

JUSTICE WRAP

by REX BOLT



Chris Seely
Vigilante Justice Book 5

★★★★★ 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.

CONTENTS

1 Pinpoint

2 Notch

3 Slow-Fried

4 Walk On

5 Squeezed

6 Pool Deck

7 Feature

8 Marching Band

9 Free Ticket

10 Metropolitan

11 Poundage

12 Drawing Stuff

13 Buttered

14 Little Dicey

15 Near Temecula

Chapter One

Harrison T. Beckenworth the 3rd, who considered himself a pretty good squash player, scrambled to the front corner to retrieve Duggan's drop shot, but he popped up the return and Duggan put it away.

This made it 9-3 in the third game, Duggan two points away from concluding matters.

Duggan served and Harrison went for a low percentage winner and caught the tin, handing Duggan match point, and after a brief exchange Duggan drove a crisp, low forehand along the right wall and that was it.

On the little bench outside the court Duggan said, "You were tough. You do a lot of things well. I had to bring my A-game, that's for sure."

Harrison didn't like being patronized by this clown, who reminded him of the kid who beat him in that challenge match all those years ago at the Deerfield Academy, which resulted in Harrison getting cut from the JV squash team.

Deerfield was a prep school in central Massachusetts, 2 1/2 hours from Boston. There'd been an event later that year at school, a talent show, and in the auditorium an opportunity presented itself for Harrison to push that kid down a steep flight of stairs, but he never quite pulled the trigger on it.

He wasn't sure if he was afraid of getting caught, and thrown in jail, or if he simply didn't have the nerve.

What he definitely *was* afraid of was getting expelled from school, and his father's reaction. You didn't want to think about *that*.

Either way he hadn't played much squash since that failure in 10th grade, but the tennis pro here at the club, a girl named Rebecca who played high-level college tennis right down the road in Malibu at Pepperdine, suggested it as a way to improve his quickness.

So Harrison took her advice and played squash a dozen times and was enjoying it and felt like he was back at his old level, and even above . . . so he entered the club tournament.

That was tonight, the first round, and he'd just gotten his rear end handed to him by this Duggan dipshit.

The guy even sort of resembled the kid he should have thrown down those stairs, didn't he?

Duggan said, "Well you want to play a couple more games? Just for fun?"

"I appreciate the offer," Harrison lied, "but I have to get going."

"Oh yeah? Where you gotta be?"

There were essentially two types of members here at the Racquet Club of Pacific Palisades. You had the ones that were born into it, such as himself, Harrison, who grew up in Darien, Connecticut, and going back to his grandfather the family belonged to a well-established riding and polo club in Greenwich.

Then there were the guys like Duggan, who clawed their way up, sometimes a little luck involved, sometimes not, and they could afford now to live in Malibu and drive their Ferraris and dress like the waspy New England guys, and they could almost pull it off except now and then they'd lapse into street talk from their old neighborhood.

Not that everything had been a *cakewalk* for Harrison. Yes he started with some family capital, but after he'd gotten out of Cornell business school and moved to LA, he'd studied the markets and trends and taken some calculated risks, and angel-invested in mostly the right companies.

There had been the one hitch with the startup that designed billing systems for dental offices, and he'd gotten burned and blamed it on the guy who sales-pitched him . . . but his psychiatrist calmed him down--and upped his medication to a respectable level--and he went back to the

grindstone and 6 months later had earned back what he'd lost to those incompetents . . . plus a whole lot more.

So life was pretty good. He lived in Bel Air, one of the ritziest couple of zip codes in the nation, he went to work every day in his own study in his robe and slippers, swam 40 laps like clockwork before lunch in the 25-yard chlorine-free infinity pool . . . so how could it *not* be?

Except sometimes . . . more *often* these days actually . . . he thought he was someone else.

And that someone else kept changing, which was extremely irritating.

At the moment, after coming off the court, he started thinking he was his girlfriend from the summer when he had the lifeguard job on the lake upstate.

And that was the darndest thing . . . if you were going to be someone else, why would you want to be a girl?

Taking it a step further now, maybe you go out with this Duggan tonight? Cocktails, dinner, dancing, whatever the fuck.

At some point, you have the necessary privacy, you pick your spot, you make your move.

Not a girl-boy move, nothing like that probably . . . but you resolve things for the person.

And you keep it simple . . .

. . . Except usually when he wasn't himself, Harrison was a guy. A different type of one.

When he played squash yesterday for example, his last tune-up practice match before tonight's official one, he was playing against a woman, Kathleen, who he also played sometimes in tennis.

Kathleen was overweight and slow, though she did hit the ball cleanly, likely the product of years if not decades of lessons, but Harrison could always handle her and that was great.

Last night, though, she argued one of his calls, where he felt he'd gotten the ball on one bounce but she said it bounced twice and should be her point.

Harrison saw no reason to be a wise-ass, and it was a practice match after all, so he gave her the point.

But after she said thank you and took the ball and got ready to serve he thought he was a knight in a castle someplace, and he was getting ready to cut off her head with a sword that had a 10-inch-wide blade.

Right now fortunately he was back to being good old Harrison Beckenworth the 3rd, and he answered Duggan's question, to hopefully shut him up, "I don't *have* to be anywhere, but I'm *supposed* to be at a black tie event."

"Where's *that* at?" Duggan said.

"Why?" Harrison said. "You want to take my place?" Trying a thin joke.

"Nah, no reason, other than I got one myself. In Marina del Rey. Was wondering if there'd be a coincidence."

"Well mine's in Westwood," Harrison said. "I should have taken someone's advice, can't even remember who, but don't get too tight with charities."

"I hear you," Duggan said. "This is what happens. Though mine tonight's not one of those. It's a presentation. Kind of a *Shark-Tank* type deal."

Harrison didn't like hearing this, because now he felt out of the loop. "What *kind* of presentation?" he said.

"Some material that blocks cell phone radiation. Couple of kids over at Cal Tech, and they're making jeans out of the stuff."

"I think I get it," Harrison said.

"Yeah. Could be a bunch of bullshit. But who knows. You have to play the game and show up and find out."

“I guess you do,” Harrison said. He was that girl again, ready to ask Duggan out, perhaps seal his fate.

Duggan said, “You want in, I’ll let you know what the story is, and if it makes any sense.”

Harrison was back to being himself, and this was very nice of the guy.

“Anyway,” Duggan said, on the ground now doing a little post-match stretching, “let’s play again. That was fun.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Harrison said, and he showered and wriggled into his tux, which was a little tighter these days despite all this supposed exercise--and how would *that* happen?

Anyhow you could take San Vincente or Wilshire to get to Westwood but tonight he went with his instincts and tried Sunset, which went fine until there was a jackknifed truck at South Barrington Avenue, and that piled an extra forty minutes onto your effort.

As he told the Duggan person, you ended up on committees and boards and therefore you had these obligations, and normally all Harrison wanted to do was get back home.

That’s where he was hands-down most comfortable. And in thinking about it, he wasn’t *other people* very often when he was at home.

He had a guest cottage in back, off the lawn area behind the pool, which he supposed counted as an in-law or granny unit, but he had a guy living there who he let stay for free, the arrangement being the guy would cut the grass and trim the bushes and do a little watering.

Nice kid, trying to break into film, taking some classes at Pasadena City College that he said were taught by producers and directors in the industry.

This made sense, and Harrison was rooting for the guy to catch a break and he didn’t see the guy much but it was a good feeling knowing he was back there, kind of peaceful.

A couple weeks ago though the guy brought a girl over and maybe they were having something to drink and you could hear them laughing through the open windows . . . and after a while Harrison became a stringy-haired rock guitar player with needle marks on his forearm from heroin injections and he and his band were on a train somewhere in Mississippi and he was pointing an assault rifle out the window seeing who would be best to pick off.

He didn't tell his psychiatrist about that one, since he was afraid the guy might up the meds one more notch and he didn't need that . . . or the guy might send him to a *different* shrink.

He didn't want that to happen because he liked this particular one okay. He did worry after his sessions that he might be scaring the guy into dropping him though. Nothing you could pinpoint, just the way the psychiatrist cleared his throat before he asked the next question.

The event was in a small auditorium behind a church. Harrison hadn't considered it but there probably was a religious element to the project, *Texts and Trades*, which created opportunities for disadvantaged youth.

Either way it seemed successful, and there were a few speeches but mostly at these things you mingled and nabbed the appetizers that came around, and Harrison said hello to a few people as minimally as possible, one of them Jayson Herrick, who brought him on board as a stakeholder at the tech company that was the presenting sponsor of the project.

Jayson was all tan and said he just got back from 10 days in Cabo, and boy he'd sure recommend *that* to recharge the batteries.

And an attractive female with her hair up and in a modest but plenty tight dress came up to Jayson and said something that seemed private, and Jayson excused himself and went with her.

A guy standing nearby said something to another guy, how he'd let her recharge *his* batteries any day, and there was a big eruption of

laughter--not *that* big probably, but Harrison didn't care for it either way . . . and he looked across the room and there was a woman at a microphone making a presentation . . . and he could have sworn earlier she was a middle aged black or Hispanic lady . . . but now you're looking at an Egyptian guy up there instead, and oh man, here comes his camel too . . . now both of them battling the hot desert sun, and nothing but sand spraying up, clouding the shit out the picture.

Harrison felt himself calling out, "The baby! Don't hurt the child!"

The woman at the microphone paused mid-sentence, and everyone swiveled their heads around and looked at Harrison, and it felt better now, getting all that attention, and he smiled and shrugged it off like it was a big inside joke, and soon the speaker resumed and the festivities returned to normal.

As it wound down they brought fancy dessert tortes around and there was coffee and Ruth Solomon came up to Harrison and said quietly, "I just want to make sure you're okay, hon . . . Are you?"

Harrison was a little caught off guard. Ruth was a nice lady, kind of a mother hen type, who'd been on the board of *Texts and Trades* for a couple years.

Harrison said, "Of course. Why?"

Ruth didn't answer but gave that knowing look, and dammit it was sure penetrating, wasn't it, and Harrison was fighting real hard not to turn back into the knight with the wide sword.

Though when he looked at Ruth's earrings dangling down, he could see the glistening of the polished metal in the flat blade, and this whole gathering was currently taking place in a dungeon now.

"Anyhow," Ruth said, "I'm off. It's good to see you." And she gave Harrison a quick hug and peck on the cheek, and he was back at the function again and thanked her and said he'd see her soon.

Whatever *that* meant . . . The thing now, was to get out of here just like Ruth was doing, before something else went out of whack, and there was a coat check stand near the door and someone was waiting there and recognized him and started to say something, but they got distracted and Harrison slipped past and fortunately out into the cool night.

He owned four cars and mostly he drove the Lexus RX 350, but tonight he had the Volkswagen with him, the 73 Super Beetle, phoenix red, that he'd picked up fully restored at an auction, except Harrison wanted a little more pop so he had a guy replace the engine with a Porsche 911 one, and they had to modify the rear hood slightly to accommodate it, but you could fly . . . And it was so rewarding to see the look on the other drivers' faces who didn't expect you to be zooming past them in a little tin can like that.

What time did we have? 9:20 . . . Let's see.

Nothing else in particular on the agenda tonight, so 10 minutes you're up the hill and home. It might be fun to take Bellagio tonight, a little curvier but hey, that's what you want, a little workout for the Vee-Dub.

Or . . . you could swing it by Culver City again.

See what's cooking.

How would you work it from here?

Probably pick up Olympic in Century City, your best bet, under the 405, Bundy to South Centinela . . . that should put you in the ballpark.

The thing was, he'd hopped over there now and then to keep an eye on things, but never from Westwood, so you'd be approaching a little differently, but what did it matter, it was all good.

This person was a sculptor. Harrison wondered since she was female did that make her a sculp-*tress*?

Putting it that way stirred up the medieval castle guy again, and Harrison started fighting it off but figured just let it go, and he drove over there thinking he had a sword sticking out of the back seat upholstery,

which made a nice sheath for it actually, you just plunged it in and it stuck up and stayed in position in case you might need it.

The female's name was Ellie Dubuque. He knew this because he visited her studio, a couple months ago, when they had these annual fall harvest open studio weekends. Harrison wasn't sure what the hell they harvested in LA but that wasn't the point.

What the point *was* . . . she was good. Skilled. Huge pieces. Lots of different materials, and no doubt some welding involved. You couldn't always tell what they were, and someone at the open studio asked her that exact question, "What is this?" And Harrison didn't think that was appropriate at all, that no artist should have to explain their work . . . and he flashed on being a gardener and scraping that person's chest with a metal rake.

Culver City was supposed to be an up and coming artists' district, but every time Harrison came by to check on Ellie it sure seemed dead around here. What it was, the artists had grabbed these clusters of old warehouses, and worked and likely lived in them too, and that's what Ellie was doing, you could tell because at her Open Studio day you saw into a few of the rooms off of her main sculpting area.

But in following her around, trying to figure things out, he felt bad for her when he learned she had to work another job.

And that was the trouble with being a sculptor, wasn't it--no matter how talented you were, who was going to *buy* your stuff?

It occurred to Harrison a few times that that was something he could consult with her about, it was right up his alley, and he could help her place her pieces--and didn't they call them *installations*?--in major corporate offices and skyscraper lobbies in New York and London and Tokyo . . . where they belonged.

Very different than what Ellie was reduced to, at least most evenings from 4 to 10, if he had it figured out correctly, spending her time as a supermarket checker at Vaughan's on Santa Monica Boulevard.

He understood that sometimes a menial job was a good outlet for a creative person. Once he heard of a guy composing a symphony that was performed at Lincoln Center in New York, and the guy was a toll taker on the Whitestone Bridge.

Harrison didn't see that applying to Ellie though, and he wished she didn't have to do a job like this to support her craft.

Hers was the third register in, at least that's where she was the two times Harrison went inside. One of the times he just looked around, the other he bought a quart of milk from her . . . and she was polite enough but clearly didn't remember him from when he came to her Open Studio.

That agitated Harrison a bit, realizing it, but he kept things relatively under control and didn't turn into anyone else that night.

The other problem with this Culver City district, even though it felt like there was no one around you couldn't always park in front of your studio, because there were work vehicles and trucks taking up a lot of space.

So from what his experience was with Ellie, she normally had to walk a block or two when she got home, which meant it would be around 10:20, since her shift ended at 10, and this was a remote son of a bitch area, wasn't it?

Harrison decided one thing for sure, he wouldn't let his niece Maddy, who lived in Virginia, do what Ellie's doing.

Not that he had any say in Maddy's life, but hypothetically.

Tonight Ellie pulled up like clockwork, at 10:18, and started circling around looking for a parking space.

Harrison wondered if sculptors were different than regular artists, maybe more organized, since their work was more precise.

Ellie found a spot, a little closer tonight, across the street and three-quarters of the way to the corner, in front of a lumber yard.

She opened the door to get out and Harrison could see the interior light on, but then she was on her phone and not going anywhere, and he watched her, involved in the device, casual and carefree as if she was waiting for a girlfriend to come off the *Sizzler* ride on a hot summer night at the Allegan County Fair in Michigan.

And see, this was the thing, what he'd warn his niece about. Don't screw around. Just get inside. Do your socializing once you're safe and sound.

Harrison wasn't sure why he thought of that place in Michigan, since he'd never been there. Maybe he'd read about it somewhere, or overheard someone talk about it once.

He didn't like picturing that ride though, and he was having trouble getting rid of it. He saw a flat series of cars, more like little boxes, everything stainless steel and metallic, the cars squared off with corners and tight edges. Nothing rounded.

Finally Ellie finished her business and there was the thump of the door and the beep of everything locking up, and Ellie had a paper supermarket bag in one arm . . . not much in there obviously, but even so, you don't want to be stealing stuff do you? Just because you work there . . . and everyone else does . . . Harrison and his friends used to call it the 5-finger discount . . . except he wasn't Harrison any more, he was a carnival barker at the fair, and his face was deformed on one side because his mother married his uncle . . . and there was one of those big round homemade cheese blocks at home in the kitchen and he really *did* need to get home and get himself a wedge before his Uncle Henry poured lighter fluid all over it.

He said to Ellie out of the dark as she passed, "How much did that sour cream run you? It's okay, you can admit it."

And Ellie was startled for a moment, and then Harrison thought she relaxed a bit and was answering the question when he brought the knife across with a clean emphasis--not unlike a symphony conductor wrapping things up in a major concert hall--and into her neck.

Chapter Two

Chris was taking a surfing lesson today, and halfway through he was thinking this was the dumbest idea I ever had.

The concept was shaky to start with, trying to learn a somewhat hairy water sport at age 43, but he'd let Ken and Stacey talk him into it, that something *fresh* and *in nature* would be good for him . . . and okay fine, they meant well.

His big mistake though was booking Tammy as the instructor.

Tammy could surf her head off and she seemed to have a nice personality--until now--and she looked perfectly presentable in her shorts and tanktop as well, when Cindy had introduced them officially in the *Crow's Nest* last night.

So Chris got duped, and here he was.

There were probably several other instructors, though there were two that he saw a lot--an old guy like him, and a kid who was probably in high school.

Neither one seemed as appealing to spend 90 minutes with as Tammy, but Chris was re-thinking that entirely at the moment.

They were 45 minutes into the lesson and Tammy had him on the sand, they hadn't gone *near* the water yet, and Chris was laying on his chest on top of an old huge surfboard and she was making him stand up and lie back down.

Going on like 500 times now.

His stomach muscles were in spasm and his knees where all chaffed up and his wrists felt like they'd both been sprained, and even his chin was taking a beating from repeatedly having to contact the board.

Chris said, "I'm starting to think of it a different way."

"Well that's your first mistake," Tammy said, "Trying to apply thought to the core fundamental of the sport."

"Yeah, well," Chris said. "My *thought*, was do you have a bikini on underneath that stuff? If you did--or maybe it doesn't even matter, you can leave on your full attire--but how about I watch *you* demonstrate for a while?"

"You're wasting time," Tammy said. "We'll never get into the water today at this rate."

"Is that what those are? *Yoga* pants? Or is that a pre and post-surfing kind of garb?"

She said, "You sure ask a lot of questions. You need to be more single-minded if you expect to prosper in a new pursuit."

"You're getting formal on me," Chris said. "Which tips your hand, that you're not local. Originally."

"That's an interesting take. If I was going to place *you*, I'd say you're from Tarzana."

"I don't even know where that is," he said. "But I'll make you a deal. Let's knock this stuff off, and go have lunch."

Tammy said, "And? . . . I'm waiting to hear how that's a *deal*."

"I'll figure it out on the way up there," Chris said. "Then you'll see."

Tammy said, "Well you're becoming uncooperative, that much is obvious."

"That's *your* interpretation. I'm *shot* here. I haven't been worked this hard since junior high school."

Tammy suggested finishing off the session with some easy jogging in that case, pointing out that Chris could lose a few pounds in the mid-section, which would definitely help with the standing up and maintaining your balance on a surfboard.

Chris said, "I like that place halfway up to Peet's. *King's Highway Grill*, I think it is?"

"The fusion one?"

"See, you didn't change the subject, so I can tell you're interested. When's your next lesson?"

Tammy said she didn't have another one today so she supposed she couldn't back out of it, the offer, and they thankfully left the beach and headed up the hill, though walking on cement he felt *different* body parts hurting now.

They started with a couple of tropical drinks with the little umbrellas sticking out of the glasses and Chris said *Cheers* and thanks for putting up with a poor student.

Tammy said he wasn't a poor student, just an indifferent one.

"What happened to the surfboard though?" Chris said. "You just leave it there?"

"Yeah."

"Too big and heavy, you mean? No one'll steal it?"

Tammy laughed. "That's the hope. Though I do lock my door at night."

"You're saying," Chris said, "don't underestimate the wealthy? They're unpredictable like the rest of us?"

"I'm *saying*," Tammy said, "you don't *hear* of a lot around here, but I make it a policy to watch my back, *wherever* I am."

"Oh yeah? Where's that *been*, you're referring to?"

"I was born and raised in Cleveland," she said. "But getting back to what you were saying, what did they do to you in junior high, that you pretend to be so traumatized by?"

"Ah, we had this PE teacher. Not worth going into. Bottom line, he tortured us for three years. And every day you were afraid he was going to embarrass you, on top of it."

“We had one of those too.”

“Nah, not *this* guy you didn’t. He’d be in jail today, probably. Or at the minimum, bankrupt from all the lawsuits.”

“Gosh.”

“Times were different, and it wasn’t the worst thing to make it through that stuff. Even my friend Ray, who was very defiant back then, he says kids today have it too easy.”

Tammy said, “How did *Ray* turn out?”

“Not great. Ray’s on hemodialysis.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“But he’s had an eventful life, is my impression. I think he was in some trouble at one point. Kind of matured his way out of it.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Good *old-fashioned* trouble . . . Not the light version.”

“What’s the *light* version? Depression, mental health stuff, addiction?”

“Yeah, none of *that*. The real thing . . . He got me a gun once.”

Chris watched for Tammy’s reaction, and he figured that should bring her down a notch, more to his level and hopefully lose some of the surf-instructor attitude.

Tammy said, “Wow . . . Tell me about it.”

And this was the thing. When something stalls or isn’t proceeding as smoothly as you like, throw in a gun.

Of course that’s in the movies, where some guy was talking about that. A director one time, who made action-thriller type films, and Chris saw the guy being interviewed on TV. He remembered where *he* was too, a motel in West Lafayette, Indiana, when he was driving cross-country.

The reason it stuck in his head is because the guy was a hometown boy made good and they were honoring him, and he was giving a talk that

night at Purdue University, and Chris didn't have anything better to do so he went to it, and the guy was pretty entertaining.

And yep, his little gun philosophy made sense, and Chris figured you could apply variations of that to plenty of situations. You didn't necessarily always need to bring a *gun* into it, you just needed some shock value.

"Just that he *got* me one," Chris said to Tammy. "Nothing real interesting beyond that."

"Well . . . did anything . . . like, *happen?*" she said.

"Not a big deal. It seemed like a sensible idea, but I didn't ending up requiring it."

"Then that's not a good end to the story at all," Tammy said.

She was expressing some frustration now, and Chris couldn't help wondering, in a more intimate setting, did she bring a similar approach to the table that needed to be resolved . . .

And of course here he was being a jerk again, projecting stuff out that didn't call for it.

The crazy need to womanize *like there's not tomorrow* had diminished somewhat, which was a relief, because it meant he really *was* starting to believe he was okay . . . That *someone--somehow--*had screwed something up with his diagnosis.

In fact an example just a little a while ago, down at the beach, Tammy remarking that he had that extra poundage around the gut? . . . That could only reinforce your positive outlook, couldn't it?

No one exactly reprimanded him for all the attempted womanizing back then, but he got the feeling there was disapproval.

But what they didn't realize . . . there really *was* no tomorrow, at that point. At least on paper. So how could it not make sense?

That was *what* again . . . the middle of January? Getting the news in Billy's office and staggering out into the world like a zombie . . .

Now . . . Jeez, December 14th already.

Man, when you put it in *that* perspective--that's 11 months! He'd been cautiously optimistic on each monthly anniversary, starting at about the six-month mark, July.

But now . . . son of a gun . . . you were on the backstretch coming into the far turn, and the 1 year mark was actually in your sights.

Today was Thursday. The little adventure up in the Bay Area in the Original Joe's parking lot was last Friday, and the other adventure, having to bail on that unpredictable driver in Santa Barbara--which may have been an over-reaction, Chris was thinking, but either way--that was Sunday, and he'd finally gotten back to MB on Monday.

A couple days to recover and get your bearings, and today the ill-advised surfing lesson, but overall you couldn't complain.

And Christmas was coming up, his favorite time of year--and unless something highly unforeseen happened, he should be able to embrace and enjoy it.

And if there *was* some kind of God up there, that'd be a good time to thank him.

"Sorry about that," Chris said. "I was re-arranging a few things in my head . . . What was your question?"

Tammy said, "It was more of a statement. That your story petered out."

"When it comes down to it, I'm a chicken."

"But something must have precipitated it. People don't normally go up to their friends and say, 'Oh by the way, let me borrow your gun for a while'."

"Now you're loosening up," Chris said. "If I asked you to go home with me tonight, what would you say?"

What the *hell* was wrong with him, why was he blurting this out, especially after just reminding himself he was being an *idiot*?

"I'd say no," Tammy said.

“Well, that’s good then . . . In fact I respect you for that.”

“You seem a little off,” she said.

“Not in the *worst* way though?”

“I don’t know. You’re interesting at least. And a little mysterious.”

“I just remembered something,” Chris said. “It wouldn’t work anyway.”

“*What* wouldn’t?”

“You coming back with me. I gave up my bedroom.”

“Now you’re losing me,” Tammy said. “But the gun business . . . that really *did* just peter out?”

“Pretty much. Yep.”

“Hmm. Do you still have it?”

“It’s possible . . .”

“Can you please at least give me a clue?”

Chris said, “Do you like dangerous guys?”

“Now you’re all over the place,” she said. “But maybe I do.”

“How about Lou or Ned Mancuso? He fit in there too?”

Tammy hesitated a second. “I think I know who you’re referring to. I’ve seen him at the *Crow’s Nest*.”

Meaning, she knew him pretty well, would be Chris’s guess, but no point pursuing that right now.

“Anyhow,” Chris said, “*my* deal, there’s a guy and a gal, I kind of underestimated it, thought it was a negative, but now I see there’s something there. So I gave ‘em the bedroom.”

“I’m not following you,” Tammy said. “But that sounds nice of you. You’re saying you’re on the couch?”

“Yeah, that or the recliner . . . Amazing how easily you fall asleep in those things. You know what I’m talking about, those huge Costco jobs?”

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes to recharge the batteries. After what you put me through today, I’m gonna need extra.”

“I meant how long have you had the sleeping arrangement, letting the two people take over.”

“Oh. Just a couple days so far . . . But so I have it straight, *why* couldn’t we go in the ocean? Isn’t that what you do when you surf?”

“I think I explained it pretty clearly,” Tammy said. “Would you want to be Van Halen on stage before you learned your basic scales?”

“That’s a terrible example,” Chris said. “You need to come up with a better one.”

“Maybe next time,” she said.

“See? I roped you in. At least enough to have lunch with me again.”

“We’ll see.”

Chris said, “You have a good gig. And you do a conscientious job with it. It’s nice to be an authority figure.”

“What’s *your* deal?” she said.

And here you were again, in undefined territory, so Chris never liked that question.

He said, “I guess I’m mostly a journalist, if you pin me down . . . and I pull out the fancy terminology.”

“Gosh,” she said. “Now *I’m* impressed. I’m trying to get a blog off the ground. On women’s surfing. I’m looking for advertising, the whole nine yards. Do you think you could take a look at it, and give me some feedback?”

“We’ll see,” he said.

Generally speaking, it was good to finish things off with the upper hand if you could, and he was glad he had control there at the end with Tammy.

And when Ken and Stacey asked him how the lesson went he'd be sure to tell them it was the best decision he'd made since he moved to Manhattan Beach.

Well maybe not that over-the-top, but at least don't make them feel bad for suggesting it.

It was admittedly a little awkward having them both in the apartment, but they seemed pretty dang happy, and what you *didn't* want to have happen was Stacey get mixed up again with the wrong crowd--such as the guy Chris had to fire over the railing that time--and you didn't want Ken headed that direction either.

So you kept them under control by not kicking them out.

Maybe not how they drew it up in the relationship self-help books--move into some older guy's apartment who you met around the pool--but so be it.

The recliner though, he may have been over-stating the benefits just a bit to Tammy. It wasn't as easy lately to fall asleep in the thing as he made it sound, and your neck, every night around 3am, got real stiff.

Anyhow . . .

Something Chris had been putting off, but he knew you couldn't dance around it forever . . . and that was taking a look at whatever news that might be coming out of up north from last Friday.

And Jeez, it was almost four, where did the time go, though that's what happens when you have a late lunch and combine it with too much booze in the middle of the day, things run long and you lose track of time.

