neighborhood park up ahead with a kids' sandbox and some swings and a half-basketball court, and on the sidewalk there was a mailbox, and Chris realized if he maneuvered it right he could do what Jeramiah had been trying in the driveway, which was pull up tight next to it and reach in from the vehicle, since the mailbox had one of those extra slots on the street side.

Chris succeeded, and he heard the satisfying sound of the post card dropping down . . . and suddenly, it became real, real clear that his business was done . . . and it was like a weight was lifted and a chapter was closed . . . and all you wanted to worry about now was going home.

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And Chris almost avoided taking another Greyhound bus . . . but not quite.

It was tempting to make some kind of longer term deal with the car guy and just drive *that* thing straight to MB . . . but that was absurd of course, you already had the Camry down there waiting for you, so from Benicia he drove straight to the guy's place and dropped it off, and then he splurged and took an Uber back to the motel.

They had a Happy Hour hors d'oeuvres thing in the lobby, and it actually wasn't bad at all, and Chris had to begrudgingly give the motel some credit, they tried hard . . . though he supposed if you *didn't* do that stuff now, the continental breakfast and the Happy Hour, you'd fall behind the places that *did* . . . but Chris reminded himself stop being cynical and enjoy the dang food.

At any rate he got to talking to a few fellow guests, and it was good-natured, and even the couple with the screeching voice popped in and they were okay too, and this one guy starts peppering Chris with a bunch of questions, and Chris lets on that he's headed back to LA tomorrow and is deciding between a bus or train.

The guy says what about the simple way, flying, you're there in an hour, and Chris tells the guy he has trouble with planes.

Which wasn't the case at all, but what he had trouble with was all the security measures and forking over the real ID . . . and again, being off the hook with the Modesto thing, what would be the problem, but it still didn't sit right and Chris wasn't flying.

So, wiping his mouth after polishing off a mini empanada the guy tells Chris he can give him a ride, no problem, he's heading to San Diego, so he's going right by there, and he's leaving in the morning.

Chris sizes up the guy and says, what can I say, that'd be great, and I'll see you then.

This was Saturday night now, always something going on at Weatherby's, or if he wanted to low-key it a notch, then the Booker Lounge for sure, but Chris felt like dialing it all down tonight, not risking introducing anything new into the mix, and they had some paperbacks in the lobby and he picked up a book of short stories, some better than others but all taking place in central Ohio, so you learned something, and got a feel for a place you were unlikely ever to visit, and that killed a couple hours and he hit the sack early.

The guy was prompt, all packed up at 7:45 like he said, even cleaning the interior windows with some Windex he had, and he saw Chris coming and said it's good to have company and he was glad it worked out.

The first 4 hours were fine. They talked about sports and the Trump White House and the myriad of different stuff that was popping up on YouTube these days, and the guy recommended a couple channels, guys filming themselves exploring ghost towns and abandoned structures, and it sounded like maybe some crossover to what Mike was talking about back in the casino too, and he wrote them down.

A little past San Luis Obispo is when things began to unravel. Chris made the mistake of asking the guy for the first time what he'd actually been doing in San Francisco. It hadn't been on Chris's radar up to that point, and the guy hadn't asked *him* what he'd been doing there either, and that was fine.

But the guy answered that he comes up three or four times a year, and enjoys the clubs south of Market, and Chris naively asked *what clubs*, and the guy said 'you know' and Chris realized he was talking about the gay scene.

Chris tried to keep the subject moving but the guy was grooved in now, and he opened up about his various relationships, past and present, and he started getting more personal . . . and you never knew how something was going to play out, but if there was a chance the guy was going to make a move, Chris didn't feel like sticking around and finding out, there'd been enough drama for a few weeks.

So when the guy stopped for gas in Santa Barbara Chris reached over and found that little lever and popped the trunk, and Chris got his bag and thanked the guy and said he had it from here.

Which he *didn't* have, unfortunately, because when he made his way to the Greyhound station he learned he'd missed the second and last LA bus of the day, and it was close to 4:30 now and Ken would be getting off work and he supposed he could impose upon the kid . . . but Jeez, you're talking 2 1/2 hours each way . . . so no, you weren't going to do that.