But the library was still open, and Chris hated to risk finding out something that might wreck his night, but you needed to, and he walked over there.

He hadn't seen Emma since the episode at the 25-year reunion. Meaning this could be a little awkward if he ran into her right now, though

why should it, really, since whatever they may have had briefly brewing had obviously run its course.

One thing he did give the woman credit for was helping out with Ken, pushing a few buttons, so he could keep working at the library after his temp stint ran out. She may have had her own motives there--in fact who was he kidding--but the end result was positive.

Still, no real point running into Emma today if you didn't have to--why set up that situation--so Chris didn't go upstairs to the computers he'd used before but found one on the first floor near the Biography section--and man, that took up several racks, all kinds of individuals apparently being profiled, and he was thinking he should read a few of them and educate himself--except the business at hand was a little more timely and relevant.

First you had a couple of small mentions on Saturday, the day after he'd handled the Jeramiah guy, one on page 3 of the Chronicle Metro section, and one on page 2 of main section the San Jose Mercury News.

Chris thought this was a little odd, the Merc picking it up like that, since Original Joe's was in Daly City, right at the San Francisco border, not really Merc territory, except he remembered the guy lived in San Mateo, so you did have that angle.

Both papers' mentions were small, 2 column-inches tops, which was newspaper jargon for the number of words, which in this case was less than 50.

They were both basic generic crime stories . . . a guy was found unresponsive in his car outside a restaurant, authorities suspect unusual circumstances, yada-yada.

Nothing about the guy being recently arraigned for an auto break-in and animal assault in the Cow Hollow neighborhood.

Which is what you would expect. Too early to make the connections.

Also too early obviously for the postcard to come into play--Chris was trying to keep it all straight, when he killed the guy, when he tracked down

that big postcard he needed, when he filled the thing out, and when he actually sent it off.

Bottom line, piecing it together, he didn't even *send* the thing until Saturday afternoon, after these two articles already came out, from that mailbox in Benicia that seemed strategic but probably didn't make a difference . . . but regardless, the kid reporter at the start-up paper wouldn't even receive the post card until Monday, at the earliest.

Which was 3 days ago now.

So Chris clicked around some more, and finally, just yesterday morning, the Chronicle had a story matching it up . . . who the guy was now, connecting it to their article on November 30th by Whitt Holmb, headlined:

Car Thief Kills Dog on Union Street

The *new* article said that Jeramiah Towne pled not-guilty to the charges against him, one of which was Felony Animal Abuse under Penal Code 597, and was free on \$25,000 bond pending a January 12th, 2018 court date.

Nothing about any post card being received by the media, or the authorities.

Chris thought about this and for a moment wondered if the darn thing was too big after all, and got squashed or rejected by the post office, or caught up in one their automatic machines and shredded.

Otherwise, wouldn't something like that have made a splash by now?

He wasn't positive he had the details right but he was pretty sure, back in 1969 when the Zodiac sent *his* letter after the cab driver murder in Gloria's neighborhood, that the Chronicle posted it right away.

Or . . . did this mean he'd mis-stepped big time, and left, Jeez, some saliva residue on the card, or something, by breathing on it?

That they were keeping it out of the news and dead quiet because they were investigating *him*?

Maybe it wasn't such a brilliant idea after all to try to be a big shot and serve notice and attract attention to yourself. Did he ever think of something as basic as that?

And Chandler . . . could *he* know something too? The son of a bitch was clearly in the loop, he didn't miss a thing, and he'd been oddly quiet yesterday when they'd played tennis.

No real joking around in between sets, pretty much all business out there . . . though Chandler had mentioned as they were warming up that his right side was bothering him a little bit overnight . . . so maybe the guy was worried he had a kidney stone coming on . . . and maybe Chris's mind was running away from him all around.

Still, this was a little odd, the media coverage, wouldn't you think?
Zippo?

Maybe it *was* the start-up publication, that if they did receive it they didn't know how to handle it. Or they thought it was a joke and tossed it in the recycling.

Or . . . more logically, unfortunately, they didn't *necessarily* think it was a joke, but they didn't want to give publicity to the post card author without additional confirmation.

And if this was how they were operating, on old-fashioned journalistic principles, Chris supposed you had to give them a measure of credit, since integrity in the profession had largely gone out the window.

And of course the Zodiac, unpleasant as it was to think of, had included a piece of the victim's shirt with his letter, to achieve more or less instant credibility.

Oh well. What could you do at this point . . . other than keep it philosophical, and be grateful that so far no one had come looking for you.

This first floor computer cubicle had worked out okay, no sign of Emma, nor Ken for that matter, who he didn't particularly want to run into either and have to explain anything to. The only drawback, compared to upstairs, you sacrificed that great view of the ocean.

Before he got out of here you might as well scan the rest of the news as well, meaning Jerry Smith, McCall and more recently Mel--see if there's any unfortunate updates on any of those characters.

Luckily there didn't seem to be. The only piece of anything was the *Sebastopol All Saints Club* announcing a revolving scholarship in Smith's name . . . and Chris wondered how Eric Mossman's family, what was left of them--meaning the kid up the street who Smith drunk-drove into an early grave--would feel about *that*.

Chris skimmed the sports section of the LA Times, and the Rams lost a showdown to Philadelphia on Sunday but they were still in good shape for the playoffs. You had the Dodgers trying pick up a left-handed free agent to bolster the back end of the rotation. You had USC football news, which you always seemed to down here, during the season or not.

That should about wrap it up, and he clicked the back button a couple times, ended up on the Chronicle site again, and gave it the final once over to make sure he didn't miss anything on the dog guy--and son of a bitch, there was a tiny post he hadn't seen the first time . . . another motherfucker robbing a student at gunpoint in Berkeley.

Naturally they hadn't apprehended anyone, it said both UC campus police and Berkeley police searched a three-block radius but came up empty. And there was a hotline.

And Chris was wondering exactly, this particular situation, 6 or 8 or a dozen of these now, *at least*--When exactly was it that you guys came up *full*?

His day was actually going pretty well, despite the debacle of the surf lesson--and that'd settled it by way, he was in over his head trying that, and he'd be sticking with bodysurfing, at the most, from here on out.

And . . . shouldn't that experience slowly but surely be telling you something else? You have to start accepting your age, maybe?

Forget all that though. His day *wasn't* going as well all of a sudden, now that he'd read that little item.

It had been eating at him for a while that he never tried to address it personally. He was right there, when he was following Smith around in and out of the Berkeley hills, and could have sized it up better, but he was too preoccupied.

The Berkeley thing *had* made it onto his list . . . but again, what did that *mean*, since you couldn't point to an individual and go to work on it the normal way.

It wasn't clean, no, and highly doubtful it was just one guy. Much more likely, you had a bunch of thugs coming over from Oakland or up from the flatlands, ripping off expensive electronics from easy prey.

It was out of control. Maybe he'd missed something in the news these last couple years, but he honestly couldn't remember reading about a single one of these pricks getting caught.

Chris admitted he was as guilty as the next person. He was ticked off, fine, but at the same time he was sweeping them under the rug and hoping they'd just stop.

But stuff doesn't just stop. Just as if a few months go by and North Korea behaves itself and doesn't test a missile--you're fooling yourself if you don't know it's only a matter of time.

Things don't come to a halt on their own . . .

So he left the library in a bad mood, sorry he'd come. The dog guy stuff was unsatisfying so far, and now this.

He walked home, and that was one of the good things about being out there, moving around, exerting yourself a little . . . your brain improved and sometimes you'd get an idea.

And the way the post card seemed to have been ignored, you were probably spinning your wheels here too--but short of driving back up there, you had to do *something*.

So what you did, you got back to apartment, organized yourself again with the gloves and whatever else, and drove to Disneyland.

Traffic was surprisingly light for 5 o'clock, but it still took an hour and a half, the 405 to 110 to 91. Disneyland was in Anaheim, further inland than Chris remembered, though he'd never approached it from the coast before.

He found parking on the street a half mile away, but by time he'd gotten to the main gate he sort of talked himself out of his original idea.

The plan was to go into the gift shop, which he was pretty sure you could do without paying a fancy admission to the whole park . . . and Jeez, it hadn't even occurred to him that they might have winter hours and be already closed . . . though there was a flashing sign that told you the whole shebang was open until midnight, so that part was fine.

And even if they charged you, so be it, you pay, and maybe even go *on* something, get your money's worth . . . But the main thing, you pick up the largest post card you can find and you fill it out.

Except . . . something told him they'd take your picture, wouldn't they, everyone who came through that gate . . . even the ones who hoped to avoid the gate and do a little shopping only . . . Chris suspected pretty strongly the place had you, that sooner or later the surveillance picked everybody up.

So that shot that idea and he was getting real hungry, it was a big mistake not to at least eat first, and you needed a plan B, and unfortunately it wasn't as clean as Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, where you had the main attractions but also little supporting shops all over.

Here you had nothing, and until you got close to the main gate it felt a little too quiet actually, maybe even slightly dangerous.

The idea of course was to pick up something and send it from Disneyland, their own mailbox if you could, and that way you were a tourist who could have been from Iowa City and you're throwing more chaos on their plate.

So what he ended up doing, there was a supermarket, a neighborhood type place on Anaheim Boulevard called King-Lie's, and on part of one aisle they sold magazines and sundries and had a few postcards.

Chris found one of the Matterhorn, which was the famous bobsled ride in the park, one of their originals, and it was regular sized but conveniently pre-posted and it would have to work, and what he did, he casually stuck it into his pocket.

Then he picked out a 6-pack of club soda, which never hurt to have in the apartment when you got thirsty in the middle of the night, and at the register it was \$4.99 plus CRV, and he gave the checker a ten-spot and told her to keep the change.

This way he didn't feel guilty about shoplifting the postcard. The supermarket had the casual feel of a family operation, and Chris didn't see any cameras around, but this seemed like the wise approach.

Back in the car, again with the left hand, he wrote:

Dear Bronson Northfleet (OR WHOEVER):

You've ignored me (APPARENTLY)

Now I have no choice

Tell the people if they rob me at Cal--

--HA HA HA

Sincerely

Your Friendly Visitor

“There,” Chris said out loud. That should get the point across. He supposed you could spend hours toying with these things, getting the words just right. Maybe misspelling some of them intentionally like the Zodiac probably did.

Chris couldn’t see the point of all that, you were speaking your peace, from the heart, and any fine-tuning seemed like a waste of time. All he needed to do was mail the thing, and it would be nice to find a mailbox near the Disneyland park, so you could still fake being someone on vacation here . . . except it was safer to low-key it, and there was one on the sidewalk near a bus stop up ahead, and that took care of it.

That was *two* now, to the hungry start-up newspaper, the Bay City Beat. Chris felt like he was throwing them a nice bone, being generous. A scoop.

If they didn’t pick up on this one, you’d have to figure out a different approach. One thing he *really* didn’t want to have to do was go back up there, and hopefully it wasn’t inevitable . . . but it was starting to feel that way.

It was definitely a warm night for mid-December, the little gauge in the Camry said 66 as he was heading back to MB.

Not tropical maybe, like Florida, and likely in the 70’s currently in a place like Arizona . . . but really, you couldn’t complain, and Chris thought he’d sit around the pool for a while at the *Cheater Five*, read a *New Yorker*

magazine, which Ken had been bringing home from the library, along with the *Atlantic* and some others.

Older ones that they were taking out of circulation, but it didn't matter, good writing held up, and Chris was open to all of it but he especially liked the human interest pieces, such as the one about the identical twins, adopted by different families at birth, growing up in different states, and then reuniting at age 39 and finding out they did most of the important things in life almost exactly the same.

And Jeez, speaking of that . . . how about the astronaut the other day who comes back from a year in the space station, and 7 percent of his DNA is different.

Chris couldn't help think, was there some way criminals could duplicate an experience like that here on earth. They'd have to invent something, maybe a chamber or some shit, but some of those criminal minds were pretty sharp and someone was probably already working on the possibility.

Of course he never put *himself* in that category. Yes, admittedly he'd broken the law a few times . . . but whether he'd committed any actual *crimes* . . . that was open to interpretation, and his was: *no he hadn't*.

Others might see it differently. Which you couldn't worry about. People understandably based their viewpoints on their own life experiences, and those were out of your control.

Not that you were about to initiate any arguments on the subject.

And when you thought about it, not too many *regular* topics were worth arguing about either . . . such as sports or politics. You ever see anyone win one of those? The other guy saying, "You know something? I've had it wrong all these years. I'm so glad we had this confrontation, because now you've convinced me."

He had the jazz station on which helped the drive back go faster, and he turned off Sepulveda onto McLellan Lane and into the parking lot, but

there were splashing sounds coming from the pool, not that he minded them, but tonight he thought you know what, maybe wait an hour or so . . . and he headed down to the *Crow's Nest*.

Cindy spotted him pretty quickly and without asking brought him a Vieques Fresh, which he'd ordered a couple times before but didn't feel like tonight, but he didn't want to make her feel bad of course so he said, "Dang. All the doofii you have to put up with, pretty amazing how you keep things straight."

"What's doofii?" Cindy said. "Doofuses?"

"I guess. Why not."

"Well you're almost a local now. You're being a little hard on your friends and neighbors."

"I tend to be an ass," he said. "But you already knew that."

"How did your session go though?"

"Oh, that. Yeah, thanks for the intro. But I concluded I was being a little delusional. An elevated sense of my capabilities. Never got off the beach, which is an embarrassment."

"Tammy said the two of you had lunch."

"Jeez . . . Word travels quick in a small town I guess. The thing there, I wanted to make it worth her while, since I bailed on the lesson at the midway mark."

"She said you were being difficult . . . Ned's here tonight by the way."

"Ooh boy," Chris said. He hadn't seen Ned since that night Ned and Floyd had the bizarre exchange, and he hadn't noticed him so far tonight . . . but scanning the room, yep, there he was, same stool near the far end of the bar by the window, in robust conversation with the same type of guy he was talking to last time.

"Shall I tell him to say hello?" Cindy said. She was giving him one of those knowing looks, except Chris had no idea what she meant by it. Or what she knew, for that matter.

“You like to stir things up,” he said. “You remind me of me.”

“Your brother’s an attractive man,” she said. “Is he still in the area?”

“I’ve been down this road before,” Chris said. “Kind of looks like me, but better looking, right? A little younger, more athletic . . . To cap it off, he’s smarter too.”

“You’re pretty smart,” she said. “Even though you pretend you’re not.”

“It depends how you define it. He’s killing it in real estate out in Phoenix . . . but that was the only part of what I said that you challenged.”

“You’re going a bit overboard. I thought is was simple enough question, is he still around, that’s all.”

“So you were making small talk,” he said, “which I appreciate . . . Speaking of people being around . . . what about Rory?”

Chris wasn’t crazy about opening up the subject, the business Ken had filled him in on, that Ned and Rory got nabbed for something with an escort service.

It was less of a shock as it sunk in, since you figured Mancuso was running schemes up the wazoo . . . plus admittedly, you had that conversation with Rory in the hot tub at Sharif’s motel, where she put it out there that the last time she’d been in one of those was at a resort in Mexico . . . and she didn’t blurt it out, but the possibility fit now.

And he hadn’t seen Rory in here last night, his first time back, and he minded his own business.

But now with Mancuso here, and the likelihood that he’d be speaking to the guy, you might as well ask.

“She’s taking a little time off,” Cindy said. “But she’ll be back . . . Listen, I’m going to let you go, signal if you need something.”

A couple minutes later, there she was over in the corner by Ned, bringing him another beer, not from over the bar but right next to him, one hand on his collar as she put it down in front of him, a fresh little napkin first, and then you can see her saying something in his ear.

And Ned, being cool about it, waits a little while before he looks over and finds Chris.

Cindy was obviously pretty tight to the scene herself, you could tell that from Day 1 when he first sat down with Ned in here. Maybe she had something to do with the escort thing herself, who knows.

At the very least you had the impression she was banging the guy-- past, present, whatever.

And like an increasing number of situations lately, it wasn't worth trying to figure out.

On cue Ned excused himself from the guy he'd been talking to and came over and sat down with Chris.

"My buddy," he said. "What's shakin' in *your* world?"

"More than I want, would be the thinking man's answer," Chris said. "Since Cindy just told me I'm smarter than I look. Or some variation."

"What'd she base that on?" Ned said.

And this was the thing, you tried not to like this guy, but he was colorful.

And who was he telling earlier, they remind him of himself? Ah Jeez, that was Cindy, just a few minutes ago. Not great, and a little concerning, when you can't keep that stuff straight.

But the point being, that was for show, a remark like that to her . . . but this son of a bitch really *did* make some of the same comments *he* might have.

Chris said, "I was comparing my brother. The guy you beat up."

"Hold on there now partner. I was on *short* end of that, was how I remember it."

"What *was* that anyway? Macho bullshit, with your old pal Chip in Vegas? Or am I taking a wild guess?"

"You are," Ned said. "But you're on the right track. It don't matter, I feel like he got it out of his system."

“Small world,” Chris said, waiting for a reaction, and Ned was good, there *was* none.

“I heard the cops were looking for you,” Ned said.

This was the kind of alarm bell going off that Chris needed like hole in the head, stretched out here, halfway through his Vieques Fresh on an uneventful Thursday night.

Did this . . . could it possibly mean . . . like *today*, or something?

Or *tonight*, when he was running around Disneyland?

And there’ll be some guy’s business card at the apartment when he gets back, with a direct number to call?

“Well that’s no good,” Chris said. “Why’d you have to tell me?”

“I’m playing with you,” Ned said. “I think.”

“Well . . . no point stopping there, then.”

“All it was, I heard something a couple weeks ago. You were getting called on. I know the feeling.”

Now this changed things . . . thank *God* . . . that he was likely referring to Hamm and other guy dropping by to ‘release’ him, as Chandler put it.

Hopefully. That there wasn’t *another* visit someone made to him a couple weeks ago, separate than this one.

“What’d they look like?” Chris said. “The policemen.” A ridiculous question, but might as well see what Ned said.

“Now you’re playing with *me*,” Ned said. “I just happened to *hear* about it. From the looks of it, you sitting here holding court, flirting with the babes . . . it was no biggie.”

Chris was trying to put two and two together. It could have a coincidence, who knows, Hamm and his sidekick stopping off for a beer after Ken poker-faced them that day, and someone in the *Crow’s Nest* overhearing something . . . or . . . thinking about it a little more, it could have been Chandler passing it on to Mancuso.

That was more likely. Chandler was a good guy, had been there for him and bailed him out . . . but you had to watch your back with him.

Chandler talking shop with Mancuso was probably not all that different than Chandler talking shop with the private eye up in Sonoma County, when it came down to it. Different sides of the law . . . but when did that stop anyone from having a good laugh?

So you might as well have a little fun *back*, and throw it out there. Chris said, “Did you ever hear about Chandler Sweeney’s experience with that CraigsList scammer?”

“I did not,” Ned said, but you could tell he recognized what Chris was talking about.

“Did you help him out on that?”

Ned pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. “I keep saying I’m going to stop. My problem, I never give myself a date to stop *at*.”

“I know what you mean,” Chris said. “You gotta hold yourself accountable, immediately. I’m bad that way too. Then you can talk yourself out of it.”

“And make a *new* resolution . . . Your brother’s not going to shoot me or something, is he?”

“*I* might, on his behalf,” Chris said. Going way off the tracks now, the alcohol doing its thing, but why not push a few buttons.

Ned said, “That’s why I like you. You can take a joke. We should hang out more.”

“Well you know my schedule obviously . . . Whether I’m out of town, and so forth.”

“Be good my friend,” Ned said, and he got up and went back to his corner spot, and Chris figured it was as good a time as any to get out of here himself.

Chapter Three

Harrison T. Beckenworth the 3rd was wrapping up an afternoon *Insanity* workout on the back lawn, and sweating up a storm.

He'd picked it at random, Day 6 the Plyometric Cardio Circuit, 40 minutes of brutality being barked at him by the black dude . . . who meant well, but Holy Mackerel he was a taskmaster.

Of course the 'back lawn' in Harrison's case was about the size of a football field. Well not quite, but it was a significant expanse, especially considering how hilly most of the properties were in Bel Air.

He was lucky to find this place, and at the right price as well, back in 2007 when the market was in the middle of what they called the worst housing crash since the Great Depression.

Though he still paid a pretty penny for it--people loved to go overboard with those grandiose declarations.

He decided *Insanity* was better than tennis or squash, both of which pissed him off.

First of all you didn't have to *go* anywhere and pretend to be nice to people. Secondly, you didn't *lose*.

And that tennis pro at the club, what the devil was her name again?

Rebecca. She should be crucified--shouldn't she?--for talking him into entering that squash tournament.

Not *literally* crucified of course. But someone in management really did need to straighten her out on that. You don't just go around putting people in uncomfortable positions that were going to end with you crash-and-burning.

The other night, after the squash and the black-tie nonsense though, the other part had been good for him.

It was unfortunate, what had to happen with the gal ultimately.

If he could have brought her back he would. CPR, jolt her with one of those shock wave things, something.

That was unrealistic obviously. But it wasn't imperative for her to be permanently gone. That wasn't the point at all.

What's that expression you'd hear? *Life gets in the way?*

That's how it worked, didn't it. You couldn't expect others to understand that . . . but he was glad *he* did. It was a comfort.

Harrison finished the *Insanity* workout and took a long shower.

All his soaps and shampoos and colognes and body washes were imported. Mostly from London and Paris, a few from Switzerland. He made sure as always to take his time shaving every bit of body hair. The groin area in particular was critical to address. Not something you could accept under your clothes, something growing like grass.

Another habit he'd developed over time, which seemed more important than ever these days . . . you don't wear the same clothes twice.

Any of it. Except the shoes and the jacket. You make exceptions for those, but you be sure and bleach-clean the bottoms of the shoes every time you come home, before you walk around inside, and Harrison had taken to keeping a bottle of Clorox and a bag of cotton hand towels under the bench on the front porch.

The rest of your daily outfit, you toss. It ran you a few bucks, operating that way . . . but if you could afford it this was common sense. Whatever riff-raff you picked up during the day, get rid of it.

He frequently thought of shaving his head and eyebrows too, but decided he could go without doing that, so long as he never covered them up, such as wearing a dumb hat.

Another thing lately, maybe a little extreme, he could admit, but he had to vacuum the downstairs of the house--meaning the living room, dining room and his work study--every morning first thing out of bed before he allowed himself his coffee.

He had a housekeeper who came in three afternoons a week and took care of that, but he needed to do it anyway.

Overall, the last couple days, life was pretty good.

He hadn't gone anywhere yet, since it happened with Ellie, and was a little concerned about that.

And he could work fine, was negotiating a sweet deal in Louisville . . . in fact was shaved, showered, vacuumed and all that good stuff the morning after it happened and at his desk by 8:30 like clockwork.

In fact that first morning he'd worked *better* than fine, there was an energy he hadn't experienced in a while. He did get up to stretch at one point, about 11, and in the hall mirror noticed he was a conquistador in 16th century Peru.

The good part about *that* . . . it wasn't alarming at all, like these things sometimes were. In fact he had to admit he looked quite handsome in his pose.

Today had been mostly successful as well, so long as he put his head down and focused, and the markets responded nicely and he got on a conference call with some investors from Hong Kong, and what could you say, he had a smooth touch, and when he knocked off a little early to go out on the lawn and exercise, he felt he'd earned it.

The only thing . . .

That *couple* though.

That was starting to bother him.

Nothing overwhelming--he didn't think--but dammit, just enough to where he wasn't going to completely enjoy his dinner.

Which was supposed to be a hamburger slow-fried, grass-fed beef, sauerkraut heaped over the top of it, served with mustard. No bread. A 2013 Duckhorn Vineyards red to wash it all down.

Fuck it.

This is what happens when you break your routine, and let things slip. The routine meaning keeping an eye on the two of them.

The guy, pretty sure his name was Dag, unless she was calling him that as a secret name--but there were guys named Dagwood, right?--anyhow he treated her nicely, from everything you saw.

Her name was Andrea, and Dag called her Andi sometimes but not always. If Harrison had to guess, they were both in their late 30's.

This was at a coffee place on Mulholland Drive.

Things normally got underway, Dag and Andrea, close to 5:30. Same table every time if they could get it, same beverages.

Once last week Harrison got there early and took their table to see what would happen, and they seemed flustered, and they sat at a different one but didn't seem to get along quite as well that evening.

Anyway. They'd drink and talk and laugh, and that took until around 6:15, and then they'd drive to Bickford Park, not too far, a mile or so, where they had the man-made lake and people floated those boats around that you control from shore. At least until it got dark.

Harrison enjoyed watching Dag and Andi interact.

What he was pretty sure was going on, was they were having an affair.

He'd never had an affair himself. There'd been the relationship with Leslie at Cornell, and the one with McKenzie out here when he lived in Costa Mesa. And then of course there was Hattie, right smack in this house, from August 12th 2011 until May 10th, 2016, when her dad and brother arrived and helped her move out.

Funny how you committed certain dates to memory. He thought he was in love with Hattie there for a while, but then she changed.

First she was Lois Lane in Superman, which worked out okay, but then she was Olive Oyl in Popeye, and that was a bit disturbing.

She was a health-nut, and she liked to juice everything. Big mounds of fruits and vegetables reduced to one tall glass, and a ton of pulp emptied out of the juicer every time and thrown in the compost bin in the garden.

That was all fine.

And even the Olive Oyl part wasn't the end of the world . . . but then one morning her face flattened out.

They were having breakfast and she was splurging and having a scone and jelly this morning with her juice, and she gets up to put the butter in the fridge and when she closes the door her face is squashed back in *more*.

It was a little bit alarming, and Harrison thought maybe he was seeing her from a funny angle, the light filtering through the blinds over the sink playing optical tricks.

But that wasn't *it*, because that night too at dinner, this time in the dining room because they had Mike and Taylor over and Hattie liked to make a big production of it when they hosted someone--different light, different situation, but her face was goddamn flat there now too.

Harrison had gotten up in the middle of dinner that night to put some music on, and he had a jazz CD picked out which he should have stuck with but he went with a Baroque guitar compilation, and that added to Hattie looking increasingly odd . . . and downright scary by the end of the evening, when it came down to it.

By the time she moved out and wished him well she wasn't Olive Oyl from Popeye anymore and thankfully her face wasn't as flat, it had a little edge back to it, and she was some aging starlet he couldn't place, who couldn't come to grips with her age. Someone like Pam Anderson, but that wasn't the exact person.

But back to what was on your plate at the moment . . .

The two lovebirds, Dag and Andi, they smiled a lot, and they looked directly at each other most of the time. And they each had wedding rings on.

This of course tipped off Harrison about the probable affair. Either that, or they were excited newlyweds, that was another possibility, but the separate cars and the routine, and one or both of them frequently checking the time--nah, that didn't add up.

If he had to guess, lay it out--which was fun actually--they didn't live around here exactly, they weren't quite Beverly Glen Mulholland Drive material. The guy had a shiny suit and drove a Honda Civic and she always wore the same scarf.

They were more Sherman Oaks, Van Nuys, Northridge types, and the advantage here would be they were unlikely to be recognized.

You assumed they came to the coffee place directly from their jobs, and after their episode at the park--and a major kiss before getting into their separate vehicles--and you *could* be married to each other but have your own cars, except that kiss was something *else*--and they'd get home to their likely real spouses at a reasonable hour.

So everything was accounted for, as though they'd gone for a drink with their co-workers, and to a health club, or some other silly enterprise . . .

Right now it was quarter to five. Here was the thing. Could that burger and sauerkraut hold tight for a while?

Harrison wasn't crazy about that, was ravenous enough right now, the effects of the *Insanity* workout very apparent.

But you had to be at ease while knocking back a good meal, and that wasn't going to be happening.

He got there at 5:20, and Gee Whiz, Dag, was already here tonight, holding their usual table. You had to wonder if he got off a little early, or if something else led to this. Why would he get off early?

Here you had a little mystery to start off with, and it would sure be interesting to ask Dag about it . . . but you weren't going to insert yourself and perhaps throw off their chemistry. That would be rude.

Andi arrived at 5:33, so nothing unusual there, and as they went through their usual paces drinking down their beverages and discussing the events of the day--Harrison always sat out of earshot to give them privacy, but he imagined they were talking about movies and books and TV shows and good vacation destinations. Not that they were necessarily going to *meet* each other at one--just that they probably didn't have the greatest jobs and looked forward to changing up the scenery when they could.

After a while he drifted to thinking about his old friend Tim, in the schoolyard in 4th grade in Darien. It wasn't the kind of stuff you were aware of at that age, but Tim's dad was on the town council and there was a dispute, he and another politician, and one day you came to school and Tim wasn't there anymore and you found out the family moved far away.

Harrison had had a bad dream that night, and he was hoping one of his parents would come in and help him but they didn't. The next day at school he asked the teacher, Mrs. Howden, what happened to Tim, where did he go?

She said didn't have that information, and Harrison didn't believe the witch, and the day after that he came to school with a hardball that his uncle had brought back from Yankees' spring training in Florida . . . and at recess when no one was looking Harrison fired the hardball at the back of Mrs. Howden's head . . . but the ball missed and hit a window of the gym, and amazingly the window didn't break but there was a crack he noticed later that no else seemed to, and the crack stayed there the next year and a half until 6th grade, when Harrison and the rest of them changed to middle school.

At 6:15 Andi and Dag got up and left, and it was good to see, other than Dag getting here a bit early, that the routine was essentially intact.

Chris knew the drill by now, Bickford Park, over on Camino de la Cumbre, and he once again figured you may as well follow along.

When he got there matters didn't seem quite as joyful tonight.

There'd been no sign of trouble in the cafe, and Dag still had his arm around Andi and all, and they slow walked it around the lake, but there was some strain, and you tell because a couple times he took his arm off her and they stood there for a minute dealing with something, before things normalized and they resumed their original walking position.

So far it didn't feel like anything was going to happen tonight . . . and Harrison really hoped it wouldn't.

He wasn't anyone else--hadn't been since Ellie, except for that conquistador--and there were no voices nagging at him either.

Though he did hear the *Insanity* instructor barking orders at him, ringing in his ears, but that was fine, it was good to have a little company.

There was a series of long benches that extended around the lake, with small breaks in them here and there so people could get to the other parts of the park, and Harrison wondered if they were one solid unit, the benches, or if they were a bunch of them bolted together.

It would be something to check, wouldn't it . . . except Dag and Andi had stopped up ahead and were sitting on one of them.

Harrison didn't like it, the benches, if there were small ones attached to each other, instead of one whole piece. That seemed like cheating.

Andi was on her feet now and Dag got up too, and they cut through one of those openings, and this was out of their routine, but Harrison assumed someone had to get a drink of water or use a bathroom . . . and that's where they were headed, a couple of low wooden structures, painted your typical parks' department forest green.

The women's was on the left, the men's on the right, with a display in the middle, one of those big framed boards that had maps under plastic, and showed you various paths, not only here, but the major trails as well at

the much more extensive Fossil Ridge Regional Park, which wasn't too far away.

And . . . thinking about it . . . it was surprising they didn't go over *there* some of the time too . . . but maybe they did, when they snuck away on the weekends and you had more light . . . but it wasn't any of his business.

Andi was the one who needed to use the ladies' room, it was clear now, and as she disappeared into there you could see Dag motioning that he'd be standing guard, and Harrison had been in that position too and there really wasn't much you could do except twiddle your thumbs, and these women always took a while in there, no matter what, even in a no-frills civic facility.

And that's what Dag was doing, twiddling his thumbs, looking at the board in the middle with the maps, even though you couldn't really see jack, plus you could tell he had no interest . . . and Harrison always liked the feel and balance of the Garrett Wade gardening hatchet, and he slashed it into the side of Dag's throat, not cutting anything off but actually coming pretty close.

Chapter Four

Friday morning at Starbucks began at more like noon for Chris, due to Tammy really *having* worn him out with the surfing calisthenics shenanigans.

He'd slept right through Ken getting ready for work, having his orange juice and cereal, the kid always trying to tiptoe around but Chris usually woke up anyway, especially now that he was in the living room on the recliner. But this morning he was out cold.

So when Chris finally did get up he twisted Stacey's arm into walking into town with him, and she joined him for a quick cup of tea and then was off, and she seemed a little distant, and Chris was worried about her, too much time on her hands . . . but he didn't want to suggest anything, such as maybe looking for a job, since that would probably backfire. You had to let her find her way, these things were tricky.

A few minutes after Stacey left, a guy sat down with Chris, young guy, good shape, surfer-type bleach-blonde thick head of hair.

"I *recognize* you," Chris said, "but I don't *know* you."

"Dave," the guy said, shaking hands.

"From the bar, correct?" Chris said, placing the guy now from last night, and probably a few others, at the *Crowe's Nest*.

"You got *that* right," Dave said. "My go-to venue. I guess I tend to keep a low profile."

"That's the way to do it. We all unwind at a different pace."

"I couldn't help notice you talking to Mancuso," Dave said.

Chris wasn't quite sure what to do with that one. He said, "You're like me, it looks like. You don't work."

Dave smiled. "I can appreciate your answer," he said. "Since I might have ruined your soy latte by bringing that guy up too early in the day."

Chris said, "Never drink soy *anything*. Under any circumstances . . . Real fat, that's the one and only way to go."

Dave said, "The a-hole owes me 8 grand. Plus royalties."

"I know the feeling," Chris said, not surprised at a development like this, and figuring no need to ask, if it's important the guy'll tell you about it.

"But what you said before," Dave said, "you're retired? That's the gig *I* want."

"I get that question. My answer is, a work in progress. Give it a try and let me know."

"I wish," Dave said. "I'm a beach lifeguard, but I got no seniority, and it's seasonal. So I personal-train people on the side, the fitness game."

Chris said, "A lot people say that. What's that *mean*, exactly? You go to a health club, a gym, work with them . . . go to their houses, what?"

"That's one way. I work with them outdoors, public places. The pier was perfect, but then this other guy comes along, he had knee surgery but he's back, and that's kind of his territory."

"Yeah I've seen that guy," Chris said.

"So right now I'm at Dockweiler, by El Segundo . . . It's nothing fancy, my sessions. Like . . . see that curb over there? Step up and down on it a hundred times alternating your feet, and then crab walk backwards to where I'm standing."

"They obey, then, no problem?"

"Oh yeah. It helps that they think I played college football, that makes 'em like to show off." Dave spoke a little quieter. "I didn't really play, but I kind of maneuvered it onto my Facebook."

"You mean . . . you faked a college?"

“No, real college, Southern Miss. D-1 and everything. I was what they call an invited walk-on, but didn’t make it past spring camp. White guy wide receiver down in Mississippi.”

Chris thought about it and said, “I can see where you’re coming from. Okay you lied, but the end result is the clients get a better workout.”

“Well I like your approach,” Dave said.

“That’s not Ole Miss, right? Two different places?”

“Oh yeah. Ole Miss is in Oxford, Southern Miss is Hattiesburg.”

Chris said, “If I had to take a wild guess, you don’t sound like you’re *from* there.”

“Not at all, La Jolla . . . They swallow their words, very different . . . though I’m a fan of the accent, and I liked it there . . . What fucked me in the end was there was one of the assistant coaches, an older guy, he had a daughter who I had a class with. I started dating her, and even though I was already cut from the team by then, they threw me out of school.”

“Good old boys.”

“No kidding.”

Chris said, “Those two towns though, Oxford and the other one . . . how would they be if someone wanted to . . . *hang out* for a while, low-key it?”

“You mean *you*?” Dave said laughing.

“Jeez,” Chris said. “Quite a projection on your part.”

“Just a hunch. You know Ned, for one.”

Dave not smiling as much now, because he’d come full circle back to his own situation.

And no point asking if he knew Tammy, supposedly a personal trainer herself. Likely he would, but so what.

“So that’s it?” Chris said. “You don’t run around at night doing Amway or something? . . . I’m joking, you sound plenty busy, like you’re hustling.”

“*Amway*? What’s that?”

“Forget it, I’m dating myself. Multi-level marketing, biodegradable cleaning products. My uncle and cousin tried it, teamed up, had a falling out, and still may not be speaking.”

“I gotcha. Passive income, on the side. That’s not bad. If you have a better suggestion than *Amway*--it sounds like--let me know.”

“Anyhow . . .” Chris said. “How’re the rescues? You get a lot of those?”

“We can. Usually someone who we already warned, ignoring a rip current . . . Sometimes the surfers and boogie boarders get too close, and you have to watch for some guy getting hit in the head . . . The other thing, the European tourists in the summer, they’re oblivious to the conditions.”

“Not a lot of waves to contend with in the Mediterranean.”

“I guess not,” Dave said. “You know Mancuso got pinched, right?”

“I heard that,” Chris said.

“You guys going at it last night, I figured you did.”

“He didn’t bring that part up. But do you know Rory, the waitress?”
What the heck, might as well put it out there, this Dave was harmless enough, and it *did* seem like he had his own issues with Ned.

“She took the hit with him,” Dave said. “A couple others too.”

“Is she . . . she’s not in jail or something, is she?”

“No I’ve seen her back in the *Nest*.”

“An escort thing then?” Chris said, not really wanting more detail, since it would alter his perception of Rory . . . though he supposed he was already at that point.

“That and more,” Dave said. “Yeah they got nailed on the first thing. The second one is where he screwed *me*.”

Chris lowered his voice. “You’re not saying . . . drugs?”

“Porn,” the guy said, and he didn’t lower *his* voice, since he was mad and obviously didn’t care.

“Holy Toledo,” Chris said, not knowing what that meant exactly, by itself--*porn*--but certainly one more thing to have to wrap your head around.

“So yeah,” Dave was saying, “I keep a low profile in there . . . But notice how Ned, he made sure not to look in my direction.”

“Man,” Chris said.

“I can tell you’re kind of in shock. When it’s people you know, it’s hard to conceive. You get used to it. It’s business.”

Chris couldn’t help it, he had to ask, leaning in and lowering his voice down to a near whisper. “*Rory* though? She makes *porno* flicks?”

“Some. She’s more or less Mancuso’s right hand man. There’s another gal too, older.”

“You’re saying . . . they organize them? . . . Book them?”

“Yeah. *Produce them* would be the term . . . Fucker talked me into it, I needed the money, and then he shafts me . . . The way they got it set up, you can’t exactly take ‘em to small claims court.”

“Sheez,” Chris said. This was a fair amount to digest . . . Now you were inclined to ask Dave if *he* hooked with *Rory* at all--*professionally*--but you had to leave that alone.

“So anyways,” Dave said. “I recognized you, figured I’d say something, for what it’s worth.”

“I appreciate it,” Chris said. “Let me just get it straight, though . . . their thing, operation, whatever . . . it’s *where* exactly?”

“You know down the Strand, the house with all the glass and the motorcycles in front?”

“Yeah. Like they’re being displayed . . . That’s a pretty incredible house actually.”

“Four, maybe five houses past there. That’s where it’s at. The front facade is all this interlaced exotic wood, little pieces put together.”

“Dang. Pretty sure I know it, yeah . . . You’re saying . . . the escort, and the other stuff, it’s all . . . right there?”

“Go take a look,” Dave said. “Son of a bitch is creative. Even rents rooms downstairs, like an Airbnb, is my impression. An extremely pricey one though. But no stone left unturned.”

“Wait . . . so Mancuso actually owns a house on the *Strand*?”

“Not sure about *that*. I think there’s an Argentinian connection involved . . . Either way the mope has moved up. When I first met him he had a studio apartment in North Hollywood.”

“Well, one thing,” Chris said, “he didn’t seem too worried, this escort *legal* matter.”

“Nah,” Dave said. “He’s got lawyers who know their way around. A bust like that, they’re trying to make a statement, probably because some billionaire neighbor complained. Nothing’ll happen.”

Chris couldn’t help thinking those lawyers included Chandler at one time, and who knows, maybe still did . . . and he and Dave got up and went out the door and said see ya later and turned in different directions.

Chris’s direction was to the right, down the hill. Starbucks was at the corner of Highland, so you had 2 1/2 short blocks to the beach, which were Manhattan Avenue, Ocean Drive and then the Strand.

Where you would turn left, toward that motorcycle house, and the one a few doors past it.

Hmm . . .

It was a little after two . . . *should* you just do what Dave suggested . . . mosey on over there, knock on the door, say *how you doing* to whoever answered and see what happened?

Chris decided, seeing as he didn’t have a whole heck of a lot on the agenda--yeah, what could it hurt to at least walk down there.

One reason his afternoons were wide open at the moment was because Chandler tweaked his elbow the other day, after he'd showed up complaining about his right side. Chandler had forgotten his racquet, which Chris enjoyed making a big deal about because Chandler was pretty meticulous about his equipment, and Chris had an extra one and Chandler used it and an hour in started complaining about his elbow.

"I can't believe I trusted you," Chandler said. "Your grip's too small."

"Sometimes I think you're out of your mind," Chris said. "You gotta come up with a better excuse, the one day in a long time I'm actually beating your ass."

"I'm not kidding, I have to stop," Chandler said.

It wasn't something you were going to admit, but Chris knew what he was talking about, that if you have elbow problems you want a *big* grip, because you don't have to close your fingers as tight, and it puts less pressure on the tendons in the elbow.

Come to think of it, watching Chandler standing by the net flexing his arm around looking quite concerned--which was admittedly amusing, but that was beside the point--Chris had been experiencing some elbow issues as well this week.

This *could* have been his imagination of course, but if he had to guess, he was dealing with a residual effect of having to strangle Jeramiah last Friday night.

The position had been a bit awkward, especially when he had to cross the hands right before it came to a head with the guy kicking savagely at the front windshield.

So at any rate . . . tennis was off the table for a while, and that was probably for the best, and now he found himself a block down the Strand from Manhattan Beach Boulevard, walking in the direction of Redondo and looking for the motorcycle house.

He also started wondering what else might be going on in these different houses.

Some were fancier than others, but none of them were over the top mansions, because you didn't have the space for that, and most were pretty casually set up, with some simple beach chairs in front and the feel of sand being tracked in.

It was deceptive of course, since this was one of the wealthiest stretches in the nation, from Manhattan to Hermosa, smack dab on the beach, and Chris heard these days you couldn't touch a teardown or even a *vacant lot* on the Strand for less than 5 million.

Dave's directions were good, and there was a little brick entryway with an arching redwood gate, and you pulled a cord and the gate opened and there you were at the front door, everything glass on the first level, and stories above.

Chris figured here we go, and he rang the bell and a middle aged woman answered, modestly dressed, jeans and t-shirt, and Chris said there's a chance he has the wrong place, but would Ned Mancuso happen to be around.

Without missing a beat the woman said please come in, and she led him to a room between the living room and the kitchen, and she half-knocked on the door as she pushed it open, and Ned was sitting there at a small desk, on the phone, no carpet on the floor, two folding chairs facing the desk, and that was about it.

He saw Chris and stuck out a hand hello, and he ended the call pretty quick and stood up.

"My Bud," he said. "Hey I'm real glad you stopped by."

And this was one more example of how you scratch your head with a guy like this, since he was saying it as though he'd personally invited Chris *over*, and was happy Chris took him up on the offer . . . rather than wondering what he was doing here and how the *hell* he found this place.

“Well thanks for having me,” Chris said. “But my first impression? Not much of an office for someone running a fancy, multi-directional operation I keep hearing about.”

Ned laughed. “Sit down,” he said. “What, you’re not impressed with the furnishings?”

“No,” Chris said. “But I remember a guy telling me up in San Francisco, he was trying to run a gym, and he had a fancy office overseeing the basketball court, the thing must have been 30 by 30 feet. He had a couple couches in there and a private shower and everything.”

Ned said, “You’re going to tell me the place picked up steam when he scrapped the office and stuck 10 more treadmills in there.”

“Or turned it into a yoga studio . . . So what’s going on?”

“You want something to drink? Doesn’t have to be serious, could be Coke, Gatorade, whatever you like.”

Chris said a soft drink would be nice, and Ned left the office for a second and called something to the woman who let Chris in. “That’s Josephine,” Ned said. “I’m telling you, without her, we wouldn’t be able to do half as well.”

Josephine came back with two sodas in glasses, limes on the sides, and she put down round cocktail napkins that had dolphins swimming.

“A nice touch,” Chris said. “Does she . . . participate in any of your other activities?” Chris was wondering, is this what a madam looked like in MB? Which got him thinking of his own experience that time, on the road trip, and it was weird, he could remember the madam pretty well, but he was having trouble picturing his *date*, though he was pretty sure her name was Sandy.

“Put it this way,” Ned said, “she’s an all-around good judge of people. You need that, at least someone like me does, keep you pointing in the right direction.”

“Easy to get confused in business,” Chris said. “She get pinched, along you with you and Rory?”

“Jesus, *pardner* . . . Hold your horses there a minute.” Ned was halfway putting on an act, and wasn’t hiding his amusement.

“Some guy told me you owe him 8 grand. Which kind of pisses me off, if you want to know the truth.”

“First of all, don’t believe everything you hear. Second, why would that bother *you*?”

“That’s not a good answer,” Chris said. “I’d respect you more if you said, yeah I owe him 8 grand, and I may or may not pay him.”

“You’re all right,” Ned said, giving it a little wink. “Everybody gets paid though.”

“My brother didn’t.” Letting *that* hang there a second, the Chip business.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Ned said.

There was intermittent noise in other parts of the house, people coming in and out it sounded like, and Josephine’s voice in the middle of it.

Chris said, “So if I wanted to rent a room here, what would that run me?”

“You don’t want to know. And if you add on amenities you’re in a different ballpark still.”

“So . . . if I’m reading it right, you’re in the lodging business, the companionship business . . . and more adult stuff on top of that? Or was some guy feeding me a line?”

“No, no, that’s correct,” Ned said. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

“What if I was a cop, all this time?” Chris said.

“Then you’d probably want to take a look too. It’s been known to happen.”

They were in the foyer and you could see Josephine out on the front patio talking to someone and Ned said, “The elevator, or the stairs?”

Jeez . . . Chris hadn't seen the elevator on the way in and couldn't remember being in a single-family house that had one, but he said the stairs sound better because he needs the exercise.

A flight up Ned said, "These suckers, something you wouldn't think about, the foundations."

"Not really. What about 'em?"

"Well you gotta find the bedrock, that's where you start your concrete piers. Typically, you go down thirty feet."

Chris said, "So living on the beach, you're saying . . . people don't realize it's not so simple."

"It really isn't," Ned said.

It was hard to tell what the second floor was all about, but there was a series of rooms off a main living area, no action here at the moment.

The third floor was another story, plenty of noise, including some music . . . and it sounded like people barking instructions. Hmm . . .

"The nice thing up here," Ned was saying, "we can take advantage of the light. And use the ocean as a backdrop, depending."

The top floor was set up like a penthouse apartment, one big open space with windows all around and a terrace on the beach side, and it was furnished pretty modern and slick, plenty of leather and chrome, and Chris figured whatever Ned saved on his office was added in up here.

There was a fake fireplace as well, or at least not a wood one, but it looked pretty cozy, with a couple of ceramic logs being lapped at by an orange gas flame.

Not that surprisingly, there was a bearskin rug in front of the fireplace, and you had what looked like a cameraman and a soundman, and a third person directing traffic . . . the traffic being two women and a guy presently going at it in the vicinity of the rug.

It was strange, the stuff your mind could dredge up when something *else* was going on . . . and Chris remembered back to when he first met Ned,

and they were checking out some beach volleyball action, and Ned broke the ice by saying people wonder how they don't burn their feet.

Then they talked for a while and Chris came back with, that he was more wondering how the outfits stay in place, all the jumping and diving. And Ned said they didn't always.

Now Chris said to Ned, "Do they ever get rug burn?"

"Haven't heard it brought up," Ned said.

"Quite a bit of friction there, when you think about it."

"Could be. What is a factor, with some of them, they overdo the tanning booths, and get burned *that way*."

Chris could see his point. All three of the current participants were quite tan, and it *was* December, plus none of them had any tan *lines*, which implied artificial means.

Yep, definitely not much in the way of clothing at this point. You figured they all started out with it, but that could have been a while ago, with he and Ned showing up in the middle of things. One of the gals did have a thin band of material around her waist, for a little extra aesthetics Chris supposed, but that was the extent of it.

He said to Ned, "How long's something like this go then? Typically?"

"It's up to them, how it plays out," Ned said. "What we ask them to do though, if they're going to go long, to keep switching it up."

"Ah . . . the positions, you mean?"

"Yeah . . . don't forget now, these are shorts, most of them. The business is a different animal than when you and I were going to a raunchy theater someplace and watching Deep Throat and The Devil in Miss Jones."

Across the room it looked like another crew was setting up for a scene, but meanwhile the activity in front of them was looking pretty relentless, showing no sign of letting up.

Chris said, "Where do you find them all, if you don't mind my asking?"

“That part’s not as easy as you might think,” Ned said. “We try CraigsList for one, but you get mixed results. Word of mouth’s your best bet.”

“Oh.”

“Why . . . You looking to earn some extra dough?”

“Jeez . . . not really, but you can’t be serious.”

“Oh yeah, we could use you no problem. There’s a *mature* category. It draws surprisingly well. Plus there’s other instances, we need older guys.”

Chris was a little conflicted here--not whether he’d actually take the guy *up* on the offer, that wasn’t going to happen--but because on the one hand he apparently passed the mustard, but on the other it was strictly as an old guy. Though really, what did he expect?

What he said to Ned was, “What does it pay?”

“200 a scene,” Ned said. “That’s for normal work.”

“Like . . . what’s going on at the moment?”

“Right. Now we’re talking male talent. The female scale is different, higher.”

Chris assumed by *talent* the guy was using entertainment business slang, which would mean actor or performer.

Though this particular guy *did* appear to have some talent, the way he was working stuff, one of the women more or less suspended in the air at the moment.

Chris didn’t want to ask what was *non-normal* work, if two women and a man was considered *normal* stuff, at least for the guy.

Chris said, “So that beach lifeguard. Dave . . . At 200 a pop . . . that’d be what, 40 scenes then, that you owe him for?”

It was actually interesting to get a handle on it, when you pinned it down in concrete numbers like that.

“More or less,” Ned said, “but Cripes, can you please stop worrying about Dave?”

“What would that be though? I mean one a day, one a week . . . what?”

“*Could* be, over time, yeah . . . or could be a couple a day . . . nothing etched in stone . . . What’s wrong?”

Chris said, “What’s wrong is I guess I’m starting to feel a little intimidated here . . . Both what I’m seeing, and what I’m hearing.”

“That happens, it’s common. You get over it. I was serious when I said we can use guys like you in their 40’s.”

“I appreciate the offer . . . but honestly, based on what I’m witnessing? I think I come up a little short.”

“Don’t worry about *that* either,” Ned said. “There’s a place for you. Long as you’re in shape and on time, which I can tell you are.”

The threesome in the vicinity of the bear skin rug still hadn’t wrapped it up, was showing no signs of getting there in the next couple minutes, and somewhat astonishingly, the other scene began that they’d been setting up for across the room.

This one was more straightforward, one man, one woman, though the guy was white and the woman seemed Latina or light-skinned black.

“Where do these end up, then?” Chris said. “You sell them on line?”

“The longer ones,” Ned said. “But there’s been a big shift there too. Now it’s these sites, that give the shit away for free. It’s click and watch, no signup, no nothing. The money’s in the ads.”

Chris was going to ask, do you sell the videos outright to the sites, or lease them, or do you get paid per hit, or how *did* it work . . . but the actual logistics didn’t seem important, since the bottom line was it was obviously a lucrative business, otherwise what would everyone be doing here at 4 o’clock on a Friday afternoon in this multi-million dollar house on the Strand . . . and meanwhile Chris couldn’t help notice that the new couple had gotten past the early formalities and was getting down to business pretty strong.

Chris said, "One thing I'll give you, compared to *our day* as you call it, with the full length films in the seedy theaters--there's a lot less acting."

"To put it mildly," Ned said. "Plus they had to come up with those plots back then, most of them terrible. They were just killing time until the next scene."

"So . . . Rory . . . *she* around today? Or anything?"

"She'll be here tonight. You have a little thing for her, don't you? She told me you were ogling her at a motel swimming pool."

"Jeez," Chris said, "I'm that bad? Not to mention that obvious?"

"So stick around. Or come back."

One thing you had to say about Ned . . . or Lou . . . or whoever else he might have been known by . . . he was hospitable enough.

Of course almost certainly there was an angle built in as well, where he wanted something from you, or was *setting you up* to want something from you--and this was totally separate from his goofy spur-of-the-moment invitation to join the fun and screw someone in a porno scene.

But you had to give the guy a measure of credit. He was likely some kind of mobster, just as Chip had been--and whether they were directly connected to *The Mob* or not, you didn't know for sure, but the point was Ned was a dangerous dude.

And he could wine and dine you and throw you the slick smile and joke around and lull you to sleep . . . and then turn around and kill you if he needed to, was how Chris saw it.

All that aside, the guy did make you feel comfortable, like you *could* hang around as long as you like . . . and Chris considered it, that it would be interesting to see Rory's role in all this.

Except he really *had* seen enough for now, and he told Ned he was taking off . . . and giving it one final look, both of the current engagements were still full-speed ahead, and as Chris got out of there he was thinking *he*

hadn't been joking around, had he, when he characterized the whole shebang as pretty dang intimidating.

Back at the *Cheater Five*, it wasn't the worst thing to keep it simple tonight, which meant a little ramen for dinner.

How could you beat it, really? If you picked up the 12-pack at Ralph's on Sepulveda--which had become his favorite supermarket--what did it come out to, something ridiculous like 27 cents a meal?

And if you required a little supplemental protein, which Chris went for tonight, then you boiled up a handful of potstickers from Costco, threw them into the ramen, topped it off with a dash of soy and some hot sauce.

You just saved about 14 dollars over eating something similar out.

Anyhow, sitting there slurping down noodles, the TV on in the background, Ken and Stacey not home yet, Chris had a chance to try to process what he witnessed today.

When you stopped and thought about it . . . all you could really say was *Wow-ee*.

On multiple fronts. Wow, what you were looking at transpire right in front of you . . . and wow, that was admittedly some operation that Mancuso and whoever else had going on.

Also, wow, how were they avoiding the cops?

Although, *that* part, he probably wasn't thinking clearly there.

Meaning the porno flick stuff . . . why *wouldn't* it be legal?

After all, they were all consenting adults . . . and everything they were doing fed into a huge legitimate industry . . . even if your *personal* opinion was it was on the sleazy side.

Unless there was a zoning issue or something that they were not adhering to . . . and you'd figure that's the kind of thing Mancuso could handle.

But the second thing, the *business* aspect . . . dang, they were cranking them out quick, weren't they . . . and that seemed to be the trend in plenty of other enterprises too, you feed the public in manageable bite-sized installments, and you don't waste time trying to get every detail just right, you just *produce*.

Chris was reminded of something from that year he spent living in Teaneck, New Jersey, a neighbor he got to know a little bit named Allan.

Allan would put on a coat and tie every morning and commute into the city, and spend the day in an office on 45th Street and 7th Avenue. Chris eventually found out, when he had Allan and a few other neighbors over for a barbeque, that the guy wrote porn novels.

What these companies would do, they'd hire fast writers and sit them in a 40-hour office gig, not real different from most regular jobs, and the writer was expected to produce up to 2 or 3 books a *day*, depending on the length.

It sounded like a heck of a grind, and the burnout rate must have been astronomical. Chris figured Amazon coming on the scene a few years later probably put an end to that type of business, and Chris lost touch with Allan, but still you had to be impressed with the guy's ability and output.

Chris supposed what Mancuso was doing was the 2017 hi-tech incarnation of what the Allans once did.