So what do you know, one more night twiddling your thumbs and then trying to fall asleep on a low plastic seat at the station, and there was a 4:40 am that rolled in, and at that point it would have taken a collision with a semi truck, and maybe not even that, for Chris to miss that bus.

Four hours later, give or take, Chris knocked on the door of Apt 8-C at *Cheater Five* apartments, the reason being it dawned on him after feeling around in his bag for a minute that he hadn't brought any keys. Jeez.

Though when he thought about it, why *would* he, what would he have been needing them *for*? He remembered now handing them to Ken, the whole keyring, and telling Ken use the Camry if you need it, but at least please start it up every few days and let it run a minute.

There was some rustling in the apartment and Chris was thinking *come on already, this is ridiculous*, and he knocked again and the door opened and it was Stacey standing there looking embarrassed.

Chris looked at her for a second, and this wasn't the time or place to lecture anybody, much less conduct an investigation, and Chris spread his arms out to see what would happen and Stacey came into them . . . and she was a sweet kid, who had her troubles like anyone else and tried to do the right thing . . . and they stood there for a while not saying anything and it felt pretty dang good.

Chris was thinking, not for the first time recently, you really don't script this stuff.



Ken was at work already, she told him, and she said please don't worry, she had a place to go and would be out of his way, and she was only here for a little bit because he was gone.

And Chris held up his hand, and told her that was enough, you're not going anywhere, it'll all work out--and meanwhile, was she hungry?

This whole deal, her assuring him she'd be gone and him saying don't worry about it but how about breakfast--that felt like a repeat of the episode with Ken way back when, the only difference being, Stacey said thank you but she never ate breakfast.

So Chris washed up and put on a fresh shirt and made the left out of the apartments and up the hill toward town.

It was a crystal-clear morning, a bit of a winter feel to it now, or as much as you were going to get in southern California, and there was the incredible expanse in front of you, Topanga State Park and Malibu to the right and the tip of Rancho Palos Verdes to the left, all touching the ocean . . . and it was awful good to be back.

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Chandler said, "If you asked me what one positive is, you being absent, it's that we minimized the dumb small talk, Kenny and I."

"He's referring to tennis of course, Boss," Ken said.

Chris said to Chandler, "What I thought you were going to say, you couldn't *narrow down* one positive, because there were multiple ones."

Chandler laughed, in fact they all did, Chandler and his wife Mallory, and Ken and Stacey, and Chris joined in too, and it wasn't the worst crowd, he supposed.

What happened was he got ahold of Chandler after leaving the apartment and grabbing some coffee and breakfast, and he told Chandler to send him a bill for all his time, and don't discount anything, that won't fly.

Chandler said that's not going to happen, and Chris assumed for a second that was Chandler confirming *don't worry, there won't be a discount* . . . but pretty quickly it was clear that Chandler wasn't going to charge him a penny, and

Chris fought him for a couple minutes but it was pointless, so Chris insisted on at least taking everyone out to dinner tonight.

And admittedly it was quite a nice place, Il Trattoria del Rio, one of those restaurants on Highland, off Manhattan Beach Boulevard, that he'd passed a dozen times and never given a second thought to since it looked pretty ordinary, but you get in there and the owner is the chef and he's classically trained and he's speaking Italian to one of the employees, and it's like being catered to in someone's home in Tuscany.

On the way here Ken filled in that blank, the piece of news that happened when he was gone, and it was that Ned Mancuso and Rory got arrested for running an escort service out of a house on The Strand.

This was too much to process tonight, there'd be time for that, and Chris told Ken and Stacey to order whatever they wanted, don't hold back, and when they got in the restaurant he said the same to Chandler and Mallory.

Chandler said that wasn't necessary, that announcement, they were all going to order what they wanted anyway.

"Maybe I just wanted to keep everyone on their toes," Chris said.

"You have been," Chandler said.

THE END

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