One thing for sure, Ned did seem pretty desperate for new 'talent' if he was trying to recruit *him*.

But if you looked at the numbers, two clips an hour--Jeez, and at *least* that, from what he'd witnessed--and you go, what 8, 10 hours a day?

You're probably talking conservatively 20 scenes a day. So yeah . . . it's conceivable you did need fresh people. Chris had read that the San Fernando Valley, for whatever reason, was the porn capital of California, but Ned obviously had his reasons for setting it up in MB, which *did* probably make it harder to recruit.

The news came on, and something caught his attention, two murders this week, one in Culver City and one in Beverly Glen--which by itself unfortunately didn't jump out at you, since hearing about that stuff was a fact of life in a place as big as LA--but the kicker, which got Chris to put down his soup spoon for a minute, was an LAPD spokesman speculating that the two crimes may be connected.

Nothing beyond that, but it *was* interesting that they wanted to put it out there.

Which meant they must have found some link, or at least were working the case that way until proven otherwise.

Connected could mean a few things of course . . . the victims knew each other, there were two killers involved and *they* knew each other . . . or, the more likely . . . you had some motherfucker out there trying to be a serial killer.

The news switched to a different story, Santa Claus visiting a little kid that fell off a roof helping his dad put lights up but thankfully is okay, and Chris went back to finishing his dinner.

And also, what did we have now, December 15th? Dang, the holidays really *were* creeping up on you, and Chris hoped he could shift gears enough and actually get in the spirit, now that his plate was thankfully pretty clean.

A few minutes later Ken and Stacey came in excited.

"Boss, is now a good time to run this by you?" Ken said.

Chris's first thought was don't tell me they're getting married, and he wants my blessing.

That would likely be a disaster, but it wouldn't be a total shocker if that's where the kid was going with this. Chris had seen it before, he could think of one couple in particular, they were in a tumultuous relationship, on-again, off-again and full of drama--so one day they wake up and go to city hall and tie the knot.

When he thought about it he could see the logic . . . you take care of your business, validate the thing, you stop the silly paralysis of analysis.

But this couple in question, Larry and Sylvia, they were divorced inside 6 months. The final nail was a dining room-set delivery that went wrong, and that was pretty amusing actually, to everyone *but* Larry and Sylvia, but either way their marriage was doomed before it started.

Chris said to Ken, "I'm not a big fan of change, so if that's where we're going, *no* time is good. But you better spit it out."

"All it is," Ken said, "there's an apartment opening up, downstairs in the corner. You know when you come out the side gate of the pool? That one, right there on the left. A-6."

"Oh yeah?" Chris said.

"Yeah . . . Me and Stace, we were thinking of taking it."

Chris looked up at the news again, and now they had the weatherperson on a pier, which looked like Santa Monica, holding an umbrella and looking like she was bracing against something, even though Chris would bet money if any storm *did* materialize, it was going to be so weak you'd barely notice.

He said to Ken and Stacey, "See this is why I need to leave the TV off. Better yet get rid of it. Fake news. Detrimental to a normal brain."

"Isn't that what our president says, things are *fake*?" Stacey said.

"Indeed," Chris said. "Now he's got *me* doing it . . . Getting back to your original observation though, I don't think it's a good idea."

Ken said, "It wasn't strictly an observation, Boss. I think you know that."

"Fine. And you remember our little issue at the Big Wok. Which luckily we've worked past, but still . . . that was followed by a police presence here one night, as I recall."

"All true. But there was a police presence here a couple times for *you*, as well."

Chris hated arguing with the kid. He said, "Let's cut to the bottom line here. How much is the thing?"

"It's, whatever," Ken said. "A one bedroom, like yours."

"And how are you going to afford it?"

Stacey spoke up and said, "We were hoping Airbnb."

Chris said, "Okay now, most people would have no idea what you're talking about. But I think I get it . . . you're saying rent it out *some* of the time, to help defray the cost."

"Boss you're sounding like an economist, but you catch on quick," Ken said, some renewed enthusiasm behind it now that they laid it on the table and Chris was at least tossing it around.

"Only reason," Chris said, "last time I was in San Francisco--or *one* of the last times--I was going to swing by my apartment on Broderick Street that I'm subletting . . . I told you about that, right?"

"A little," Ken said.

"Two things stopped me from doing that. One, I didn't want the guy figuring out some repairs that he needed me to make, but two, I had this vision of the guy Airbnb-ing it."

"Meaning he wouldn't even be there," Ken said. "But someone else might."

"Yeah. I didn't want to get pissed off, so I stayed away. Probably my imagination was running loose."

"Not necessarily," Ken said. "Especially up *there*. It sounds like there's all kinds of opportunity, if you have control of a place."

"Not as easy here of course," Chris said.

"No. But I think if we promote it right, we can get \$150 a night. We checked around a bit, you can't find a motel room on PCH for less than \$129 right now, and this is the off-season . . . And in our case they get a full apartment and a kitchen."

"And a pool," Chris said. "Whoopee."

“You’re being sarcastic, aren’t you?” Ken said.

Now Chris felt bad. Jeez, it wasn’t like they were asking for his approval to commit highway robbery or something . . . And it could be a lot worse, them moving away *entirely*.

“What you’re saying,” Chris said, “you lease the place, you rent it out when you can, to take some pressure off the rent . . . and then what? You move back in with me when you have a tenant?”

“Boss, we didn’t want to ask you directly . . . but that’s exactly what we were hoping.”

“Oh,” Chris said. “Yeah that could work okay.”

At this point Ken and Stacey together came over to Chris and gave him an awkward hug . . . and really, what could you do?

Stacey was more animated now. She said, “We’re going to make it attractive too, you’ll see. Not just the apartment, but there’s going to be a website, and photos and graphics. I think we’ll stand out.”

“I don’t doubt *that*,” Chris said. “Like I told you before, your work really is terrific.”

And no need to get back into the specifics with her, but Stacey’s forgery of the piece of art, that saved the day with the Craigslist idiot, *was* an amazing piece of work.

“There is just one thing,” Ken said.

“Oh no,” Chris said. “There always is, isn’t there? . . . You ever watch the old show Columbo, though?”

“Sorry, I can’t say that I have,” Ken said.

“That’s the kind of detective the world needs more of,” Chris said. “Cerebral. Though he gives everyone the opposite impression. But he takes his time. His signature moment is, when he’s wrapped up all the questions and is on the way out, he casually remembers one more thing he forgot to ask . . . And of course that’s the most *important* one, but he works it in like you could take or leave it.”

“I’ll have to check it out,” Ken said.

“Really?”

“No, Boss, it honestly doesn’t sound that good . . . But if I could run that one thing by you, it would be much appreciated.”

“Fine, let it rip,” Chris said.

“Mr. Sharif. I’m a little worried about that part.”

The kid was still scared of the guy, on account of the police being called that time . . . meaning the *last time* they rented from Sharif . . . which was a moot point now of course, since it was Ken who saved Sharif’s rear end by diplomatically encouraging the bad-news bodybuilder to vacate Sharif’s motel.

Chris said, “You’re saying, get past the credit check and all, make sure he leases it to you?”

“Yes that would be fantastic if you could put in a good word there . . . The other thing though, the Airbnb part. We don’t want to get in trouble.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Chris said. “That’s enough now. Who’s hungry? Let’s go somewhere.”

“Boss, didn’t you just finish eating?” Ken said.

Chris said, “You’re so observant. But you know me, it’s the experience, so I’m always looking for an excuse.”

Which was true of course, he did love to socialize in restaurants . . . plus the reality was, the economy ramen concoction that he was so proud of himself for coming up with a few minutes ago, it wasn’t quite doing the job, which meant yeah, he could still eat.

Ken and Stacey were speaking quietly to each other. Ken said, “If it doesn’t foul you up, Stacey and I thought we’d go out on our own tonight. You know, maybe have a couple drinks.”

“Celebrate a renewed beginning,” Stacey said. “Thank you for helping us.”

She had the puppy dog thing going again, where all she wanted was a little approval . . . And Chris was happy for them too, and you needed to cut the negativity and say *God Bless You*, and *things happen for a reason* . . . and that's what he told them as they headed out the door.

Chapter Five

Monday morning Chris was doing his walk into town. He'd developed a new routine the last two days, and how long he'd stick to it was anyone's guess, but the crux was you go down to the beach *first*, you put in your three miles, get the whole shooting match out of the way before you let yourself have that first sip of coffee.

Plus you get started earlier, no dilly-dallying taking a dumb hour just to wake up.

This was a concept he'd picked up Friday night from one of his favorite mystery writers, Elmore Leonard, who unfortunately passed away a couple years ago, though he had a long career that most writers would envy, still cranking out the off-beat plots and quirky characters every day into his 80's.

Chris was having trouble falling asleep Friday night. Ken and Stacey told him they were going to try out a music club in Torrance, and they had some friends over there they were going to stay with, so Chris didn't have to worry about getting woken up, but he just couldn't get tired enough.

Maybe it *was* the change throwing him off, the new apartment business . . . or sometimes you get *used* to a little chaos and then you don't *have* any, and that can screw you up too.

Either way, he found an Elmore Leonard podcast from a few years before he died, and that did the trick finally and put him to sleep but he heard most of it first.

The relevant story was, Leonard worked in advertising before he earned enough to be a full-time writer, so he'd get up at 4:30 and work on

his books. But his trick was, he needed to write three pages--in those days they used an old-fashioned typewriter--before he put the coffee on.

So that made sense to Chris, and here he was, Day 3, and he liked going this direction because the half-way turnaround was El Porto, and that was the happening surfing beach down here in the winter, and the last few days you had impressively large winter swells and all these frigging guys out there, 7:00 in the morning, surfing their heads off.

The other good thing about getting the exercise in first thing, you didn't feel guilty the rest of the day if you ended up sitting on your hiney, and if you did do *more* physical activity, you were in the bonus column.

Such as yesterday, Chandler talking him into playing, Chris trying to get out of it by reminding Chandler about his elbow issue, and Chandler telling him to shut up and get down to the courts.

But it ended up working out okay. You had the Sunday crowd and people had to double up, so he and Chandler took on these two guys in doubles.

Chris never enjoyed doubles, never quite knew where to be, or when to cut in front of your partner and when to stay out of the way, but Chandler was a good coach it turned out, and they beat these younger guys in straight sets, and the two guys were gesturing toward each other and raising their voices as they left the court.

Chris said to Chandler, "Not that I've been on the winning end of too many of these . . . but that *was* rewarding to see those guys become increasingly bent out of shape there."

"Oh most definitely," Chandler said. "I ran into the left-handed one in singles, a league match, and he beat me 6-2, 6-0."

"Gee. You didn't act like you knew each other."

"No. I didn't want to say anything, because I *lost* to him . . . He's not going to remember *me*, because he doesn't respect me."

Chris said, "You guys are weird, this competitive stuff that comes out. I'm glad I'm no good, because then I can get away with a passive approach."

"You're a pacifist then," Chandler said, looking at him sideways. "That's a brand new one."

"Only one time I got pretty competitive," Chris said. "Up north. This scumbag I used to play with. He was older than me, in better shape, used to play with his shirt off to rub it in."

"I do that too sometimes," Chandler said.

"I wasn't going to bring that up. You should be ashamed of yourself . . . Anyhow, this douche, he's got a beautiful, devoted wife. She's Scandinavian I believe."

"So you don't like the guy, period, and you make a move on the wife."

"Way off. The guy keeps bragging about his outside escapades, the scumbag is having affairs. Like it's normal, understandable behavior . . . One day, and he's just beaten me pretty routine so I'm already in a bad mood--but he's doing these terrible looking calisthenics right on the court, and I tell him he better knock it off, the screwing around."

"Okay let me guess this one. Either . . . you're going to tell the wife . . . or you're going to rent a storage unit up there too, and hit him over the head with the racket and lock him in it."

"Jesus," Chris said. "Keep it real, will you please? He stands up and says, oh yeah, and what are you going to do about it there pal? And I said I'll have to cause trouble in that case . . . meanwhile I'm hoping he doesn't call my bluff and ask what *kind* of trouble, because I have no idea."

"Uh-huh. So what happened?"

"What happened was for the best. The guy dropped me cold as a partner, and I started taking lessons from this vivacious Asian pro in Golden Gate Park, Jenna . . . It cost me money, but the experience was a heck of a lot more fulfilling."

"The experience on the court? Or there was more?"

“I wanted more, yeah. She saw through my BS. She did mention she occasionally dated clients when they became solid lesson-takers, so I upped it to twice a week, and finally squeezed a Giants game out of her, but a night game, on a Tuesday.”

“That’s not going to get you too far.”

“No. Plus it was freezing, I was almost glad to drop her off and stay in the heated car so I could thaw out.”

“Candlestick, you’re talking about?”

“No, AT&T, right downtown. Candlestick was *sub*-arctic, but this is still arctic. I learned my lesson about night games, especially when dating is involved.”

“Forgetting all that . . . what happened with the calisthenics guy and the wife?”

“Oh. Well that part was interesting. Curiosity got the better of me, and I rang the bell one day. She said the guy *left* her, and left the country too. Then it got weird . . . it sounded like the crux of it was, he had a falling out with a Russian partner, and it came to a head and she suspected he may have drowned the guy in the bay, if you can believe it.”

Chandler chewed on that one for a minute. “I gotta tell you,” he said, “you have some entertaining stories . . . My sense is you have a propensity for embellishment. Hard to separate your facts from fiction sometimes.” Giving Chris the straight-on look now.

Chris said, “That little stint out there in Nevada. The casino. You develop a bit of a poker face . . . Not the worst thing.”

“Probably not,” Chandler said.

At any rate, today Chris wrapped up his morning business, the three miles up and back, and in front of the pier there was the fitness trainer that Dave mentioned, who had knee surgery but came back, and Dave was forced to find new territory.

It was pretty amazing, and instructive as well.

The guy would stand there in ordinary street clothes, except for an Adidas warm up jacket, pretty big gut hanging out, a whistle around his neck along with a stop watch, and a clipboard under his arm.

The whole session he probably didn't move more than ten feet, but the pupils, many of whom were likely multi-millionaire investment people who lived in the boomer houses up in the hills that Chris passed by every day, would do anything for the guy.

Chris watched for a while, and the final exercise of the day was some stomach thing on the beach--and even then the guy didn't go down there, he stayed on the pier and leaned over the rail and barked orders--and when they finished the exercise he had them sprint up the hill to Von's Market, which was four blocks.

They ran it like they were trying out for the Olympics, and came back all bent over, assuming that was it for the session . . . but then he had them go *back* on the beach and do the stomach thing again, and when it was over most of them were pretty wobbly, and they made it up the stairs back to the pier, and told the guy they'd see him tomorrow and thanked him as profusely as if he'd just helped deliver their first child.

Chris could see now that Dave had a point, *faking* that he played college football and so forth--it was interesting how you could turn the tables on people pretty easily, and have them drinking out of your hand.

He'd been tempted that day, down at the Strand house, to push Mancuso a little harder on Dave's 8 grand--that if you're doing so well, all this non-stop activity, what's the problem with paying the guy.

But you couldn't help *everyone*, that was for sure, you really *did* have to pick your spots . . . and he at least brought it *up* to Ned . . . but realistically Dave was probably never going to see a penny of that.

Chris watched until the last of the exhausted fitness pupils was on their way, and he walked up to Starbucks. Partly he'd watched the session

out of envy, that when the dust settled they really *had* put themselves through these incredible workouts.

The other part, he had to admit, was curiosity-- would anyone throw up or collapse.

Starbucks at this hour was different, more urgency to it, people not chit-chatting as much, like they didn't have to *do* anything . . . which is the crowd you got later on, when he normally dropped in, and probably the rest of the day and night too.

Sitting around cafes was a way of life in Europe, and Chris always considered the Europeans intelligent--but let's face it, you wasted a tremendous amount of time in these places. Not that that was necessarily terrible.

Man that coffee hit the spot, there *was* something to the delayed gratification, wasn't there, and Chris felt adventurous enough to pull out his phone and check a few newspapers.

Maybe he was losing a little common sense, and bringing up Maierhaffer and Damirko and Brigitte the other day to Chandler yesterday seemed stupid--not to mention a little risky.

That story just sort of unfolded, and Chris made the best of it, and Chandler probably didn't believe it in its current form . . . but there was a *lot* that Chandler already probably didn't believe, so who was anyone kidding, really.

He'd been so dang careful for so long, it seemed, about limiting his computer searches to libraries and staying off his personal devices, but there comes a point where that shit just becomes a little too dang inconvenient.

So Chris figured you could compromise. Roam around, read the Bay Area newspapers like any ex pat currently residing in southern California logically would . . . just don't use the *Search* function to *look* for articles, or

otherwise Google anything, unless it's how late Target is open tonight or something . . . and you *should* be fine.

So . . . might as well start, as usual, with the San Francisco Chronicle.

And the way online newspapers worked--which was a pet peeve of Chris's--they over-did it, and you couldn't always tell what was *new* news and what was dated.

But in this case that was helpful, because you'd have two or three days worth of key stories all plastered together, meaning you shouldn't *have* to search . . . otherwise you'd go to the library later if you had to.

Not surprisingly though, the Chronicle website was taking forever to load, and Chris suspected they were doing this on purpose, slowing it down on you so you'd give in and subscribe to the *paid* version, though he could have been overthinking it.

Either way, enough of that, and he tried the Bay City Beat.

Which opened right away, nice and clean, and he once again admired the layout as it unfolded, not overly complicated.

And Holy Shit . . . then he noticed the lead article.

It said:

**Letters a Possible Link to Daly City Murder
by Bronson Northfleet**

December 18, 2017 - Two post cards received this week by the *Bay City Beat* may have been written by a south bay killer, according to police.

Authorities said the letters bear a connection to the December 8th murder of Jeramiah Towne, who was found slumped in a vehicle in a Westlake parking lot, and was later determined to have been strangled.

Towne had been charged with felony animal cruelty stemming from a November 29th incident involving an auto break-in in Cow Hollow, and a January court date was pending.

The first post card was received by the *Beat* on December 11th, and the second was received this past Saturday, the 16th.

The letters were reportedly mailed from different parts of the state, but authorities confirmed today that they consider them to be from the same writer.

Post card No 1 implied the author was upset about auto burglaries, and it referenced pets, and closed with a threat to “*clean up more messes*”.

The post card read, in part:

**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

“Obviously with an alleged homicide we look at everything,” said Lieutenant Bill Skollkendalh of Daly City PD. “At this point we’re treating this chain of correspondence with legitimacy.”

The letter writer left no indication why he or she selected the *Bay City Beat* as the recipient.

The first post card was signed only *Your Friend*, with no return address.

Wow, so there you had it . . . This took a little processing now . . .

First of all it was interesting that they didn’t reference the content of the second letter, the one he sent from Disneyland . . . and Jeez, what *was* the content anyway?

This was getting crazy, and Chris had to run back through it, and yeah, okay, that was the one where he was a little ticked off at the reporter for seeming to ignore the *first* letter . . . and where, for good measure, he threw in the part about Berkeley needing to watch out.

Meaning not the city of Berkeley obviously, or the good citizens, just the assholes who were robbing the Cal students.

So why wouldn't they have included that?

Though Chris knew from being in the business at one time, that it was complicated with the media . . . you had editors seeing things a certain way, and you had publishers--who ran the whole show from the cheap seats--with agendas, and often friends in high places.

Plus the cops, for a multitude of reasons, maybe told them to keep a lid on the second one.

It wasn't worth figuring out, just as you could scratch your head why they abridged the first letter.

They could be holding something back *there* too, or trying to lure the writer into something *else* . . . or it could have just been the reporter got tired of copying the letter into his article and said that's good enough.

At any rate . . . Chris wasn't sure why he was shocked by this being the lead posting, since that was the dang *intent* . . . but it still took a little getting used to.

After a few minutes of speculation it seemed wise to get your rear end offline, or at least not dwell on this one article like it's the last thing you're ever going to read, and before he signed off Chris clicked around and read a few meaningless news stories to cover himself, which was pretty darn ludicrous, but he felt better doing it.

He could use some fresh air now, he decided, even though he'd had about two hours of it already this morning and even though Starbucks was pretty much fresh-air *itself*, with these big screens they rolled open most of the day.

But he gulped down the rest of his coffee and went outside and walked around the block.

The main concern--Was he some kind of idiot to have gotten involved in the letter writing business? Deep down, was he trying to emulate the Zodiac, is *that* it? And what would be the good purpose of *that*?

He reminded himself that he did have a good reason, which was deter the bad guys, first the car burglars, which the police weren't doing anything about and had reached epic proportions--98 percent of them in San Francisco getting away with it clean, according to that recent report--and second, the mutants causing the problems in Berkeley.

The downside of course . . . it was very likely this correspondence would have *zero* net effect on *either* situation . . . and he was probably more of a laughingstock at this point than anything else.

And downside number *two* . . . had he *given* them something now? The police?

Was it a concern that they *were* seeing a link to Jeramiah? Which could imply he left some clue, which cross-connected to the letters . . . and you had potential fingerprints, and DNA and hair follicles, and handwriting . . . Holy Smokes, what on earth were you thinking?

It took a couple blocks for Chris to calm down and come back to earth a ways, since he reminded himself that the Zodiac did the same thing, and it took the cops all of 48 years to track him down . . . and even then, *they* didn't do it, he and *Ken* did. If that was the guy . . .

Chris thought of a scene from one of his favorite movies, Butch Cassidy, where Butch and Sundance are pinned at a point of no return on top of a cliff, and way down there is a fast moving river, and their only option is jump . . . and Sundance won't do it because he says he can't swim.

Butch can't believe what he's hearing, and then he starts laughing and tells him don't worry about it because the fall will probably kill him.

The point being, Chris reminded himself, you can let your mind run wild worrying like a nervous Nellie . . . and often the thing you *really* have to worry about is something else altogether.

Or in the case of Butch and Sundance, they bit the bullet and made the jump, and the fall *didn't* kill them and Sundance didn't drown in the river *either*.

So for now, move on . . . and what did we have, 10:40 . . . Chris was thinking, you know what, maybe Kenny can break away for an early lunch, why not . . . and he headed up over to the library after all.

There was no sign of the kid in his usual spot, which was the store room on the basement level where they processed the new books and took the old ones out of circulation, as well as prepared for fundraising sales with the thousands of books that people would donate.

Chris found the whole thing overwhelming, but Ken was into it, took his job seriously, and came home most of the time with a satisfied bounce to his step.

There was an employee lounge that Chris knew about, and that was on the second floor and he peeked his head in there too, but no Ken . . . and he wondered if maybe the lunch schedule rotated and he was out eating.

You could try him on his cellphone, but Chris hated to do that, it didn't seem appropriate at work to make someone answer it, and they probably weren't even supposed to, so you're encouraging them to break a rule.

It did seem a little early for lunch though, and he asked a gal at one of the reference desks if she knew where he was and she didn't . . . and he knew there'd be an explanation but he was getting a little concerned nevertheless . . . and your hole card of course was finding Emma and asking if *she* knew where Kenny was, and that was going to be uncomfortable, no way around it.

He checked the basement once more and confirmed in his head that yeah, the kid definitely said last Friday that he was working every day this week . . . and some worry started to creep in and got the better of him, and he went upstairs and there was Emma, same place he first met her, fiddling with something at her reference desk.

“Chris, *finally*,” she said, coming around the desk and putting her hand on his chest, which was pretty dang weird.

“How you been?” he said.

She said, “I’ve been better, if you want my honest answer . . . My middle-of-the-road one would be, I don’t have *cancer*, that I know of, so things are status quo.”

“Jeeminy Christmas . . . come on.”

“How did it resolve itself for you up north?” she said.

And that one, you could have gone multiple directions with.

He assumed she was referring to the 25th Lowell High School reunion, where she ducked out halfway through--and with a guy Chris never really liked much, back then or now--and Chris capped off the evening in the hotel bar trading stories with a salesman from Cincinnati.

But everyone had their issues and their reasons, and it was silly to hold grudges, and Chris said, “You didn’t screw it up, if that’s what you’re worrying about. Someone told me later, it looked like I wasn’t paying enough attention to you.”

“I was having a good time,” Emma said. “You were treating me nicely.”

And this was the thing . . . you knew her well enough by now to realize you didn’t know her at all, and that was the type of answer you might expect . . . *it was great, that’s why I banged some other guy right in the middle of it, and by the way, thanks for inviting me.*

“How’s your husband?” Chris said.

“He’s fine. Why?”

“No reason . . . except you referenced, more than once, that if you had a bazooka handy, you’d use it on him.”

Emma laughed and narrowed her eyes shook her head, like that was something out of the twilight zone, and you gotta be kidding.

Chris said, “In any case, I did want to thank you for helping Ken latch on here. The job’s been really good for him.”

“I love Ken,” Emma said, and maybe she really did, plus more. “If we can get him off independent contractor status and up to permanent, the pay and benefits increase substantially. It’s going to take some time.”

“Whatever you can do,” Chris said. “Speaking of which . . . where is he, do you know?”

Emma said, “He didn’t come in today. He wasn’t feeling well.”

This wasn’t good. These couple of months that Chris had known the guy, one thing he seemed was indestructible. Never complained about a headache, sore throat, stomach ache, nothing, Chris couldn’t even remember hearing the guy sneeze or blow his nose.

He said to Emma, “Jeez. What did he say was wrong?”

“Well don’t you live with him?” she said. “You’d know better than I . . . or did he move in with that girlfriend.”

Emma didn’t disguise it that she didn’t like Stacey at all, or at least the *idea* of Stacey. She had her own motives, that’s for sure, and hopefully Ken really *did* fend her off when Chris was up in Chico, or chasing Jerry Smith, or whatever that would have coincided with.

But the kid was human . . . so you never know.

“Well they *are* moving in together, yeah,” Chris said, happy to launch this news and drive a needle in. “In fact it’s a pretty recent development. I was a little wary at first, but I’ve come around.”

“Is that right,” Emma said.

“Uh-huh . . . It’s been real,” Chris said,

“It has,” she said, and there was no hand on the chest or shoulder this time, and no embrace or peck on the cheek on his part either, and he got out of there, and picked up his pace and headed straight up the hills to the *Cheater Five*.

Chapter Six

A definitely non-good sign was Ken huddled up in a hooded sweatshirt sitting by the pool when Chris got there.

First though, there was a gal he'd never seen before, half-way swimming laps, sort of side-stroking it, very white skin and big mop of red hair that occasionally dipped in the water.

Chris kicked himself in these situations for being a single-minded jerk . . . but he couldn't help it, from his vantage point she was round in all the right places and there wasn't a whole lot to the swim outfit, and could you take a seat yourself for the express purpose of watching her come up the steps at the far end of the pool when she was done?

He reminded himself that here was Kenny now, and this was more important, that if someone's sick they generally don't lounge around an outdoor pool . . . though it probably wasn't the worst thing *for* you, but still.

His first thought was did the kid do something wrong at work and get canned?

It seemed unlikely, since the guy had been a model worker, everything he'd been hearing, but things happen.

Ken saw him coming through the gate onto the pool deck and shifted his position to where he wouldn't be making eye contact.

Chris wondered, the new mystery woman still doing her thing in the pool, could you combine the two . . . find out what the hell was wrong with Ken and at the same time see who *she* was?

Chris said, "Yeah, Bud. What's cooking with *you*?"

"I'm not at work today, Boss," Ken said. His voice did sound a little thin, but nothing that would send you to the emergency room.

“Is that right,” Chris said. “But . . . who *is* that in there, you got any idea? Jesus.”

The woman was getting out now, right on cue, and she dried off and saw them both staring at her across the pool--Chris looking that way because he was interested, and Ken looking that way too, not necessarily because *he* was interested at the moment, but because Chris had brought her up.

To the gal’s credit, she raised a couple fingers by way of a greeting, and this caught Chris off guard and embarrassed him a little.

And he was getting ready to turn his attention to Ken, but one of those *life’s too short* moments crept up on him and he motioned for her to come on over.

She hesitated for a second and then came around the pool and stood next to Ken.

Chris said, “You have that look, like you’re waiting for further instructions.”

She smiled and introduced herself as Marlene, and she had a terry cloth robe on now, which Chris decided was a positive, since there wasn’t much left to ogle and be an idiot about.

“Chris,” he said, standing up and shaking hands. “And this is Kenneth. I’d like to say he’s my little brother, but I guess I already have one of those.”

Marlene kept on smiling and you could see she had a good spirit, and Ken spoke up for the first time and said, “And he’s a nice guy, too.”

“Me, you mean?” Chris said, “or him?”

“*Floyd*, is where I was going with it,” Ken said.

“Fair enough,” Chris said. “Marlene, have a seat . . . unless we’re keeping you from something big.”

Marlene said she had a few minutes and sat down, and Chris guessed she didn't have to be anywhere even in a few minutes, if she was floating around in a pool, noontime on a Monday.

He said, "I was just saying to Kenny here, how, Jeez, more apartments are opening up apparently, than I realized."

"Well you obviously know the history better than I," Marlene said, "but I'm in A-3. I've been here since the 1st. "

Chris started to reciprocate with his apartment number but he couldn't always remember it, whether it was B-6 or B-9, so he pointed to the apartment door, second story to the right, over the deep end of the pool.

Simple miscues still made him nervous, despite being more confident every new month, that he wasn't going to die. He hoped little slips like this were only because the information he was supposed to remember wasn't important.

He also realized . . . if she moved in December 1st . . . he would have been still out in Bingham at that point, wouldn't he?

In fact he was pretty sure the Monday he *left* Bingham to go to Reno, where the guy unfortunately clocked him--that was the 4th.

So the 1st, when Marlene here was moving into A-3 . . . that would have been when Chris had to address the business with the blackjack dealer's husband.

Ken may or may not have noticed Marlene before, but he wasn't exactly volunteering a lot of information at the moment, and either way, people had more important things to do than eyeball who moves in and out of a little apartment complex, didn't they?

Chris said to Marlene, "Well you're already a veteran then. But welcome to the joint anyway."

"I like it here," she said.

“I do too,” he said. “What I was getting to though, the vacancy rate catching you off guard, Kenny’s taking that corner one. Pointing to A-6 on other side of the pool gate, again not remembering the exact number.

“Great,” Marlene said.

“No,” Ken said, pulling his hood back so you could see most of his face for the first time.

“*No?* That’s *it?* . . .”

“Boss, I’m afraid so.” Not a lot of oomph behind it, that’s for sure, out of character for the kid.

Chris said, “Lemme get something straight first. You called in sick today? I’m going back and forth with my evaluation.”

“Yeah. I don’t feel great. Is that okay with you?”

Wow.

Chris said to Marlene, “I’ve known the kid a while now. That answer sounded like me.”

“You’re saying,” Marlene said, “he’s typically more polite than you?”

“Not even close,” Chris said . . . and something occurred to him for the first time, that should have been obvious if he hadn’t been so wrapped up in watching Marlene swim.

“Where’s Stacey?” he said.

Ken said, “Boss this is the thing . . . do you have to put it like *that?* Fine, we broke up.”

And with that, Ken got up and collected the couple things he had on the patio table and went up to the apartment.

“Jeez,” Chris said to Marlene. “I was just getting adjusted to Plan A. At my age, I can only process so much.’

“Pretty sure I’ve *seen* Stacey,” Marlene said. “She’s seems sweet.”

“She is . . . dang, now I feel bad for the kid.”

“But they *lived* with you? The two of them? Or how was *that* arranged, if you don’t mind my asking.”

“I don’t mind at all. In fact I’d suggest filling you in on it over dinner . . . except it’s a little early, but we can make it work.”

Marlene said, “Something tells me you’ve made that parlay before, to various people.”

“Oh most definitely,” Chris said. “That’s one of my signature moves . . . Create unfinished business, which is so intriguing that the person can’t resist having dinner with me.”

“Pretty sleazy,” Marlene said, but she was still smiling, at least a little.

Meanwhile Ken appeared again, this time dressed to go out someplace, wearing a jacket and baseball cap, and he didn’t say anything, he just came down the stairs and disappeared across the parking lot.

“Gosh,” Marlene said. “Where do you think he’s going?”

“Pretty sure he doesn’t know.”

“He’s walking into town, do you think?”

“Nah. I heard his keys dangling on him. He parks around the corner . . . But what, walking into town is some alien concept?”

“It seems a little far,” Marlene said. “And steep on the way back.”

“It can be,” Chris said, “though some alcohol helps.”

“I’m afraid to ask,” she said, “what that might imply.”

“Only that there’s a pub downtown. One of several in fact, and who knows, maybe you’re already familiar with it . . . but let’s cut out the bullshit and go *have* a drink.”

Marlene rolled with that okay, meaning she at least didn’t pop up and excuse herself. She said, “That sounds a bit extreme, at the moment.”

“You’re right,” Chris said. “What I’ll do in that case, I’ll pick up some ribs or something, we’ll have a little barbeque . . . Around 5 okay?”

“We’re allowed to barbeque here? I’m not seeing it, frankly.”

“I’ve never tried it, no. How would you work it? Throw out some lava rocks or something? On the cement?”

“Now you’re playing with me,” Marlene said. “But I suppose I can buy *you* dinner. If you like pizza. I have a coupon.”

“Sheesh,” Chris said. “All the moves I save up, trying to use on individuals--that’s a first.”

“You don’t like the tables being turned, then.”

“Not at all. I need to be in control. I know . . . it’s a weakness.’

“Not always,” she said.

This left Chris a few hours, and his first thought was, heck, go find the kid, don’t even entertain the thought that he could do something stupid . . . and Chris had no idea what that meant, and it was unlikely anyway, but *still*.

But you weren’t going to run into him driving around, the South Bay was a big place, and Chris was never a fan of the phone in these--or any other--situations, he always preferred direct contact, but he knew he better pull out the damn thing and give it a try.

No answer though, and he left a message, *hey, let’s go play some tennis or something, maybe catch a movie later, it’s all good*.

And now *he* was kind of ticked off, because he’d opened the door for a reply, which meant you were held hostage until it came in.

Which was the thing about modern communication, all this open-ended nonsense that actually slowed you *down*, when the whole idea of high-speed space age technology was to speed everything *up*.

So what could you do at this point . . . unless you were okay with forgetting about it, and catching the kid later . . . which he wasn’t, he couldn’t relax now.

So you drive around for a while, leave the phone on the seat, roll the window down and enjoy the winter conditions, which at the moment felt in the low 70’s, at least . . . and you clear your head and go back over your

poolside conversation with Marlene, which could be interesting but could have also have been a mistake, pushing buttons a little quick there.

The problem with driving of course, especially in LA but increasingly in the Bay Area as well, was you couldn't actually *go* anywhere.

This was reinforced about 30 seconds into it, the right turn out of the *Cheater Five*, the light, and then the left onto Sepulveda . . . and here you were, not even 3:30, and all three lanes stopped and plugged like the Hoover Dam.

So this wasn't going to work, terrible idea, except getting *out* of it was going to take some serious maneuvering, and not one, not two but three drivers gave Chris the finger before it was over, and he made it into the far right lane before the next intersection, which was 5th Street, just shy of Globe Tire and Automotive . . . which could have tacked on 20 minutes, easy, if he didn't take the bull by the horns and piss a bunch of people off by cutting in.

So forget driving around clearing your head, that was way over-rated, and forget Ken too for now, he's a big boy . . . but since you were in the car anyway and had it fired up, you could safely at least drive into town . . . hopefully.

Which was almost the case, picking up 6th across PCH, swinging over to 8th, and zig zagging your way down there, and Chris remembered you could park by the elementary school without an issue, since school had let out by now . . . and then . . . whether you wanted to or not, a little unfinished business on the computer at the library.

And by *almost* the case, the ease of the driving into town part, halfway down 6th Street there was an idiot double-parked talking through the passenger window to some woman watering her front yard.

The guy had room to pull over further, but he chose not to, and right at that spot, on the other side of the street was a dumpster . . . since you didn't have to look far in MB for someone to be gut-renovating their house.

The dumpster already reduced your room to maneuver, and then this knucklehead applies the finishing touch.

Chris figured a foot, foot and a half would do it, and he'd be able to make it through and get on with his day . . . but for whatever reason, the guy *didn't* move the foot and a half, but instead took his sweet time conversing with the lady.

In fact--and Chris had noticed this before in situations like this--the guy seemed to be taking *extra* time now, going about it *more* deliberately, after Chris had come up on his bumper waiting to get through.

This was a royal pain in the ass. Couldn't people just get along?

Chris gave a little tap to the horn, and when he saw the guy looking in his rear view mirror Chris tried to smile and spread his arms out, like *can we wrap this up please?* . . . and son of gun, the guy takes his eye off the rear view mirror and goes right back to conversation, like that didn't just happen.

Sheesh.

Chris pulled up as close as he could without touching the guy's bumper and shut off the engine and got out.

This got the guy's attention enough to keep one eye on what was developing, while continuing to talk to the woman.

Chris was sizing him up as he came around onto the sidewalk--rich guy, driving a late model Mercedes, big guy too, long-sleeved button down shirt open at the collar, the kind of guy you wouldn't be surprised wrestled or played rugby at a fancy private college somewhere.

These guys grew up with plenty of advantages, but they could also be tough.

Chris asked the lady watering her plants how she was doing, and she seemed a little surprised at the question but said fine, and Chris told her to have a nice day and continued around the front of the guy's Mercedes and propped himself up on the hood and pulled out his phone.

Again the thought had been, after the driving around to clear your head didn't work, to hit the library computer and try the Chronicle again, since the site had taken forever this morning at Starbucks and Chris had given up and switched to the Bay City Beat.

He was lax this morning with the security issues he'd been adhering to, meaning he scoured the news on his personal device, and it felt safe enough but it underscored how he hated reading anything of significance on his phone.

He didn't understand how the young generation could do all that without missing a beat . . . but wouldn't you know, sitting here on the asshole's hood, boom, SF Gate loads right up this time.

And then a little ways down the main page . . . there was definitely a headline of interest . . . and Chris was about to click on it when the guy is in his face.

"Yo fucklips," the guy said. "Get off."

"Hi," Chris said.

"Get off the *car*. I'm not going to tell you again."

"Sure," Chris said. "Just give me a minute." And he opened the Chronicle story, and you had to scroll around on the silly microscopic screen, but there was definitely something there, and it looked like part of his letter as well, since the font changed and it was set off by itself.

The guy was getting ready to put his hands on Chris and throw him off of there, and the lady friend sensed this and called out, "Terry! Don't *do* anything."

"Wait a second . . . *Terri*?" Chris said. "With an *i*? . . . You're giving off the tough guy routine, and that's the best you can do with your name?"

"I'm calling the police, cocksucker," the guy said.

"That's the best idea you've had yet. We can finally make some progress here."

Chris was wondering what he was going to tell the police exactly, this should be interesting, and he considered sticking around on the hood just to find out.

Meanwhile two more cars had shown up, and were stuck behind Chris's now, and one of *those* drivers got out too.

This guy was older, more like Chandler's age, and he had on a stylish straw hat with some decoration on it and a Hawaiian shirt and shorts . . . and you had the impression everything had been pretty easy going today for him . . . up to *this* point.

"Gentlemen," he said. "We need to move these two vehicles, *please*." And he threw in, kind of sing-songy, "Miles to go before we sleep . . . You know how it is."

"You *say* that," the first guy said, who probably *was* Terry with a *y*, "like it's all a big picnic in the park."

Chris had to admit, he agreed with Terry on *that*, they were in the middle of a legitimate confrontation developing, and you don't come waltzing in at that point all la-di-dah like *isn't this fun*.

"It just seems to me," the straw hat guy said, "if the front gentleman would merely step down, we can resolve matters nearly immediately."

"Yeah?" Terry said. "Why don't you remove him then, be my guest."

"Surely you're kidding," straw hat said.

"Let me tell *you* something," Terry said, poking a finger in the guy's face, "if you're as spineless as I can *tell* you are--and you value your health--you'd be strongly advised to stay out of my business."

Chris reluctantly had to agree here *too*. Don't be the *third-man-in* from the cheap seats if you're not going to back anything up.

It *was* interesting . . . since it was Chris causing the current problem--how now you had Terry mad at *this* guy, who was trying for a peaceful resolution . . . and for God sakes just wanted to get through.

Meanwhile the car behind the straw hat guy was making maneuvers, and he figured out a way to turn around, and they all watched him drive away . . . and then the straw hat guy went back to his car too, and this made sense, just leave it alone and get out here.

Chris thought about that too, before he'd pulled all the way up on the guy and got out, that he could have done the same thing, and he probably should have.

But it just didn't sit right . . . letting the guy *block* you like that while he *ignored* you.

And it was a character flaw and he knew it, and unfortunately you didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out why he was in a lot of these messes.

The thought now, was, fine the older guy leaves, you're right back to where you started . . . are you really going to wait for the guy to call the cops?

And the guy was probably bluffing on that, but if you stayed on his hood long enough he really might start driving the car . . . slowly at first, but still, did you need to add that to your day?

Except . . . and Chris couldn't quite believe what he was seeing . . . the straw hat guy *hadn't* backed up and driven away *after* all, and instead he'd gotten something out of the car apparently, a golf club, pretty hefty one, a 4-wood would be Chris's guess . . . and he was coming back toward the front of the Mercedes with it, a definite determined look on his face this time.

Unbelievable, Chris thought, *he's going to smash the headlights, like they do in the movies*, and he almost said as much to Terry . . . but at the same time thinking maybe *he* better move *his* self off the front end of the vehicle now, you've made your point, fine, but don't be in the guy's firing line for Criminy sakes, especially if he's a little wild with his accuracy.

What the guy did though, was throw everyone a curveball. No, he didn't worry about the headlights . . . or the windows . . . or maybe putting a dent in a door . . .

He wound up sidearm like a baseball bat, and let fly and smashed Terry in the ribs.

Getting crushed in the mid-section like that, you'd think a guy would double over, or stagger around a bit . . . or if he *handled* the blow, he'd attack the guy who just hit him.

Terry didn't do any of those things, he collapsed like a sack of potatoes being dropped off a truck, and barely moved, and for a second Chris thought maybe the golfer severed his spinal cord or some really scary shit.

Either way, the golf guy had a crazed look, like he hadn't finished the job and was positioning for more, and the garden lady started screaming and ran out into the street and this caused the guy to hesitate . . . and after a moment it was like he realized what happened and felt awkward about it, and he put the golf club down.

The guy'd gone into some kind of trance obviously . . . and again, Chris knew the feeling, you *did* get to the point of no return sometimes . . . but man, you still had to be able to control yourself, this was a silly road rage thing for crying out loud, and not even a *major* one like you read about . . . You needed to keep your poise. *Jeez . . . Didn't you?*

A few other neighbors had gathered, and Terry looked a tad bit better but that wasn't saying much, and it did seem like a good time to depart . . . and Chris assumed it would be simple after watching that first car maneuver backwards, but he couldn't figure out for the life of him how to turn around, so he had to back it all the way to the intersection and across.

You could hear a siren in the distance coming closer, not sure if it was the cops or an ambulance . . . and no point running right into them, so he

headed toward Hermosa, giving the whole thing a wide berth, and waited a few minutes and looped back to downtown MB and the library.

The library was more crowded this time, school kids supposedly doing homework but that was dubious since they were all talking up a storm . . . but his cubicle on the first floor was open and he sat down.

Yep, the Chronicle did have something . . . an article dated yesterday, and what could you say, quite a different angle than the Bay City Beat had.

Mailed Threat Raises Concern at UC Berkeley
by John Hillemakyer, staff writer

Sunday, December 17, 2018 - The second of two post cards obtained by the Chronicle this week, written by what police are calling a ‘person of interest’ in a November Daly City slaying, appears to address the armed robbery epidemic that has plagued the fringes of the UC Berkeley campus.

The post card’s characteristics are believed to match those of the first card, which, according to authorities, made legitimate reference to the murder last month of Jeramiah Towne at Original Joe’s in Westlake.

Towne had galvanized the pet-protection community through an alleged animal assault in conjunction with an auto break-in on Union Street.

“We are seeking an individual who may have committed a crime against Mr. Towne,” SFPD spokesperson Sgt. Amy Schnoek announced Sunday. “We believe this is the same person who has authored the two letters, and that yes, there is a match.”

The second card, postmarked December 15th in Anaheim, states:

Tell the people if they rob me at Cal--

--HA HA HA

Sincerely

Your Friendly Visitor

Dr. Gregory Bok, a Stanford psychology professor specializing in criminal profiling, says contrary to the police interpretation, the post cards weren't necessarily written and sent by whoever committed foul play on Towne.

"We see copycats every day," he said. "and people play games.

"Picking up a pen can rapidly embolden someone who is otherwise harmless, Dr. Bok said.

Dang. One thing that ticked Chris off here, not important and he shouldn't be worrying about *that*, but isn't it dirty pool on the part of the Chronicle to not at least acknowledge that the postcards were sent to the Bay City Beat?

And it was strange that they posted the second, at least part of it, but not the first one, even though they implied that had obtained them both.

And as far as posting the second, they left off the top part, which he remembered was where he berated the reporter for not acknowledging the first post card yet, and thereby ignoring him, and he threw in:

Now I have no choice

This seemed unprofessional--didn't it?--on the part of the Chronicle to leave that *out*?

Chris was thinking Jeez, that was a big part of it . . . All that work driving out to Disneyland and getting the words just right, to hopefully send a strong message to the bad guys . . .

And that was part of the problem--what the newspaper, and maybe the police, didn't understand was these post cards were for the *benefit* of law-abiding citizens.

Yes, the Bay City Beat seemed inclined to post the letters in full, but their circulation was 1/1000th or maybe even 1/100,000th that of the Chronicle.

Unfortunately . . . it sure continued to look like he was going to have to go back up there and take the bull by the horns.

Chris sat still a while processing it all, and then he noticed the little time in the right corner of the computer . . . and Holy Smokes, it was 5 to 5.

He was supposed to go for that pizza with Marlene at 5, and he had no way to contact her, they never got that far with the introductions, and he hustled out the door and up the street toward the elementary school . . .

And then he remembered like an idiot he'd *assumed* he could park there earlier because school was out, but there was some event and there were no spots, so he *didn't* park there but ended up on Pacific and 18th, not great at all . . . and he sprinted over *there*, way more exercise than he bargained for, and he reminded himself not to agree to do *anything* in the future at 5 o'clock, that wasn't using his head at *all*.

Chapter Seven

Marlene said, “Golly . . . unless you took a dip in the ocean, or got tangled up in a hose . . . you’re sweating pretty profusely.”

“Well I have a thing about being late,” Chris said. “I get ticked off at people when they keep *me* waiting . . . sometimes drop ‘em . . . so the pressure’s on me, I have to keep producing.’

They were by the pool, and Marlene looked at her watch. “Except it’s currently 5:08.”

She was reading a book, looking pretty comfortable, using another chair as a footrest. Her hair was pinned up and she had on a long cotton dress. There were subtle suggestions of the curvaceousness Chris had admired at the pool, but everything tasteful.

“I’m going to jump past that for a second, the timing part,” Chris said. “You have more freckles than you did earlier. It must be the light.”

Marlene ignored it, and said, “Were you serious when you said you’ve dropped people for being tardy?”

“*Consistently* tardy, yeah. There comes a point.”

“I generally run late,” she said. “You were in luck tonight, since I already live here.”

“Well you’ll probably get dropped pretty soon then,” Chris said.

“In that case,” she said, “shall we even bother?”

“It depends how hungry you are, I guess.”

“So it boils down to that.”

“Well I was telling someone recently, it seems like, can’t remember the circumstance . . . but that my mom would lecture me, make sure you marry someone who can get ready fast and eats a lot.”

Marlene said, “Interesting. So you’re advancing the marriage card now?”

“Nah,” Chris said. “You’re only halfway there . . . If you have a good appetite, that is. Otherwise you’re *zero* of the way there.”

Marlene reacted funny for the first time, like she doesn’t mind playing along *some*, but this is kind of ridiculous.

Chris said, “You have to forgive me, I’ll a little punchdrunk, and I can blurt stuff out . . . which comes from being pre-occupied . . . which I am more of lately.”

Marlene said, “Well it’s not the worst thing to have a lot on your plate. Though fiction can help.” Holding up her book, something by Robin Cook.

“You mean it distorts your real world, a good story?”

“Possibly . . . or takes you away from it entirely. I gave in and bought myself a Kindle. It’s wonderful.”

“I can’t read on those things,” Chris said.

“Oh there’s an adjustment, but then you’re off and running. Now I have a Kindle Unlimited membership, so I’m a full-fledged devotee.”

“The problem,” Chris said, “I look around at those books on Amazon, that I assume you’re talking about, and they have this Look Inside feature where you can read the first 10 percent?”

“Exactly.”

“And when I *try* that, most of them I cringe.”

“Well you’re a tough critic then,” she said. “Maybe that’s part of your problem.”

“Jeez . . . you know me, what, three hours, and you’re already diagnosing a *problem*.”

“I’m pretty hungry,” she said.

It was the pizza place in Hermosa that Marlene had the coupon for, and Chris realized he hadn’t been there in quite a while. This was the little

hole in the wall restaurant on the sidestreet at the bottom of Pier Avenue, a block from the ocean, where the owner was a pretty colorful guy who liked to talk, and where Chris ended up having a couple slices that night after he'd locked the CraigsList guy in the storage unit.

The owner did come by the table pretty quick, but he didn't linger this time, and when he was out of earshot Chris said, "That guy, he told me his life story pretty much, I could barely eat, though I didn't mind, it was entertaining."

"I like when people wear their emotions on their sleeve," Marlene said.

"That's kind of a strange comment," Chris said.

"Really? I was merely following up what you just said."

"I don't know, you shifted it a little, you kind of killed any momentum I had going."

Marlene took a sip of her beer and didn't say anything, and Chris was thinking that's good, hopefully she's not too big a boozier, since beer over wine is usually a decent sign.

Marlene said, "You're kind of a whack job. I'd ask if anyone's ever told you that, except pretty sure I know the answer."

"But *see*? You're not particularly bent out shape about it."

"What about your friend Ken?"

"You mean . . . does he share your view . . . or you're moving forward, to what *about* him?"

"The second thing."

"Ah, he'll be all right . . . Did you know I met Kenny in a restaurant something like this?"

Marlene said no, he hadn't volunteered that piece of information but she had to use the ladies' room and would be right back.

Chris decided he liked this place all around. It was cozy, the prices were fair to start with, and then the coupon, there were no complications,

just *2nd entree free*. Often you run across these things, other places, where there's fine print.

He noticed now the paper placemat, *that* was full of coupons as well . . . and you might as well take a look.

Nothing more involving the pizza place, they were all outside businesses, and not the fancy ones around here but the ones that looked like they needed a little help.

Several of them up on Sepulveda . . . including a muffler place, a tax preparer, a nail salon, a surf shop . . . and couple further down on Artesia toward the Redondo Beach mall, a music store and a Verizon phone place.

Then there was one more, for a service way over in Santa Monica:

Skilled Family Counselor. 10 Years Experience.

Crisis intervention-caring and compassionate-traditional solo practice-relationships-diversity.

Free 45-minute session.

Hmm. This wouldn't be something Chris would normally even read, but since his eye had wandered there anyway . . . what would it really hurt, to at least save the darn thing?

So he moved his calzone to the side, off the place mat, and casually made a couple creases and tore the little counseling item off and stuck it in his pocket, and Marlene came back and they finished up, seeing things a little more eye to eye, Chris was thinking, the second half of the meal.

And he debated suggesting going somewhere else, since the night was still young . . . when the waiter took away the dishes and Marlene asked what he'd torn off.

Chris hesitated and she put 2 and 2 together pretty quick and checked her own place mat against the missing part of Chris's, and she looked back up at him.

Chris said, "What? You think I'm going too far?"

"I really don't know enough to comment," she said, "but it is sweet of you to think about him."

And luckily she bit . . . which meant she assumed the therapy session coupon was intended for *Ken* . . . while the truth was Chris grabbed it for himself--since you never know--and fortunately he was able to think quickly and *parlay* it into Ken when she asked about it.

And Chris milked it a little further, that he should have known something was up when Ken came home last night without Stacey, though he was half-asleep in the recliner and it didn't register.

"So how did you find out?" she said.

"This morning, I stopped by his work."

"Really. What were you doing *there*?"

"You know something, you didn't so much, earlier, but now you're starting to ask a lot of questions . . . do you like bars?"

"I can," she said. "I have to get up early though."

Now it was Chris's turn to ask the questions, but this had been a refreshing little outing in that regard, neither of them poking into the other one's business, at least the part about how they each made a living.

Chris said, "So come back to my place for a while . . . The good thing, you can even wear your robe and slippers and so forth, since you have a built in escape if you're worried I'm not going to behave myself."

"Are you?" she said.

"Of course." Which was accurate, he wasn't planning to make any moves, that wasn't the thought process at the moment--though he admittedly couldn't entirely shake the image of her in the pool earlier.

So they went back and Marlene didn't stop in her apartment and change to the robe and slippers but she made herself comfortable on the couch and Chris put on coffee and asked if she wanted to play cards or something.

She said tonight she felt like some old-fashioned TV, and Chris handed her the changer, since he had no idea what that meant any more, with the lines blurred between the networks and the thousands of spin-off channels.

Whenever he flipped around it felt like a lot of the shows were thinly disguised variations of each *other*, but there was one he heard about that he was interested in, no idea when it was on . . . but the premise was a guy puts on a mask one day and robs a bowling alley. He only clears a couple hundred bucks, and he never gets caught, but the psychological weight is heavy-duty, and he pays the price on some level every day.

He couldn't remember the name of it but it sounded like something you could get into and he asked Marlene but she had no idea and meanwhile she had settled on the Rachel Maddow Show on MSNBC.

"You're kidding," Chris said.

"I like to stay informed, if you don't mind," Marlene said.

"Fine. Except you wanted old-fashioned television, I thought."

Marlene wasn't listening because she was absorbed in something one of the guests was saying now, and they were going at it about the looming government shutdown unless they got their act together before Christmas and passed a bill.

It was dull and tiresome, but Chris couldn't help thinking you had a whole hoard of spineless doofuses in Congress on *both* sides . . . and by contrast, a guy like that straw hat golfer today, at least he *showed* you something.

"Meanwhile," Chris said, "have you ever thought about living in Florida?"

“Huh?” Marlene said.

“Should be a basic question, not seeing the confusion.”

“Have you ever *been* to Florida?” she said. “Why would you put yourself in those extreme conditions?”

“I’m thinking . . . if you were going to kind of re-invent yourself somewhere . . . it might be an option. How ‘bout *you*?”

Of course this was a common theme lately, more common than he was comfortable with, but there was a reality . . . if something wild happened again, and maybe not Hamm and the other guy this time but two *different* guys . . . or someone up north calling him in for an interview . . . you needed an ongoing contingency plan.

“I spent a winter there once,” she said. “That was in Gainesville. By the time the heat and humidity and bugs roll around, you’re happy you’ve vacated.”

“Wait a second. Gainesville, that’s barely real Florida. You’re in more like Georgia there.”

“Real Florida’s worse . . . what’s so bad about here?”

Chris had to admit, there was *nothing* bad about it, in many ways Manhattan Beach was the best place he’d ever lived.

“That’s *another* angle now,” he said. “You want to go in on buying a house together? How would *that* be?”

“A *what*?”

“The thing people live in, with the driveway and roof. We’d need about 8 more people, and we could pull it off.”

“I’m going to say this gently,” she said, “but are you on some medication?”

Chris was trying to play with her, distract her from the dumb political talk show, and he was kind of falling flat.

“I’m not on any,” he said. “But I’ll break the ice and ask you this then. What’s your story?”

“I’m a school teacher,” she said. “K through 8.”

“Oh . . . Except not at the moment. Or, wait a second, is school out for Christmas vacation, then?”

“I believe they get out on Wednesday. But you were right, I’m looking for a job.”

“Jeez. Well how’s that going?”

“It’s a process, is the best I can say.”

“So just like that, boom, you’re here?” Chris said. “I mean where’d you teach before?”

“Appleton, Wisconsin.”

“Holy Smokes. Big change.”

“I felt I needed one, yes.” Here we go, now we’re getting to it, the standard scenario, a relationship gone sour and someone needs a fresh start . . . Not that he couldn’t relate.

So since that was on the table you might as well get it out of the way. He said, “You don’t seem *that* difficult to be around. The guy had bad judgement then . . . went gay on you? . . . what?”

“It’s a she,” Marlene said. “And if you don’t mind, we can dispense with the comedy please. It’s still quite sensitive.”

“Ah . . . Well, see? . . . This is exactly what I was thinking earlier, going back to the pizzeria . . . why it’s better to not ask too many questions.”

“A bit late now,” she said, and it was clear she *was* still sensitive, and her voice was quieter and a little shaky.

“That’s my fault all the way then,” Chris said. “I should have trusted my instincts . . . but . . . seeing how the damage is done . . . just to clarify, you’re *gay* then?”

“I’m not sure,” Marlene said, and Ken came walking in.

“Whoops,” he said.

“Nonsense,” Chris said. “Join us.”

“Please do,” Marlene said. “I feel bad, we didn’t save some pizza for you.”

“Me too,” Chris said. “You look thin. Y’aright?”

Ken said to Marlene, “He’s always trying to get me to eat.”

There wasn’t a lot of energy behind it, Ken’s normal upbeat self having disappeared for now.

And Chris was thinking, Jeez, all of a sudden I got two of ‘em here, moping.

Chris said, “*Forget* what I’m always trying to do. How ‘bout we go down to the Kettle, get some *real* grub.”

“Boss, something else I meant to tell you . . . I’m sorry you had to go through all that with Sharif.”

“*What* Sharif? Oh, you mean squaring it so you and Stacey could rent out the apartment part of the time?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t worry about it, I never talked to him. One thing you have to learn, do as little as you can in anticipation of shit. Generally wait until something *happens*. And even *then*, maybe don’t do anything.”

“I must say, that’s an interesting philosophy,” Marlene said.

“I’m going to go out for a while,” Ken said.

“You just came *in*,” Chris said, but the door clicked behind Ken and he was gone.

Marlene took a moment and said, “Perhaps you could have done more to accommodate him. Besides make him eat.”

“I’m sensing this is you the *teacher* speaking now . . . To follow up my point about Sharif though . . . did I ever tell you the real estate example?”

“You just *met* me,” she said.

“Just seeing if you’re paying attention . . . but a guy one time, big-time landlord in New Jersey, he takes me aside, and big dramatic pause, like he’s going to give me the secret of eternal youth, or something else that’s the

most important thing I've ever heard . . . and he looks at me straight on and says, 'Don't repair in anticipation.'

"Hmm. I'm glad he wasn't *my* landlord."

"And of course there was more to it, he kept going, but you get the gist . . . the thing was, our deal here, the kid had an idea to move in with his girlfriend but at the same time try to airbnb the place, and if he rented it, get out of there that night."

"That's not a bad idea," Marlene said. "*I* should consider that."

"I've been saying the same thing . . . Anyhow, you gotta get going?"

"Not immediately. I detect a change in tone though, since you picked apart my background."

"That's a question of interpretation. Since we're being so honest here, that wasn't entirely the worst thing to learn. Now I can enjoy your company without having to worry about putting the moves on you . . . most likely."

Marlene gave it the little *is this guy for real* headshake and said, "Okay, you can watch whatever you want. My show's over, Lawrence O'Donnell's coming on."

"Oh he's *much* better. He cuts to the chase, knows how to put on a show . . . I've actually Tweeted him a few times, when he said something I didn't agree with."

"Good for you then."

"You make fun of that . . . but did you know I also talk to Nancy Sinatra on Twitter?"

"You mean . . . what was that song, the *oldie*?"

"Yeah. *These Boots Are Made For Walking*. Frank Sinatra's daughter."

"I love that. They recorded a duet together as well."

"You know your stuff. Speaking of which, I was in the Reno area not too long ago, and it always comes up, some of the casino performers, why

they're doing the lounge shows and others not necessarily any better, are the big pop stars."

"I never thought about that," she said.

"Well what's your *take* on it?"

"I can't help you there. You might need, like a sociologist to shed some light."

Chris got up and refilled both their coffees, and it was nice that she didn't give him the typical *thanks but coffee keeps me up* BS.

He said, "I'm starting to like you, if you want to know the truth."

"Gee thanks."

"And even if I'm *wrong* about that--since as you point out I might not know you well enough to *make* that judgment . . . but let's just say I'm comfortable with you."

Marlene said, "Okay, now I'm concerned where you're going with this."

"No, no, not what you think. I'm not going to lay some major confession on you, or anything . . . But what would you think if Ken became a porno actor?"

"*What?*"

"Ah Jeez, I should have asked you first, do you go to church?"

"What does *that* have to do with anything?"

"Only that you might be opposed to the concept on religious or moral grounds . . . Kenny doesn't know about it yet though."

"Chris . . . you've lost me entirely at this point. Very bizarre progression."

"The guy's 24-years-old and right now is kind of stuck in a menial job. I believe he's been in and out of some situations. Not this *girlfriend* thing, but in the past. Didn't seem too appropriate to pin any of it down . . . My thought though--why not make 200 bucks a scene?"

"Wow . . . is . . . I mean what constitutes a *scene*?"

“Okay. No need to spell it out, but you figure 20 minutes, a half hour’s work. Naturally you have to prepare and all. But that’s pretty good dough, and may boost his self-esteem right now.”

“He is an attractive young man.”

Chris chewed on that for a second. “You mean, you find him attractive, personally . . . or you’re just saying?”

“Oh brother,” she said. “So what . . . you can land him a . . . *job*? So to speak?”

“I think I know a guy, yeah. It’s just a thought. I probably wouldn’t bring it up to Ken in a million years, except it might not be the worst timing, actually.”

“Help him snap out of his funk, you’re saying.”

“Something like that. But the bigger picture, what’s minimum wage these days?”

“I think it’s around 11 dollars an hour.”

“So there you go . . . and at the library he’s not even full-time. He has to check in every Friday, see if they can use him the next week. Slightly degrading, honestly.”

“But you’ve . . . witnessed this operation? Where you claim you *know a guy*?”

“I did once . . . it’s not entertainment, the way you think it might be.”

Marlene said, “It’s a business, you’re saying . . . Yeah, okay.” She was giggling now.

Chris considered suggesting she could see for herself and make her own determination . . . but that was getting off track, he only wanted some feedback on the idea he’d been tossing around the last few hours.

Which was *throw* the kid something, and let the chips fall where they may. It obviously wasn’t your typical business opportunity.

But wouldn’t it be irresponsible *not* to at least put it on the table?

Chris remembered a movie one time where a girl dumps a guy, and the guy says *screw it, that's it*, and he starts acting in porno flicks, partly as a way to get back at her.

This wasn't like that, the only similarity being the timing, since Ken was freed up to participate, if he wanted, no strings attached.

Marlene asked a couple more questions, which were starting to get a little more specific, and Chris decided church *wasn't* a big issue for her, and he changed the subject and asked if she was a Dodgers' fan, now that she was a southern Californian.

She wasn't as interested in the new direction of the conversation, and she picked up the changer and settled on the local news, which Chris normally couldn't stand, but he took a look.

The lead story tonight was a bad crash, unfortunately, a tour bus spinning off the road and down an embankment halfway up Mount Baldy, which Chris had never even heard of but learned from the report was in the San Gabriel Mountains, north of Pomona.

Victims were transported to various area hospitals, some of them helicoptered, and it was tough to watch . . . but then came the next story.

"In other news," the anchorman--a young guy with a weird comb-over--said, "a woman found stabbed to death in the Westfield Wilshire Hotel this evening has police concerned about a possible pattern. Kelly Johnstone reports . . ."

And then you had the reporter standing there in front of the hotel awning, police activity around her, including a strip of crime scene tape.

The scene was a little like the one from Chico, but this was big-city LA, not a small college town, and the news people were more polished . . . and the reality was they likely encountered bad crimes on a regular basis, whereas the McCall deal may have been a first for the Chico group.

"Peter, details are sketchy at this hour," the reporter on location was saying. "What we do know is there was an incident on the 6th floor at

approximately 6:18 this evening that left one person dead, a white female. Now I'm told off the record, by a source close to the investigation, that police fear this crime *may* fit the pattern of two unsolved homicides from last week, the first in Culver City and the second in Beverly Glen."

"Fuck," Chris said.

"How awful," Marlene said.

"Unbelievable," Chris said. "Everything there is to worry about, now we got a maniacal serial killer on our hands."

"Well we don't know that for sure. Not that it in any way lessens the impact."

"God *damn* it . . . I saw something a few days ago, the second one had just happened. I didn't take it real seriously, that there'd be a connection. And especially not a follow-up."

Marlene put her hand on his arm.

"I understand," she said. "But aren't you taking it a little extra hard? . . . I mean, thank God you--or I--don't know any of the victims. Think of *that* unimaginable scenario."

"That'd be worse, yeah," Chris said, "The problem with these things, the pieces of scum can be clever, and they can keep it up for a long time, sometimes forever."

"Now that's an awfully extreme perspective, don't you think? I'm sure the police are right in the middle of this by now."

"You'd think. But you remember the Zodiac? Up north? 1969?"

"That would have been a bit early for me, by 10 years. But I've heard of it of course, and I did see the movie."

"Okay so . . . 79, 89, 99, 2009 . . . that's good because you've established your age. 37, depending on your birth date."

"You need to use your fingers to do math?" she said.

"Not always, but I get screwed up when I hit the turn of the century, so I keep it simple . . . what'd you think of the movie?"

“Well I like Mark Ruffalo,” she said, and Chris wondered, does that mean she likes guys after all, or is she just commenting on his acting method. But that was for another time . . .

He said, “Well as you could see, they never did catch the guy.”

“Right. Although they were zeroed in on someone who lived in a trailer, as I recall. Except he passed away before they could confirm it.”

She wasn’t bad actually, and that was Arthur Leigh Allen she was referring to, and that guy had been dismissed by key witnesses, plus his handwriting was way off, and he passed a 10-hour lie detector test.

Chris didn’t want to get in an argument, and you definitely weren’t going to spring on her the simple fact that, no, she’s mixed up, *he* most likely found the right guy, *Mel*, and that was taken care of . . . since the police were incapable of it.

“My point,” Chris said, “*that* guy, whoever he was, taunted the cops for 48 years.”

“I have to go,” Marlene said, “and thank you for the evening. But why don’t you put on Jimmy Fallon and put your feet up and relax?”

Chapter Eight

21 miles away in the hills of Bel Air, Harrison had been watching almost the same news report in his bedroom, except on a different channel.

This time the reporter was in the the lobby of the Westfield Wilshire, not out front, and she had her back to the bank of elevators, and there was a live interview with a hotel security guard at the end.

Otherwise, you had an identical report to what Chris and Marlene had watched . . . in other words neither one told you much of anything.

Harrison was slightly alarmed but not surprised that by this one, his *Number 3 Job*, law enforcement had apparently figured out that they were all *him*.

Of course it didn't matter what they did or did not piece together, that had no bearing on whether you were going to stop your activities.

And at this point Harrison saw no reason to do anything differently.

It would be nice not to *have to*, sure . . . and carry on with your evening with nothing in your way . . . like that prick Duggan did after their squash match.

That was some smile he showcased there on the bench outside the court . . . Harrison saw the guy now in the USC Trojan marching band, on the 50-yard line, halftime of a game . . . doink, doink, doink . . . the guy thrusting his hand out with the V signal they made, Victory, as the horns and drums thundered to monster crescendo, and Jesus, you had to stick your fingers in your ears to plug out the sound.

Harrison had a mind to spank Duggan then and there, and not in a way he might enjoy, except he figured that then he'd get kicked out of the

football game . . . and that would mean kicked of the tennis club, wouldn't it?

Harrison realized he was a little confused at the moment, and his right eye started twitching to where he thought he might have to go out in the tool chest in the garage and find a clamp . . . but luckily he was able to reign it in just enough, and the key, as it so often was, was repeating his mantra silently but rapidly to himself: **Nam-Myo-Renge-Kyo.**

So, after his shower, his routine shave of the body hair and lotioning up, watching the news, and then this episode with Duggan . . . and then finally the meditation . . . he felt pretty good actually.

Kind of like he'd come full circle tonight. That main conclusion, *let it go* if some guy beats you in a silly game and is going to use it for a source of pleasure.

Pick your battles. Wasn't that a good idea?

He'd made a fire downstairs in the living room, and the smoke was trickling up here, bothering him bit. It seemed wise to *burn* your clothes from tonight, from over at the hotel, rather than just toss them in the trash like he did most of every day's basic outfit.

Tonight he wore an Angels' tracksuit, the baseball team, zippered sweatshirt on top and sweatpants bottoms--so a sweatsuit--except some other ass-wipe, not Duggan this time, calls this stuff a tracksuit because he's English.

Harrison thought about that one for a minute, that it'd be fun to watch that guy run a lap on a real track, his beer belly hanging out . . . and if he managed to make it the one time around, you chop off a few of the toes on his left foot and say *try it again now my friend.*

So yep, he burned it all, ball cap and sunglasses included. He hated wearing stuff on his head and face, but there were security cameras. *Some.*

What he should have done, he was thinking now, was throw a couple logs in there first, or some crap . . . get it roaring and *then* dump the clothes

in . . . but what did they *want* from him, he was supposed to be an expert on pyrotechnics all of a sudden?

The Westfield Wilshire wasn't a bad place to stay actually.

In fact he'd given it a dry run a few weeks ago . . . not staying there per se but pretending he was by checking in for a couple nights at the Four Seasons over on Doheny Drive.

Or not pretending about the *other* place, but what was the difference.

The thing was he felt an urge--as the great writer Ernest Hemingway pointedly stated once or twice, *the old feeling had returned*.

So back in November he came close one night--two people, part of a big convention, but on their own now, close to midnight, deciding to take a walk, get some air, all the rest of their compatriots still yukking it up in the hotel bar--not a typical bar, they had a crazy disco kind of a set-up, with the swirling lights on the ceiling.

Following the two people out into the night was natural, why not, and something might have happened--Harrison thought of it that night as an *adjustment*--except one of them decided they were cold and they made an about face and he got caught off guard--and he watched them go and snapped his fingers, like *darn it*.

But that convention, there was a *concept* there, it let you think juicy thoughts . . . and when he got back home to Bel Air after his mini-vacation at the Four Seasons he looked up other conventions that might be taking place in the area.

There was one the next week too, same hotel, the Tool and Die Makers of America . . . and Harrison didn't even know those kind of guys *existed* anymore, but their industry must have shifted gears, gone the computer route, and these would be their top execs still hanging in there, coming out to sunny California for their annual crock of whatever they did.

Chris was tempted to book a room for *that*, and almost did, except right around then was when he ran into Ellie in her open art studio gig . . .

and then of course he got caught up in that, which was time consuming and pretty exhausting frankly, until it was over last week.

Still he managed to keep an eye on things, and this week you had a gathering of nutrition people, not the traditional approaches, it announced, but juicing and fasting and a list of a million *holistic* disciplines up the wazoo.

So what the heck . . . he didn't have anything pressing going on tonight, so he attended the convention . . . not in the official sense, but he went over to the hotel, the Westfield Wilshire, and took a peak . . . which meant stood in the back of the huge ballroom they'd taken over, and see what it was all about.

Then of course there's an overweight woman . . . and isn't that the way these things work, all these health nuts who profess to living like monks, but half of them don't look so good . . . and she gets in the elevator, so Harrison does too.

He asks her what's wrong with the current lecture going on, and she laughs and says nothing's wrong with it except it's giving her a headache, and she's got to go up to her room and retrieve a couple ibuprofen.

Harrison says don't they have natural remedies for headaches now, and she says she *wishes*, but she hasn't found one yet that does the trick.

He says they talk a better game than they deliver then, is that it, and she says they do . . . but that it's her own fault, she stays up half the night watching the auction network.

Harrison says is that CVC, and she says that's one of them, yeah, but the one she's addicted to currently is AAN . . . that the formats are a little different.

Harrison asks how so . . . and she starts explaining it as she turns out of the elevator on the 6th Floor, and he reaches in his pocket and a moment later sticks the blade in her throat.

And not just any blade . . . and *that* didn't go in the fire tonight, that would be going too far.

This was one of those items that meant something to you . . . 15 years old, he and 3 guys and 2 girls swung down to Tijuana for Easter vacation. This would be 10th grade.

One of the girls didn't tell her parents, she just went, and a day later her parents show up and are all bent out of shape, and they're blaming Harrison and the other guys for the whole thing.

The parents took her with them, but it seemed like a good idea, in case he had dealings with the bastard dad and bitch mom again, to pick something up . . . so he shopped around that night in the stores off one of the plazas, and everything was open late and there were loads of options and it took him a while . . . but he came out of there with a beautiful pearl-handled tool, a switchblade, and all these years later kept it lubed up just right with the finest machine oil, and that button still worked like magic.

And it really was your *friend*, it stayed nice and stiff for you did what you told it.

He hated to admit it, but the dumb garb--the Angels' attire and the hat and glasses was probably necessary with the surveillance cameras, although frankly it was an older hotel, and it still had charm to it but it had seen better days in terms of cutting edge technology, if the elevator itself was any indication, which jerked you around quite a bit and where the step didn't quite line up when you got off.

Something that energized Harrison a little, was at the front of the lobby when you walk in, there's a guy watching security screens, and there weren't a whole heck of a lot of them . . . in fact, come to think of it that looked like the same dude just now on the news, talking to the reporter.

That may or may not have been it, but right *around* then was when he decided he was a bricklayer, in ancient Rome, and he was working on the Coliseum . . . except some younger guy on a kind of wooden scaffold up

above him kept spitting, coughing up wads of phlegm, and then letting them fly, and the goo kept hitting Harrison in the ears.

By the time he got out of the elevator with the woman and reached into his pocket--and she'd been entirely pleasant and self-deprecating, she really had--he was a ballerina taking a class on a Sunday morning in the basement of a church.

But don't worry about *that* any more. For crying out loud.

The question was . . . how do you handle the rest of the evening?

Okay fine, he was all showered and shaved and powdered . . . but what if you had to take *another* shower?

Would that be the end of the *world*, for Christ sake?

So Harrison went downstairs and flicked on the floodlights that illuminated the big lawn, and he went outside and set up the equipment and turned the volume real loud, and the guy came on the screen, a friendly familiar face, the black guy . . . and it didn't take long to get back in sync with the guy, and together they did another lively installment of the *Insanity* workout.

Chapter Nine

Wednesday afternoon Chris couldn't help himself, the pool looked so dang inviting, and he threw on his trunks and went down there, and instead of easing in the normal way, he impulsively dove in.

Right away this was a mistake, not because he came close to hitting his head and was risking paralysis--that was a nice thing about these older pools, the few that were still left--they had an actual deep end, that went down 10, 12 feet.

Probably there'd even been a diving board at one time, before the lawyers likely freaked out one of the owners--and this would be way before Sharif--and the insurance went nuts eventually too, and they took the damn board out.

But Chris's mistake was he did a belly flop, just didn't get the chin tucked on the chest in time, and it sure felt like a lot of water spilled out of the pool, and *man* did that sting.

One more example, wasn't it, where you needed to accept your age. It was a fact of life.

The other part though, he still felt *limber* enough, even if the pistons didn't always fire quite as well--and he couldn't think of the last time he'd even had a cold, and definitely the Bingham business and those torturous bus rides where you barely slept a wink and had your equilibrium turned upside down--that would have tested you for sure, meaning the immune system.

Mentally--that could be another story--you had plenty eating at you there . . . in fact he was thinking again the other day, how maintaining a list

had been hard enough, but then when you start going *off script*, as it seemed like he'd been doing plenty lately . . . *forget* about it.

People have no idea.

But back to the physical part . . . Holy Toledo now, this was December 20th already . . . and what did that mean?

Well . . . and he was hanging onto the side of the pool, and starting to count backwards on his fingers . . . and something just dawned on him . . . *God dang it.*

He'd been working it in his head originally, the timeline, that he'd gotten his bad news in Billy's office a month after the 49ers lost to the Seahawks in the final home game last season, and he placed it like that because he'd unfortunately *been* at that game in Santa Clara, having accepted a free ticket against his good judgment.

And then he remembered telling Manusuco, the third day down here--after he'd had to deal with some guy's bicycle on the pier--a little bit about his situation.

Which he probably shouldn't of, but the booze and the excitement of new beginnings got the better of him . . . in any case he'd told Ned it was the *day* after that game that he'd found out, a Monday afternoon, which meant that was when he received his death sentence--and when they talk to you about experimental therapies 5 minutes after breaking your diagnosis to you, you *know* you've been death-sentenced.

At any rate, it was clear now that he'd gotten confused on the dates, which meant he'd been walking around these last few months *over-stating* in his mind the in-the-clear time frame, and this was pissing him off . . . and he got out of the darn pool and dried off enough to check his phone . . . and it took a while, and you thought you *had* it but then you had to figure it out against some *other* event, and this was the problem with keeping lousy records, which in Chris's case typically meant *no* records.

He finally straightened it out and the outcome wasn't quite as deliriously exciting as his earlier version.

He'd gotten his news on Monday, February 6th, and of course we're talking this year, 2017 . . . so now going back to the fingers, you've got *10 and a half months*, more or less.

Still . . . given the multitude of *alternatives* at this point, Chris figured he'd take it.

Of course you still needed to low-key it, meaning you weren't going to find some bridge and go bungee-jump off it in celebration . . .

So, moving forward . . . he dove back in the pool. That result was unfortunately the same, the entry was screwed up and he was getting smashed around here for no reason . . . but the bigger picture, as he rolled onto his back and floated for a while, looking at the sky with the tops of the palm trees blending in, was yeah, you *could* be somewhere worse.

Some guy he'd seen once or twice but never spoken to showed up and dove in, and of course a perfect effort, barely a splash, and Chris said, "This has to be unseasonably warm, right? Even by southern California standards?"

"I'm not so sure bud," the guy said. "First of all you've got your global warming asserting itself now. Second, we may be experiencing the outset of a 38-year cycle. If you look back through history, you'll see repeated examples."

Chris regretted opening his big mouth, and he asked the guy if he'd ever seen a UFO, nothing to lose and he was probably the type . . . and the guy got started with a long-winded answer there too, which Chris kind of blocked out when heard some ice clinking into a glass from one of the apartments and he realized Jeez, the day had gotten away from him a bit here, if we were already at Happy Hour.

The 38-year cycle guy finished his answer and got out of the pool and said good night and left---and thankfully the guy had just been here for a

dip, not to hang around, and the *good night* was odd with the sun still blazing, but forget that . . . since Ken was now crossing the parking lot toward the pool.

He saw Chris and waved to him before he opened the gate, so right away Chris supposed this was a decent sign.

“Yeah *Boss*,” Ken said. “How was your day?”

Now this was the thing. What Chris was worried about--and the reason the day probably got away from him, because he'd been trying to keep busy and not think about it--was how *Ken's* first day went on the new job.

Chris said, “Well, you seem to have a bounce in your step, at least.”

Ken came over to the edge of the pool, and looked around to make sure they had privacy, and he kept his voice down.

“Boss, I have to tell you . . . 400 dollars in your pocket can do that.”

“*Four* hundred?” Chris said.

“Yeah, why? You know, two . . . scenes.”

“Well yeah, okay . . . but I mean, what, you have the morning . . . session . . . and then, you take lunch and come back?”

“Yeah. What's wrong with that?”

“No, that's . . . fine. I just didn't realize, it would be quite that extensive.”

“Well when I got there this morning they asked me what I'd be available for. So naturally I told them for as much as you need me.”

Jesus.

“You dealt with *who* then?” Chris said. “The woman set you up? Middle-aged gal, what the devil was her name . . .”

“*Josephine* you mean? Yeah, she's great. Ned was there too, of course, but getting me set up and all was mainly the director, Anthony.”

Chris didn't want to ask, but couldn't help it. “Rory involved too? . . . With any of the directing, and such?”

“She didn’t appear to be on that end of it, that I noticed. I did work with her though, the morning session.”

This took some processing, for sure . . .

Was the kid saying . . . in the most basic terms . . . that what Chris understood *might* have happened . . . *really did*?

You gotta be friggin kidding me.

Ken said, “They told me it normally worked best when the actor starts off in their comfort zone, so working with someone they’ve met before.”

“You know something,” Chris said. “Your use of that expression . . . *working with* . . . it’s really starting to get on my nerves.”

“Boss I apologize. You had asked about Rory is all . . . and evidently it was understood that I *did* know her from the restaurant.”

“Bar,” Chris said.

Ken said, “It’s been all about me. Is everything okay on *your* end?”

“So *what*? Then the afternoon deal, it was someone you *didn’t* know?”

“Yes. Two actually . . . None of this is important. What is, as I was saying, 400 hundred dollars, and they have me booked the rest of the week.”

Ken was started to choke up, it seemed like, and here you were again, one of those couple of situations where he got too emotional and tried to thank you for stuff.

Chris cut him off and said, “Well you earned this.” Though he felt pretty funny saying it, it wasn’t exactly like Ken had presented a Master’s thesis and earned a fellowship at a prestigious university.

In fact the whole thing was out of the Twilight Zone.

But again, Kenny was nearly 25, and he was doing what guys that age *do*, which was *making choices*. Wasn’t it that simple?

So how can you be mad at the guy for any part of this . . . that was silly . . . it was you who initiated it, when you thought he might need a *boost* the other day, and that the chips would fall where they may.

Except Rory now . . . sheez.

And frankly Chris knew it might come down to this . . . not necessarily the Rory part, but that he could end up feeling like he was now . . . which was a little jealous.

That was something he said to Mancuso last night, after he'd told Ken about the job opportunity, when Ken seemed non-committal but at least said thanks and that he'd look into it.

At that point Ken said he was going out for a while, unless Chris needed him for anything, Ken awful casual, so you had no idea if the *employment tip* really registered . . . but meanwhile Chris headed down to the *Crow's Nest* to find Ned.

And luckily Ned was there, his usual spot, end of the bar by the window, in deep conversation with yet another guy Chris had never seen before in the place . . . and Chris went right over there this time, very direct, and told the other guy excuse me but I need this stool.

For all he knew the other guy was a *wise guy* too, like Mancuso probably was, but Chris wasn't in the mood and he gave the guy enough of a look apparently that something resonated and the guy told Ned he'd catch him later.

Chris got to it without fooling around. He told Ned that *he* wasn't going to be taking him up on the offer . . . down the Strand . . . the *Veteran's category*, or whatever they called it.

"Mature," Ned said, amused, wondering where this was going.

"So the guy I've been helping, you know who I'm talking about, he's been a little down on his luck."

"Good looking fellow," Ned said, finishing where Chris was going with it. "Send him in."

"You're sharper than I keep giving you credit for," Chris said. "I was that obvious?"

“You don’t have to worry about him,” Ned said. “We’ll break him in slow. If it’s not his cup of tea, no harm no foul.”

“I use that expression now and then *myself*. More general circumstances though.”

“Tell him 9:30 tomorrow,” Ned said.

“I’ll do my best. There’s two things though, why I came down here. Personally.”

“Yeah?”

“The first, you gotta to pay him. I mean any . . . work he might do. You need to pay him on the spot.”

“Relax, *Chrissie*. You know me well enough now, I’m not going anywhere. We’ll take care of him.”

“Like you’ve been taking care of the fitness trainer.”

“Lifeguard you mean. That’s the angle we were playing with him, cast him in post-beachy situations. It actually worked out nicely.”

“Unh-huh,” Chris said. “And *my* angle is, you don’t pay Kenny . . . next time you see me, I’ll be pulling a trigger in the middle of your forehead.”

Chris nodded for emphasis, but it was superfluous at the moment, since Ned could tell he was probably serious . . . and Chris definitely was, if this unlikely gig worked out at all and he found out Ned was stiffing Kenny, Chris planned on killing him for sure.

There were simply some lines you didn’t cross . . . so, fine, Ned seemed to get the picture, though a moment later he’s moved on and waving hello to someone who just walked in, and acting like none of this is any big deal.

Which it probably wasn’t. Think of the number of guys that likely said something to Ned, one time or another, like he just had.

The guy could roll with stuff, that's for sure, and Chris decided that was a good quality, and wondered could you acquire it or did you have to be born with it, though he supposed the answer wasn't cut and dry.

The key thing, on *his* part, he got off his chest what he came down here for.

"What's the *second* thing?" Ned said.

"Say *what* now?"

"You said there's two things. Why you went to the major time and trouble to work this little rendezvous."

"Oh . . . Yeah, the second one, it's more abstract I guess."

"Oh no."

"You know what? It doesn't even tie in, it's not important, so forget it."

"You're reaching out," Ned said. "90 seconds ago you're going to clip me, now you're looking for a little love."

"Not *love* . . . just, I don't know . . . the whole thing sit right? In your view?"

And he really did have no idea why he was bringing this up to Ned, except that on some level he respected the guy's opinion. Illogical as that sounded.

"What you're doing," Ned said, "wrestling with it, that's not uncommon."

"It's not?"

"No . . . I can tell the kid's like a son to you. You don't want him necessarily getting mixed up in something. Which is understandable."

"Oh."

"But the other element you're introducing, and it's a bi-product of the industry, no way around it . . . you're not *personally* loving the idea of him banging people while you're on the sidelines. Makes you feel over-the-hill."

Chris didn't say anything, but yeah, that *was* bugging him.

“It don’t work like that,” Ned says. “Believe me, it’s a business, first and foremost.”

Chris figured he better retire this subject, but admittedly Ned had put a few words of wisdom out there, and he thanked him and said hello to Cindy on the way out and walked back up the hills to the apartment.

Anyhow . . . that was last night . . .

Now back at the pool Ken was saying, “Boss, like I said, I’ve got a wad of cash. Let’s go out to PF Chang’s.”

“Why there?” Chris said.

“I like it there. They give you those pagers, and you can wander around outside until they call you.”

“A lot of places do that. It’s a dumb gimmick.”

“I know, but the food’s great. I’ve only been there twice, and I’ve felt guilty about the prices. That won’t happen tonight.”

“How would you feel if we include Marlene?” Chris said.

“By all means . . . But let’s go, get out of here now, I’m ravenous.”

“Double sessions can do that, I guess,” Chris said, but Ken was halfway upstairs already and didn’t hear him, so Chris reluctantly climbed out of the pool and got a move on it, and Marlene wasn’t home but they tracked her down and she said she’d meet them there.

And it worked out okay, they didn’t need the pagers because it was a Wednesday night and they walked right in, people apparently busy with Christmas around the corner.

Halfway through the meal Ken told Marlene he’s got a new job and things have turned around for him, and Marlene congratulated him and had the good sense not to ask follow-up questions, and what could you say, it *was* good to see the kid happy again . . . and the cheque came and Chris couldn’t help it, you *still* weren’t going to let the kid pay, so he grabbed it before Ken could, except Ken grabbed it back, so Chris had to give him a semi-serious look and re-grab it, and he took care of it.

Chapter Ten

Laying there Thursday morning Chris wondered did they still put MSG in Chinese food, or was there some other reason he was waking up late and groggy and all-around out of it?

He figured you could resolve it with some serious caffeine, eventually, but so much for the fancy new routine of getting down to the beach by 7 and power-walking it the mile and a half north to where the surfers were going at it.

And Jeez, wow, it was close to 11 when he finally got out of bed, that was embarrassing, and Ken of course was long-gone if the deal was you got there every day at 9:30.

And man . . . keeping up that pace, 5 days a week, or even more, how long *could* you . . . and it could certainly turn into a *torrid* pace at that, if yesterday's schedule was any indication.

Chris reminded himself it was none of his business now, plus, the other way to look at, if Ken only stopped into the Strand house minimally, say *twice* a week, he was already making more than grinding it out 9-5 in the basement of the library.

Chris couldn't help wondering for a moment how Emma might react to Ken's new endeavor . . . and it could be amusing to be a fly on the wall in that situation.

Chris thought of a guy and a girl he knew in high school, and the two of them hooked up pretty convincingly back then, and then a few years ago on Facebook it's clear the guy has become a born-again Christian, and soon enough there's the same girl (a middle-aged woman now of course) firing

dozens of postings at him, trying to get him, in her view, to come to his senses.

Come to think of, neither of those two people, nor the others who were weighing in on that Facebook post, showed up at the 25th reunion . . . but you couldn't worry about that.

The point with Emma was she'd taken on a bit of a role as Ken's protector, but she also was pretty clearly *into* the guy and maybe had done something about that, so it was a strange dynamic . . . and even if Ken didn't volunteer the information, she was bound to figure it out sooner or later, especially if he announced he was quitting the library job.

So who knows, you might have some fireworks there.

Again though, not his problem right now.

He poured himself a second cup of coffee, and that dull ache behind the eyeballs was started to dissipate, and he plopped down in the recliner and fired up the laptop.

And yeah, there was that internal reminder, don't be leaving tracks, and as usual the Chronicle site didn't want to open smoothly, it was hopelessly clogged up and they should be ashamed of themselves, a once-proud major metropolitan daily.

Obviously the thing was free online, so how critical could you be . . . except *don't* put anything on for free then, make everyone pay and do it right, since right now you're just irritating people.

So forget the Chronicle, and he went to the Bay City Beat . . . and admittedly yes you should be concerned spending too much time on *that* site logged in from your home computer, since there was the small issue of having sent *them* the post cards . . . but this wasn't the best day to be logical, and you weren't going to walk into town right now to look something up that was probably innocuous, and he said screw it and clicked on the link.

And at the top of the page, Whoa Baby.

**North Beach Brothers Say Car Burglar Got Lucky
by Bronson Northfleet**

Wednesday, December 20th, 2017 - Two San Francisco brothers, who reportedly apprehended and detained an alleged car thief Tuesday night on Russian Hill, told the Bay City News today that they went 'easy' on the individual.

"When you spot something like this," said Lucco V's deli owner Tony Vigliotti, "it makes you sick. I was about to--you know--take matters more into my own hands. Luckily for the SOB, my brother reigned me in."

Tony's brother Dominic concurred. "These low-lifes come in our neighborhood, and start messing with our vehicles, and terrorizing our people? Unh-uh, no more."

The Vigliotis' actions resulted in the arrest of 23-year-old Derek C. Washington, of Bayview. Washington has been charged with trespassing and intent to commit burglary, both misdemeanors.

Tuesday night's incident occurred on the 800 block of Lombard Street, between Jones and Taylor. The block is at the base of the tourist portion of Lombard, known as 'the crookedest street in the world'.

Police had announced stepped-up plainclothes patrols in the neighborhood, following a string this fall of multiple auto break-ins and strong-armed robberies, many involving tourists, and several in broad daylight.

"What I would have done to this guy," Tony Vigliotti said, "was broke his neck. I had him in a full-nelson, and things were headed that way."

Dominic said, “Of course then *he’d* be the guy locked up standing trial. So that wasn’t about to happen. But you get frustrated.”

“You do,” Tony said. “The cops, I guess they made an effort, but it seemed like they had better things to do than waste time with parked cars.”

Dominic added that he walks that block every day, often multiple times, and hasn’t noticed any increased police presence.

“Our mom still lives over that way,” he said. “It’s where we were raised. Some scum think they’re going to come in now and take over the neighborhood? No sir, it ain’t gonna happen.”

Lieutenant Ray McCaulkin, head of the SFPD property crimes division, played down the incident, and said that while a potential perpetrator may have been stopped, North Beach, as well as other key neighborhoods, is being diligently protected.

“Citizens can become frustrated,” McCaulkin said, “and we get that. Fortunately for everyone, the Viggliotti situation didn’t escalate.”

McCaulkin also dismissed any connection between the as-yet at-large killer of a Daly City man facing auto burglary charges, and rising tensions that may have contributed to this incident.

“We see this as a one-shot deal,” McCaulkin said.

Well . . . that was sure a little something, wasn’t it. If you started the day slightly foggy and sitting there babying yourself, this would knock all that out of the park in a hurry, wouldn’t it?

Let’s get a slight handle on this.

These two fellows, regular hard-working Italian guys from the neighborhood, and Chris knew the exact type, he’d gone to school with a

ton of them--they get sick and tired of the neighborhood being dumped on, and the tourists up the hill not being able to relax anymore--and despite some big talk from city hall, they don't see any improvement.

So it sounds like the *one* guy, he got the adrenaline going and almost lost his mind, and *no kidding*, Chris thought, *tell me about it*.

That was the key difference though wasn't it . . . whether it was putting an arm lock on you so you couldn't go further with a guy . . . or a little voice in your head, which went off in people before something got to a point of no return.

We're talking *logical* people . . . and Chris really did wonder if *he* had a missing chromosome and was *never* going to be entirely logical, when you keep reading stories about guys just as upset as he is, for all the same reasons, but managing to stop just in time.

Something else interesting in the article was they didn't mention either of his letters. And they didn't ask, or quote, the two brothers on whether the letters had any influence on them.

This might have been intentional, maybe the police working an angle, or it might have been an oversight . . . or the third possibility, which Chris wasn't crazy about, his letters had become irrelevant.

In fact, maybe at this point they didn't even think they were authentic, just ramblings from some crackpot.

In the actual Zodiac case, for example, the guy tears off part of the poor cabdriver's shirt and includes bits of it with his letters to the newspapers. Nothing more legitimizing than that.

He skimmed the article once more and decided this is enough now, no need to dawdle on the site . . . and he tried the Chronicle but it was still log-jammed, and it seemed like a good time to start your day, get some air, maybe even resurrect your routine, even though it was after 12 already.

What stopped him was an absent-minded browse of the front page of the Oakland Tribune, and son of a bitch, unbelievable--though really *not*,

that was the bad thing about it, it *was* believable--there'd been another hold-up in Berkeley last night, electronics stolen from two people, but worse, one of them hospitalized.

Okay, next paragraph it said the guy was held for observation but thankfully released this morning, from Alta Bates Medical Center, where he'd been taken following the incident, in which he was pistol-whipped, according to police.

Chris was thinking, wait a second, wouldn't college be *out* by now up there, for Christmas vacation . . . and a little further along the article did reference that, with a campus spokesman telling you that remaining students need to be extra vigilant during the break, since logically there are less students for criminals to target.

What?

We really are losing our minds in this country, Chris thought.

Instead of making sure these guys are caught and locked up and the key thrown away, and not relaxing until it happens . . . how can *that* be your reaction?

Chris looked to see if there was anything in the Tribune about the North Beach guys, and for good measure he checked the San Jose Mercury news as well, and there was nothing either place . . . and of course he wasn't just checking for *that*, he was looking for any further reaction to his letters, since they were apparently a non-issue already in the Bay City Beat, but there was no mention of the letters anywhere else either.

And here's where you exercised a little common sense at least, even though you were getting revved up.

You didn't search for Sullivan and McCall and the Mel business, or anything else . . . and Jeez, he'd really never gone very far checking the *Nevada* papers on the *park* guy, had he, at least not since he'd gotten back to LA.

But any of that would have to wait for a more secure computer, and even then part of him hated to look that stuff up period, because there might be something *there* . . . and you couldn't control it at this point, so why lose sleep unnecessarily.

The Berkeley mess though now . . . added on.

Did no one get his message, which he thought he made *pretty darn clear* in Letter Number 2?

He kept thinking of them as letters and they were post cards obviously, but that shouldn't diminish the impact, should it?

He couldn't recall the exact wording at the moment of Number 2, but the message was essentially you're taking your chances if think you can keep robbing people at Berkeley, because you got *me* in the picture now.

Which nobody cared about it, it sounds like.

The bad guys didn't read the papers, but word got around, you would think . . . but not sufficiently, obviously.

God *DAMN* it.

Now he was hungry, which always happened when he got mad, and there was a half a burrito in the fridge you could microwave and take the edge off with, and he was sitting there finishing the last few bites thinking what *now* . . . and the simple conclusion was you better write another letter.

You had to wonder if the authorities changed their *mind* on the first two. Their initial reaction, at least the public one, was they were authentic, and linked, but maybe something got thrown into the mix and they dismissed them.

This was going to take a little figuring out . . . and Chris got back in the recliner and started to write something up, a few lines on Word Pad, so you can form your thoughts before you go out and find yet a third post card . . . which was starting to become a significant pain in the ass. . . and which you didn't want to pick up around here obviously, such as at those couple of gift shops half a block up from the pier that sold all kinds of

mostly useless junk, including post cards that could no doubt probably be traced to right there.

He'd written the first couple of lines, which were

This is Me speaking again.

It's a shame you don't take me seriously.

And then it was the burrito kicking in, or the aggravation, or the left-over issue from last night . . . and he felt his eyes getting heavy and next thing his head was tipping to the side and he was back in no-man's land.

The jiggling of the shoulder woke him up.

"What are you doing, sleepy head?" Marlene said.

Chris jerked away and there was a sudden moment of panic, that she'd seen what he'd written, but very luckily the screensaver had kicked in, which it did after a half hour with no activity, and it covered the screen now, someone on a bicycle in Italy near a canal, no idea how *that* screensaver got chosen, but thankfully it did the job, and Chris sat up and closed the laptop.

"Oh, hi there," he said to Marlene.

"I hope you didn't mind, the door was ajar and all."

"I never mind. But what if I was coming out of the shower, or something?"

"Speaking of which," she said, "so Ken's first day . . . it *did* go okay then?"

Chris said, "That's some transition. You could have pursued it with him directly, last night in the restaurant of course . . . but in a nutshell, it sounds like he passed the audition with flying colors."

"Ah," she said. "Were there . . . like . . . any details?"

“A lot of them. He said it was a solid workplace, they take care of the employees, and that everyone’s been polite and professional so far. Why?”

“I meant more, the details of the . . . film shoot.”

“Oh *those*. Jeez, you’re twisting my arm here.”

“No that’s fine then,” she said, “I was just curious, I guess.”

It took Chris a lot of years to finally realize that women can get down and dirty with their thoughts, every bit as much as guys can.

He said, “Well, nothing wrong with a healthy libido.”

“I can imagine,” she said.’

“I mean *you*,” Chris said.

That seemed to throw Marlene off balance, and she started to turn a little red.

She said, “You’re three-quarters a pretty nice guy, but one-quarter a son of a bitch.”

“I know, I’m bad. You have to take me with a grain of salt . . . bottom line, they apparently started Ken off with someone he’d encountered before, I guess they have a thing about comfort zones . . . The nightcap, he’d didn’t know the people.”

“*People?*”

“Unh-huh. That’s what he said.”

“Gosh . . . but just so I understand, the second activity was at *night?*”

“No. *Nightcap* is from baseball, it’s what you call the second game of double-header.”

“I see . . . Well did he say anything more about the *people?*”

“Okay, that’s going to have to be it, this line of questioning . . . What else you got going on today?”

“Not a lot, unfortunately. This teaching job search, it’s proving to be fairly frustrating, if you want my honest answer.”

“That’s no problem,” Chris said. “You just need to think outside the box.”

“Okay I’m listening.”

“Well that’s something you can talk to Kenny about, refining your approach. I mean I can chime in as well. The key always of course, find out what the doofuses are doing, and do the opposite.”

“Interesting. And the *doofuses* being the other teacher applicants?”

“Your competitors, yeah . . . I was almost going to bring up an old story, where the guy *deals* with his competitors . . . I don’t want to bore you, I’ve told the story before, and I can get long-winded.”

“Not to *me* you haven’t,” she said. “How did your friend address his job competitors?”

“Not my *friend*, some guy in a book. *Made-up*. And the guy’s a sociopathic nutcase . . . but my point is, there’s some logic to the principle.”

“Which is what?”

“Okay . . . there’s a job available, very specific, a dying industry, paper mills . . . anyhow there’re only a handful of people qualified for the particular position. So *first*, the guy puts an ad in the industry newsletter.”

“Hmm.”

“The ad is for a similar job but a *fake* one, and he takes out a PO box and requires the applicants’ resumes to be sent there.”

Marlene said, “So he’s going to figure out how many others are going to apply for the *real* job.”

“That . . . and get their addresses. Once he obtains all that information, where they live and so forth, he kills them off, one by one . . . It was doable, because as I said it was so specialized, you only had, like a half dozen qualified applicants.”

“My God, you can’t be serious.”

“What’d I just *say*? . . . This didn’t really *happen*. This is a *story*.”

“I know, but just the concept.”

“In *his* demented brain, what’s wrong with the *concept*? In the end, he’s the last man standing, so to speak, and he’s the only one who applies for the job.”

“Does he *get* it then?”

“Pretty sure he does, yeah, but then something happens that puts a damper on it I think. That’s irrelevant though. You’re missing the big picture, asking a question like that.”

“Well excuse *me*, then,” she said.

“What you’re wondering by now though, how all that applies to you. Getting hired by the LA Unified School District. Is that what they call it?”

“In LA proper yes. At this point I’ll settle for any number of districts.”

“Well like I said, that’s just an *example* of going outside the box, not suggesting that approach . . . Kenny is pretty clever at this stuff. He surprised the heck out of *me* a couple times. Let him chew on it, maybe he’ll have a recommendation.”

“Meaning . . . as opposed to how a doofus would proceed.”

“Exactly right,” Chris said. “The other thing . . . that frustration you mentioned earlier?”

“Yes?”

“Well, did that apply strictly to your job search struggles . . . or to other avenues as well.”

Marlene moved just a little closer, and Chris could feel it maybe happening, Holy Smokes . . . and he had to admit, if you *scripted* the day ten different ways, this wouldn’t have been part of it.

“Other avenues,” Marlene said, and the words came out slightly warbled, and Chris pushed himself up off the recliner and took a good look at her, and she kept her eyes locked onto his and didn’t budge, and after a minute she took his arm and guided him back down the hall.

And this was the thing, you never *knew* . . . and son of a gun, Marlene revealed herself to be a bit of a live wire, and Chris found himself admiring

that fact . . . plus, the deal he'd been a little confused about earlier . . . the other woman part . . . a definite non-factor this afternoon.

After a while Chris said, "You're going to laugh, but I think I might have tweaked my back."

Marlene did laugh a little, though her head resting on his chest at the moment muffled it. She said, "Is that right?"

"What, you're going sarcastic on me now? What if I can't make it down the hills?"

"*What* hills?"

"Into town. The *only* ones around here."

"I still haven't done that yet. Probably won't be on my priority list."

"Well then you're missing out . . . When I lived in San Francisco, I went down to the Marina Green every day. That wasn't bad, admittedly, you're on the Bay and there's Alcatraz and you have ships coming in from China, and there's a route that puts you under the bridge."

"That's a spectacular bridge," she said. "Do you know the official name of the color?"

"Can't say that I do."

"Orange Vermilion."

Chris stroked her hair. "I see."

"Unh-huh. It happened by accident. The primer was *close* to that color, and it gave them the idea. Back then, nearly all bridges were gray, silver or black."

Chris said, "Well you really do know your stuff there."

"I used to live in San Francisco myself. I tried to learn as much history as I could. It seemed the responsible thing to do."

She was rubbing his mid-section now but starting to angle her hand a little funny, and Chris was thinking that wasn't going to be a good idea at all. Jeez, a guy only had so much energy--at least *most* guys, you would think--the intimidating activity on the Strand notwithstanding.

Meanwhile, a little surprising about the San Francisco connection, he wasn't necessarily thrilled when he ran into one of those, and you definitely weren't going to get into *what street did you live on* and *did you happen to know so-and-so*, since those things rarely added a positive to the situation, and sometimes could backfire.

Marlene was saying something about Muir Woods, how that was her favorite getaway spot on the weekends when she had time, and Chris couldn't argue with her there, he was picturing the giant redwoods and the damp ferns and the soft beds of needles under your feet, the smell of the ocean too . . .

And she was saying it's a shame it's gotten so popular and you have to make a reservations now . . .

"Oh *SHIT*," Chris said, bolting up off the bed and finding his watch on the nightstand.

"My Lord," Marlene said. "Is everything okay?"

"Ah, yeah," he said, but putting on his clothes real fast. "Not a big deal . . . I mean I was supposed to *meet* a guy, is all, I lost track of the time."

"Well who is it? Can you simply call them?"

"Nah, it'll be fine. An old high school person actually, in town for the day."

"In *what* town?" she said. "Los Angeles, or right here, do you mean?"

She sure liked to narrow shit down didn't she, though he was that way himself of course, but the problem was you had to keep adding on to your answers.

"He's one of those rare guys with no cell phone," he said.

"You're kidding."

"Nope. A back to the land type dude, even in high school he was showing signs of that."

And this was getting ridiculous, but you needed to get a move on in the worst way, and Chris told her North Hollywood was where he had to be,

and to make herself comfortable, and stay as long as she liked . . . and that there was some tasty kung pao chicken left over the fridge.

And of course now she asked what restaurant it was from and what was his favorite Chinese place, and dang she was talking a lot, and he said Big Wok for both, even though the leftover kung pao chicken *wasn't* from there, it was from last night at PF Chang's--and he was out the door.

He got in the car and debated for about two seconds and decided the 405, *forget* it at this hour, it being 3:32 and your appointment in Santa Monica at 4, and PCH forget that too, it was enough of a disaster limping along those couple blocks the other day, and that wasn't even rush hour . . . so he swung down through town and picked up Highland to where it became Vista Del Mar, and you hugged the ocean all the way down to the wetlands preserve, and then you darted over to Marina Del Rey and took your chances on the city streets from there.

Chris never liked to speed, and that limited him, but he stayed as aggressive as he could within the law, and he definitely didn't miss any stop lights that were makeable . . . and after all was said and done he parked outside the therapist's office at 4:13.

This being the free coupon, the 45-minute consultation that he tore off the menu of the Hermosa pizza joint . . . and he booked it online and didn't know a dang thing about what he was getting himself into, except that it was with a Doctor Stride.

It was a third floor office unfortunately so he went flying up the steps and barged into the waiting room, and there were two other people sitting there, neither of them looking that solid mentally, at first glance, if he had to make guess . . . but then he thought he was in the wrong place until the receptionist straightened things out, that it was an office suite type deal, *multiple* therapists, and *his* showed up a minute later and introduced himself, and Chris tried to joke that now the guy only had to put up with

him for a half hour, since he'd screwed up the time, and the guy smiled politely but Chris had the impression he wasn't amused.

The more important thing than the therapy appointment though, was here he was in Santa Monica, sufficiently far from MB he was hoping, meaning another post card might place you in the *area* but not narrow you down beyond that.

So when he finished his session, aside from being starving--which all that questioning and give and take must have precipitated--the issue was where would you go to get a post card around here?

Chris decided down at the promenade would be the best, the 3rd Street outdoor mall they tried to create back in the late '80s, which he always gave a B-minus to. It was pleasant enough to stroll around, sure, but you lost the individualized flavor of old Santa Monica.

Meaning it was full of tourists down there, except today that part was good, plenty of knick-knack shops with post cards, the first one he looked at was a photo of thousands of people mobbing the beach and pier on some summer holiday, everyone looking like a dot.

And there was a place that had large ones as well, not the super oversized version he'd found at Fisherman's Wharf and sent the first time around but bigger than normal, meaning a little more room to express your thoughts. He went through the same routine again, the driving gloves, adding some mints and a comb to the order so the large post card wouldn't stand out by itself, and this was getting pretty dang old.

But like before, it was already postage-paid, so nothing to lick, no DNA in that regard--not that anyone *licked* stamps anymore, but still, *attaching* anything seemed like one more risk--and Chris drove up Wilshire to a park he remembered not far from the old deli Zucky's.

Now *that* was a deli . . . that stint back in New Jersey reinforced that if you want a pastrami sandwich, especially where they leave enough of the

fat in so they don't strip out the flavor, that it was a no-brainer, east versus west . . . with the one exception in the west of Zucky's.

Man that was good, and unfortunately long gone, and to make it worse, it was still boarded up as Chris passed by heading east, nobody figuring what to do with it apparently, and the classic overhead sign was still there.

The park was quiet and there was a cement table with attached benches where you could play chess or cards and Chris laid out the post card and starting gathering his thoughts.

He hated to over-think this kind of thing, especially when you're not even sure anyone's paying attention--and that was the other thing, make sure they *do* pay attention this time--but the bottom line being, you can torture yourself to work it just right . . . when the *first* words that popped into your head on instinct might have been just as good.

So Chris wrote:

ANNOUNCEMENT

This is Doug Lewellyn of Animal Resources.

I gave Towne a friendly chance but he didn't run with it.

There will be no more chances given in Berkeley.

It's in everyone's best interest that you

pass the word.

Your Friendly Friend

Hmm. There was more space on the card, since he had the big version this time . . . but was there anything else you really needed to *add*?

Again you could rack your brain for that final tweak, but it wasn't worth it, if this didn't jar anybody awake up there--newspapers, police or public--then forget it, he'd picked the wrong method . . . and maybe who was he kidding all along anyway, the only way that works, universally, is being hands-on.

But give it one more try, and now the thing you might as well do since you're going to the trouble anyway, was hunt down the main post office, and Chris found it, 7th near Olympic Boulevard, and he saw they had a late pickup that night which gave you the best shot at speeding up the darn process.

And of course the *chance* he was referring to, that was exactly right, all Jeramaiah had to do was follow through and volunteer at the shelter . . . and the Doug Lewellyn of Animal Resources person, that was how he introduced himself on the phone to the aunt, or whoever it was that answered.

So the police really *should* be able to put two and two together this time. There was no piece of a bloody shirt included, like with the Zodiac, but this should be proof enough that he's the actual *guy*, and he knows what the hell he's talking about.

Right? . . . You can at least hope.

Chris got back in the car after mailing the post card. Now what? The night was relatively young, and it was always good to be on the lookout for some kind of adventure.

On the other hand, he was worn out. It might be partly Marlene, admittedly. The therapist too though, that had been a bit of a *trip*, like the hippies used to say. Plus this final business, having to compose a worthwhile message and send it off. Not to mention keep your dang hands and saliva and anything else off the whole shebang.

Trying to do the right thing, there was a lot to it, and on an evolving basis . . . and once again people had no idea what you went through, not that you expected them to.

So yeah, going home sounded good . . . except he got a little turned around and ended on Pico, and wouldn't you know there was a ribs place that didn't look bad at all. The place had a fusion element to it, and that part was silly, but even so, how bad could the ribs be?

The restaurant wasn't crowded and they gave him a nice table, plenty of room to spread out, and he opened the LA Times someone had discarded in that therapist's office . . . and wouldn't you know, on page 5, main section, *boom*, there is a reference to his letters.

This got his attention in a hurry, and he read the article carefully, and it wasn't anything new, just a rehash of the cops up north thinking the first two letters might be legit.

Which was interesting, since now they *didn't* seem to be thinking that . . . but either way the story got picked up, that's the way the news business works, someone at the copy desk down here thinks it might interest a few people, and they're short one article for the next day's edition, so they go with it.

The article wasn't word for word, and in fact re-reading it Chris could see they combined the *two* articles, one from the Beat and one from the Chronicle, but they did put their own spin on it at the end, leaving out what that *expert* from Stanford said about criminal profiling, and instead substituting their own guy from UCLA, who said essentially the same thing, but concluded with:

“If these two communications are legitimate and from the perpetrator of the Daly City homicide, my initial assessment is we are looking at a P-A serial killer, in other words *Power-*

Assertive, as opposed to the any of the three other recognized types.”

Hold your horses for a second.

Chris hadn't picked it up the first time, but what the heck was *this* now, some guy labelling him a *serial* killer?

Ooh boy.

It just pointed out, most of the *experts* really didn't know *jack*.

It was too bad, as well, that the North Beach guys weren't included in the article, that would have been more interesting and maybe caused a few bad guys down here to think twice, though the way it was going, probably not.

Either way, you couldn't control these things, and he folded up the paper and got back to the business of the meal, and yes there was some fusion being attempted in this place but his instincts were right, it's hard to wreck ribs.

Chapter Eleven

Also on Thursday, but 12 hours earlier in Bel Air, Harrison opened the morning paper, which normally hit the driveway at 5:20, he could hear the thump, and for three years now he had the same delivery guy and the guy was good--better and more punctual than most of the hoity-toity ones he dealt with on the global investment front, in fact.

So Harrison took care of him every year at Christmas, 500 bucks, it seemed the right thing to do, and meanwhile he'd gotten acclimated to the *thump*, and he used it to start his day.

He was showered and body-shaved and lotioned-up and had done his *50-Trifecta* straight out of bed before that--50 situps, 50 push-ups, and 50 pullups, on a setup he had in the basement . . . though the pull up part was only 8, those were tough, but what the fuck, you don't let one little number stop you from *calling* it a 50-Trifecta, since you've earned it . . . damn *right* you have.

And he sat down at the kitchen table, and the birds were chirping outside and everything was good, except . . . it was the housekeeper's day off yesterday, which meant she wouldn't have washed and prepared his strawberries and set them aside for him in the refrigerator.

And that's what he really felt like right now. Fresh strawberries, exactly 12 of them, hand-selected to be the right color red, served in the correct silver goblet. He'd given the housekeeper one of those paint-color cards from the hardware store to make sure she stayed consistent, that the *qualifying* strawberries never got out of range, not too crimson, and not too orange.

Just right.

To top them off, Harrison would measure an eighth of a cup of fresh cream--specially produced organic and grass-fed from a small family dairy in Altadena and delivered here twice a week.

Now, everything was just screwed up, wasn't it?

He opened the fridge and took out the cream, no carton for that stuff, instead an old-fashioned glass bottle . . . and he tilted it back and took a healthy guzzle right out of it . . . and that felt a little better, marginally . . . but regardless, that was breakfast.

After all you don't want to be putting on weight. Thinking about it a bit more . . . that was why he lost the club squash match to the guy, *wasn't* it? He couldn't move effectively, because of the obscene extra poundage he was undoubtedly carrying that night.

Fuck a *duck*.

So Harrison opened the newspaper this morning not in the best mood. He took his normal care in folding the paper into precise thirds, lengthwise, and then sub-folding it into twelfths, which isolated each section of the page and minimized outside interference.

Once he got today's edition organized correctly, his manicured fingertips equalizing the seams, he started to feel better . . . back in control . . . and he allowed himself to see what was going on in the damn world, if anything, that people on TV were constantly being bent out of shape about.

Washington . . . trade tariffs . . . this guy Mueller . . . China . . . Russia . . . North Korea . . . some idiot Senator . . . then LA stuff, water issues, new emissions standards threatening San Joaquin valley producers . . . what a bunch of useless *hogwash* it all was.

So he kept folding and unfolding pages, and then finally something interesting.

And using his index finger, line by line, Harrison read the article on some stuff going on up north, some guy sending in post cards, and law enforcement being shaken up by it apparently, and Harrison thinking *the*

person, whoever it was, is clever enough to be breaking their balls, pardon my French.

What he liked best was the part at the end, the evaluation from the civilian authority, the college professor . . . specifically the P-A label the guy used.

Harrison decided right away--no more thought necessary--that *he* liked being a P-A.

Power-Assertive.

It didn't tell you what the others were, but his guess was those pertained to the *sicko* serial killers, no doubt at least one took a sexual angle--and that would mean goddamn disgusting perverts, so that was eliminated.

The other options that they could classify you as? Maybe some guy playing a game, a code? Or acting out because his childhood went all wrong? Or some *real* wacko category maybe, like some guy thinks he's going to be saved at Heaven's gate according to how many he's taken with him.

No matter. *He* was a P-A, and he liked everything about it, including the clipped sound when you said it out loud.

In and out and clean.

And you know something else?

That dude up there had the right idea all around. Why didn't *he* think of this?

It had been a good week, his portfolio was strong, the Asian markets were up . . . everything would survive if he took the day off today . . . and Harrison began to zero in a little more on the guy and his methods, and who the hell he might be.

He could be some crackpot, which one of the policeman in the article implied was possible--though someone was obviously taking him seriously enough to write it up in the newspaper.

That was *there* though, and this was *here*, and you didn't need to solve their problems up *there* . . . no, what you needed to do was compose your *own* letter. Yeah, baby.

And probably not an actual letter--no, definitely not--but a post card just like the guy was using. There was a reason for that, no doubt . . . You dodged the forensics, and you didn't inadvertently deposit any human matter into the envelope, because there *was* no envelope.

Maybe the guy hadn't even thought of all that, maybe the sucker just liked post cards--but regardless, *you* were thinking of all that, and *you* were on top of every detail and one step ahead of the simple-minded law enforcement population-- because you were a *P-A*, weren't you.

Unh-huh, dog, and a *righteously bad* one at that.

Harrison went out to the garage and pulled down the ladder that took you up into the loft, and it right away started to make him nervous, way too much stuff up here, and all these boxes without any labels so how could you even know what was in them, and that musty smell, and how could that be, the roof was only two years and water never got in here, not one drop, even with the *old* roof.

And Harrison felt himself hyperventilating and his arms were getting weak and his forehead was warm and the sweat was beading up on his neck . . . and he had to get out of there, and without thinking he came *forward* down the ladder and that was nearly a disaster before he caught himself and turned around the right way.

What he was trying to find, the whole purpose of all that torture, there was a travel trunk up there, an antique, and there were collections of postcards in there, he was pretty damn positive, from international vacations he used to take with the ex's.

But how could *all* the items have gotten so scattered and out of control . . . this was a huge concern now, a major weight, and he'd have to address it immediately . . . and he knew already what was going to happen,

that until all the shit up there gets resolved he's not going to get a good night's sleep. Not even close.

Luckily he had some *Xanax* in the kitchen cabinet next to the peanut butter, and he slugged down two of them and felt better, even before the real relief started, which it would to an extent. Though he'd almost had a panic attack there before he found the little plastic bottle, not from going up in the attic so much as fearing he might have *run out* of meds.

There was one more place he thought of looking, and this would be entirely miraculous and great, and he'd just remembered it . . . in the study, the bottom right desk drawer, there was stationary, and hopefully that box of cards he was thinking of was in among it.

Sure enough, *yes* . . . a series of cards, modern of course but of turn-of-the-century scenes . . . all 6 of them displayed on the front of the box, but the best thing about it, he'd never opened the thing, and it was still in the plastic shrink wrap.

So . . . what you did now, like any solid P-A, you got the latex gloves and were careful and precise and you picked one out--and that was tough, there were a lot of factors, but he settled on the Eiffel Tower, one of those old photos of it that they colorized, but the main point being that would imply someone falling *off* the thing or being pushed. Would it *not*?

So you'd be making your point . . . but your strongest point was with your words, and Harrison uncapped a felt tip pen and started writing:

Supermarket artist be careful in the night air.....

Park people, don't mix your coffee with your affair.....

Even with a headache, an elevator you should not share.....

More POWER of ASSERTION, you need to beware.....

Does that make sense?

(If not, stay tuned.)

That should do it, Harrison felt. Naturally the dim wits might not comprehend all or even *some* of it, but that wasn't his problem.

You made your stand, you threw them enough bones that they'd know it was *you*, even if they didn't admit it. You knew Ellie came from her supermarket job, you knew Dag and the lady were going at it in private . . . yada-yada-yada.

And you warned them.

Harrison capped the pen and stood back and evaluated his work . . . and he was entirely pleased with the effort, and all that was left was to send it off, and to whom . . . and that was easy, and the guy up north *did* have the right idea there, you get it into the hands of the media, and they *print* the damn thing for all to see. You don't waste it on the cops, that's for sure, unless you never want your message to see the light of day.

And that was a no-brainer, you send it to the same writer who wrote the article you're talking about that's staring you in the face, the letters up north business--and there you had it, and Harrison filled in the rest of the post card:

Magdalena Willingham, Reporter

Los Angeles Times

No need for an address, zip, none of that bullshit, let *them* figure it out.

Taking it a step further--there's no need for a stamp either, is there.

Somebody in the post office may not be thrilled, but you know what - what else are they going to do with it?

And that was a relief, being confident that it would get there either way, and you didn't have to risk using a stamp, that they might somehow be able to extract human matter off of . . . which Harrison didn't mind patting himself on the back for, and a detail unlikely the guy up north had thought about.

All that was left now, and you could put the matter to rest, was mail the Goddamn thing, and Harrison grabbed his windbreaker and was halfway out the door . . . but then catching himself . . . *and okay, I'll bring along the hatchet too, if you really need me to.*

The mailing part was easy, there was a pick-up box right down the road at the bottom of the hill, on the corner by the stoplight.

And *right* down there was a little misleading, since it was 3.2 miles winding your way from here out of the Bel Air hills to get there . . . but the bigger factor revealing itself to him now, you musn't mail your letter from too close to home, *must* you?

So it *wasn't* so simple, and this was suddenly a lot harder than you needed . . . and then Harrison remembered the jogger in Pasadena.

Except it wasn't *him* doing the remembering, entirely--he was being joined by a guy named Vic who jumped off the Verrazano-Narrows bridge in 1963 . . . and Vic reminded everyone now to bring their jogging stuff and join the fun.

So Harrison went back in and stripped down and started from scratch, and he put on the running shorts and sleeveless running jersey first, and then new *regular* clothes over all that, and he packed a bag with a fresh towel . . . and now he was all set.

Harrison and Vic drove out there--mostly Vic by now--and you took 134 East past Universal City and through Glendale, and the landscape opened up a bit, and Harrison/Vic was always a little paranoid about the

smog when you got this far out, the San Gabriel Mountains serving to retain it unfortunately, but today was breezy and clear so that was a big relief.

Harrison found a mailbox and took care of the post card, naturally handling matters with a fresh pair of latex gloves, and he was getting a little hungry frankly but Vic wanted to go jogging *now*.

But that wasn't going to work. And Harrison didn't care for Vic anymore, so what he did, and this was sneaky, when Vic made his landing off the Verrazano-Narrows bridge into Lower New York Bay, Harrison got hold of him at that point and held him under and drowned him.

So that was that . . . and an old railroad engineer emerged, his shoulders all full of soot, from the coal they used to power the steam locomotive, that was headed into Portland, Maine, and carrying a lot of fresh-cut timber from the northern woods . . . and the engineer's name was Bif, and Bif said eat first and relax, and even go to the movies if you need to and jog later . . . and that's what they did.

There was Dee's Diner in town, and that took care of lunch, but you weren't there yet, by any stretch, and Harrison/Bif found a movie complex, 16 or some god-awful number of theaters under one roof, all of them cut up into little boxes, Harrison/Bif thinking he could set up a projector in his own 'great room' on the first floor that he barely ever went into, and he'd blow these horrible excuses for theaters out of the water.

But they served their purpose, with Harrison/Bif bouncing around between them long enough to watch four full-length feature films, and Harrison couldn't tell you one thing that any of them were *about*, though Bif sat at rapt attention and enjoyed them all, and polished off two jumbo pop corns in the process.

That took you to just under 8 o'clock and Harrison/Bif noticed his lower lip beginning to twitch a bit, like it was starting to form a word and then kept stopping.

You needed one more hour, and a walk up and down the main drag took care of it, Pasadena one of the old-money family towns that really *did* roll up the sidewalks at 6:30, not unlike his original stomping ground, Darien, Connecticut, though there *were* a couple of pubs open, and you could hear the slobbering idiots yelling at some game that was on.

The gal jogged on the high school track like clockwork every night at 9pm, you could take it to the bank. Harrison/Bif wasn't positive, but they recalled her name being Nina.

The reason Harrison and Bif knew all this was Harrison had a client out here, Jewish guy, one of the little side streets not far from the Rose Bowl, and the guy lived like a pauper, the inside carpeting was worn out, and where it was the *worst*, the guy had put those fake astroturf mats on top of the areas, like people who live in trailer parks use as *doormats*.

The guy put out a couple of TV tables when Harrison came by, so they could spread out their paperwork.

Anyhow this dude was worth 3.2 billion dollars.

The *guy* wasn't important right now, but the last time he was out here maybe ten days ago, Harrison ended up juiced from the deal it looked like he and that guy were in the process of making . . . and he needed to unwind and found that high school track and walked a couple miles around it.

That's when he met the Nina-gal . . . she was running around it, hard, and of course she kept *lapping* him, but they had bits and pieces of conversation, and the gist of it was she was a triathlete, and trained here, the running portion, every night at 9.

6 days a week, rain or shine, and she took off Sunday.

Meaning *before* the track workout, she had done either the biking or swimming portion, and she explained to Harrison that she rotated days on those.

This gal needed a little more meat on her, Harrison did have to say that, she wasn't like out of a plague in Biafra or something, but put it this

way, the construction workers weren't going to be whistling at her ass if she was strolling around Brooklyn either . . . mainly because there *was* no ass.

Regardless . . . Harrison and Bif now were both admiring her dedication, and more importantly, her organizational skills . . . and whoops, *there she was* as they got out of the Mercedes and did a little limbering up, watching her pound out the miles around the old cinder track like a machine.

That's why she chose the high school, she'd said, as her nightly training headquarters, because it was one of the few facilities left that had the old-fashioned crushed red cinder, and not the man-made materials that all the rest of them had these days, and that in her experience the cinder surface was the easiest on her body.

Harrison/Bif wondered if she'd remember them, and sure enough she did, right away, coming off the near turn she smiled and waved hello.

The track wasn't lit directly, there weren't overhead stands of lights like you'd have at a game, but you had the lights from the parking lot and the school building spilling out onto the track, to an extent, though when someone was rounding the *far* turn, you couldn't make them out very well.

Bif informed Harrison he was sufficiently stretched out and no point dilly-dallying, let's get the show on the road . . . and that was good old Bif, he was hilarious and he hadn't changed one iota . . . and Bif/Harrison took off in a dead sprint, the *opposite* way Sally was running, which was counterclockwise . . . so *they* went *clockwise* and came up on her real quick, and Big figured nice and out of the blue too . . . and no one pulled out the garden hatchet yet but it sure looked promising, no one else on the track, no silly dog walkers, no one in the parking lot . . . and Sally made a slight gasp and abruptly altered her pace, and she followed the gasp with a little scream . . . and Harrison/Bif got blasted with a large dose of pepper spray that left them temporarily unable to see and barely able to breathe.

And then there was a “I’m sorry, you *surprised* me, I didn’t *know!*” from Sally, and she was on the other side of the track standing and watching, and Harrison/Bif got the eyes to where they could make her out over there, even though everything burned like a mother.

Harrison said, “What the *heck*, lady?”

“I’m so sorry,” came the far-away words again, “I just . . . reacted . . . I wasn’t expecting . . . someone running the opposite way . . . are you sure you’re all right?”

Harrison said he was fine, never better, and Bif added, don’t worry about it . . . and Sally waited until they’d made it back into the car . . . and as they drove away they could see the bitch through the fence, continuing her training as though nothing happened . . . and Bif told Harrison, fuck this shit, we’ll figure it out, regroup--*we’re P-A’s for crying out loud* . . . and next time we’ll be sure to make up for it and go *2 for 1*, and everyone’ll get their money’s worth.

Chapter Twelve

At approximately the same time on Thursday night, driving back to the apartment from Santa Monica, Chris had to concede that the therapy session had at least been interesting.

The guy'd been ticked off at first, a Dr. Stride, and told him as much.

"When a patient is dismissive of the time, as in your case," Dr. Stride said, "that tends to be reflective of a larger issue."

"You're talking . . . a *major* larger issue, like they study in psychology classes?" Chris said. "Or was it that I *dissed* you? Even though I hate that word."

"Yes, the second interpretation," the therapist said, "which can typically be precipitated by the individual's need to call *attention* to himself, through the tardy behavior pattern . . . That aside however, shall we begin, in the time we have left?"

Chris was thinking the guy didn't know what he was talking about, but he was tired and feeling chippy, and this Dr. Stride *meant* well, so you might as well blow off some steam, see what happens.

He said, "The reason I was late--someone took me to an Italian restaurant--now that I think about it, it started with *her* having a coupon--and that's where I picked up *your* coupon."

"Unh-huh," the doctor said. He was about 55, tweed jacket, the kind of guy who might have been smoking a pipe as he was listening, if that were still legal in an office like this.

Chris continued, "I tried to be discreet when I spotted your coupon, but she caught me. I had to concoct something, that *oh don't worry about this, it's not for me*."

“Who *was* it for? In your version.”

“This kid I help out . . . I keep calling him a *kid*, he’s in his *mid-twenties*.”

“Why do you feel he needs therapy?”

Chris said, “Okay you’re not listening to me now. I *faked* it being for the kid, the free appointment.”

“So you *don’t* feel he needs therapy.”

“Jesus. How should *I* know? That was what popped into my head, is all.”

“And she believed you. Your lady friend in the restaurant.”

“I guess . . . I mean she didn’t over-do the subject at that point . . . You’re starting to piss me off actually.”

“Not a problem,” Dr. Stride said, and he cleared his throat, and looked down at the chart. “Mr . . . Seely, how did the coupon make you twenty minutes late today?”

Chris thinking, Jeez, I was only *15* minutes late wasn’t I? Now he’s cutting it even shorter on me? Though with the freebie business, how could you blame the guy, really.

Chris said, “Cutting right to it, the chase. Which I know you guys hate, not massaging stuff . . . But fine, there was the coupon dinner, we hit it off okay, she stopped over a couple times, and wouldn’t you know, when I was supposed to be on my way here an hour ago, we were busy banging each other.”

Chris figured that should get a little rise out of the guy, but Dr. Stride said, “Do you think your friend--for discussion purposes I’ll call her Robin--”

“I’m not a fan of that name on a woman. It’s Marlene, the *real* person.”

“Is it possible,” Dr. Stride continued, “that Robin suspected you were pulling the coupon for yourself?”

“I mean I don’t know, I don’t *think* so.”

“And *that* led to an increased interest in you, on her part?”

“Where the frig are you *going* with this now?”

“The scenario that I suggest,” the doctor said, “is not uncommon.”

Looking at Chris and waiting. The way Chris pictured these psychologist-types conducting business. Throw something out there, no idea where *they’re* going with it, despite several decades of training, and let *you* put your foot in *your* mouth and react like you’re a disturbed individual.

Okay . . . he was being a little hard on the guy maybe.

Chris said, “I don’t like your scenario. That would mean, I showed vulnerability, or some nonsense, and she was intrigued by it . . . is *that* what it would mean?”

“It could. There are a scope of instigating factors, that may lead one individual to wish to explore another’s psyche.”

“*Fuck* this shit, then,” Chris said.

“Now that’s interesting you present your reaction that way,” Dr. Stride said. “Are you typically angry at women?”

“You know something? . . . I’m getting the distinct feeling here, you’re getting your rocks off jerking my chain . . . Am in the ballpark with that?”

The doctor made a note on the chart. “Your reaction is a bit concerning,” he said. “Do you ever find yourself wrestling with violent tendencies?”

“Not towards women, that’s for sure, and you’re barking way up the wrong tree if that’s where you’re going with this, my friend.”

“Toward men then?”

“Sure, depending.”

“I see. Dependent upon what factors?”

“If the guy deserves it . . . you need me to spell it out beyond that?”

“And what would constitute *deserving* it?”

“Okay here’s an example . . . let’s say you have a wife beater piece of scum. She has a restraining order, but you know those things never work. Plus people don’t change . . . *That* particular guy, you want to *injure*.”

“Unh-huh. And *have* you ever executed on such a premise?”

Jeez, that was a curious choice of words out of this guy--*executed*. Chris knew what he *meant*, which was more like *followed through on*, but still.

“Only the one time, and I regret it. The kid I’ve been telling you about. I went too far in assuming he was mistreating his girlfriend.”

“Unh-huh.”

Chris said, “Those unh-huh’s are getting obnoxious . . . What, you think that makes me think harder on my own, when you do that?”

“Please continue,” Dr. Stride said.

“You want to know the truth?” Chris said. “I feel like you got me jumping through hoops, but you’re not finishing anything *off* . . . We’re all over the place, nothing being zeroed in on.”

The doctor made another note. “What is it you feel should be zeroed in on?” he said.

“Okay . . . well since you ask, I’d like to know why I can’t maintain a normal relationship. That’d be one thing.”

“With men, or women.”

“*Women*. Jesus.”

“Unh-huh. Tell me about it.”

“Ooh boy . . . And this is just between us, right?”

The doctor nodded.

Chris said, “Well last year, I had a medical thing. A pretty major curve ball thrown at me . . . what am I talking about, *this* year. The *beginning* of it.”

“I see. And that affected your ability to maintain a relationship?”

“You’re supposed to tell *me*.”

Doctor Stride looked at his watch. “We’re going to need to end soon. Is there anything else?”

Anything *else*? This guy had to be kidding. Drawing stuff out of you, getting you to lower your guard . . . and then boom, that’s it?

Which you kind of wanted to call the guy on, except what would that accomplish . . . so Chris said, “I’m surprised you give coupons for this stuff.”

The doctor closed Chris’s chart. “You mean it reminds you of the brownies at Costco?”

“Now I’m not following you . . . or are you saying, the free samples.”

“Indeed,” Dr. Stride said, seeming to be in regular-guy mode now. “If they don’t *try* it, they won’t know.”

“Well I appreciate your half-hour,” Chris said. “I know I was a wise ass a few times . . . so, sorry about that. Let me ask you this--and I expect an honest answer, not you trying to work me like a cheap car salesman.”

“Understood,” the doctor said.

“Do you think I need more of these? Sessions?”

“Unquestionably,” Dr. Stride said.

“See there you go,” Chris said. “Immediately doing what I said *don’t* do.”

“That’s my honest evaluation,” the doctor said, standing up, and reaching out to shake hands.

Chris shook hands but didn’t say anything more . . . and driving home his head was going a *few* different directions . . . and he’d never been to a therapist before and it wasn’t altogether surprising the way it played out, but man, couldn’t they at least help you out by concluding *something*?

On Friday, nothing planned out, it just happened, Chris knocking on Marlene’s apartment door after breakfast and saying how about we take a trip up to Santa Barbara, and Marlene said she had an appointment today but she could change it, and a half hour later they were on the road.

Santa Barbara was a great town, expensive as heck of course, and over-the-top fancy downtown, but it had a sophisticated outdoorsy vibe, and people seemed content.

Chris had been there a half-dozen times, but he always thought of that first one, where he couldn't have been more than three years old, and his dad was riding him around town on the handlebars of a bicycle. No idea what his dad was doing there or how he got the bike, or if Chris was really sitting on the handlebars or on some kind of child seat, but it was one of his earliest memories and one more reason to have a good feeling about the place.

There was a Mexican restaurant that looked festive, not the kind of place you'd expect to be authentic, but it was comfortable and fun and the margaritas were huge.

Halfway through Chris said, "You remember that free therapy session I nabbed for Kenny?"

"Of course," Marlene said. "What's *up* with that, by the way?"

"I *used* it."

"Well how was it?"

"Wait a minute . . . you're supposed to hesitate at that point. Not jump ahead and ask about it like it's no big deal."

"You get bent out of shape easily at times, I'm noticing."

"Wouldn't you at least *wonder*, how it came about, *me* using the session when it was intended for *Kenny*?"

"I assumed it was for you all along. Ken doesn't require something like that."

Holy Toledo. Meaning it was *that* obvious then, that by contrast, he *did*?

Chris said, "Well since you're so interested in the actual mechanics of it, there was one thing that came up, that kind of got me thinking."

“I think I know what direction you’re going. They asked about your childhood, how you viewed your parents’ relationship, and is that why you’ve never been able to settle down.”

Chris looked hard at Marlene for a second. “You laid a lot out there, just then,” he said. “Jeez.”

“It’s common sense is all,” she said, “that we tend to repeat the patterns of our parents . . . or conversely, reject them and go the *other* way. There’s typically not much middle ground.”

Chris said, “You’re worse than the *guy* . . . No he didn’t ask about family matters or get all Freudian on me. Though that might have been in the works, except I was late.”

Letting it hang for a second and if Marlene made the connection she didn’t show it. He said, “Anyhow, one possibility he raised--or maybe I came to it on my own in there--is were you interested in spending more *time* with me once you noticed me grabbing that coupon?”

“I’m not following. The first thing, you told me it was for Ken.”

“Yeah, well moving past that. Since you saw *through* that part . . . Did me looking into a little therapy, did that present some vulnerability that *intrigued* you . . . or some similar bullshit?”

“Not particularly,” Marlene said.

“Oh, okay . . . Something else then, unrelated. What appointment did you break, to come up here?”

“A *cancel-able* one,” she said.

“Well that sheds a *lot* of light.” And Chris waited for Marlene to expand on it, but she didn’t, and Chris thought what’s the big deal, you’re not going to surprise me, whatever it is . . . but then again he knew he needed to look in the mirror before getting on anyone for keeping a secret or two.

Santa Barbara had an historic pier and Chris wondered what beach *didn’t* have one of those, but they headed over there after lunch, and the

pier connected to the county historical museum, and there really was a lot to pick up in these places . . . and then there were some shops as well, and by the time they got back to the car it was dark, and there was a young couple a few cars away from theirs, who didn't look happy.

Then you could see what happened, they got a side window smashed, so it even happened down here . . . and Chris asked if there was anything they could do to help, like give them a lift or whatever, and the people politely said no thank you in a foreign accent.

When they were on their way home Marlene said she thought those people were from Estonia, by the accent, and Chris told her she was pretty funny but unfortunately now she was going overboard, since even an *Estonian* might not have picked that up, much less a beautiful all-American redheaded woman from southern California.

Marlene spoke a little softer now, and said she appreciated the compliment, so Chris asked if there was anything else she'd like to be complimented on, and Marlene said *well let's see what happens a little later*, and Chris was kind of thinking the same thing . . . and this was nice today, it had been a good idea, and traffic was light and for the most part they were able to keep it at the speed limit back to MB and the *Cheater Five*.

Chapter Thirteen

On Saturday Chris ended up at Peet's since there'd been some kind of winter junior lifeguard event--and there was always *something* going on on the weekends down here--and a million kids and their parents were flooding Starbucks, and Peet's up a block and a half wasn't bad for a change of pace.

Peet's had more of your old-time locals, Chris had figured out, whereas Starbucks, at least on the weekdays, had more of the transplants like *him*, but also the movers and shakers, and you got the spirited feel in there of people making deals.

The Peet's brew was stronger, and that wasn't the worst thing at the moment, last night having run a little long, first the business with Marlene, and then when she left, Ken shows up with a female.

This had to be around 1 in the morning, and Chris was having trouble falling asleep as it was, and then the two of them with the universal late-night routine in the kitchen.

Why the heck *was* that anyway? People come into a house, apartment, RV, whatever--after hours--and the first thing they invariably do is open the fridge. And then stand there, like some magic revelation is about to unfold.

Anyway . . . there was some food contemplation underway, and then the stove fired up and a pot being pulled out, and you couldn't blame the kid, he was trying to keep it down, you could tell, and he--they--were no doubt hungry.

So Chris let it go for a few minutes and then went out there to say hi. First, you'd be letting them know you're awake anyway so don't worry about

the noise, second, you'll satisfy your curiosity as to who this friend of Ken's might be--and third, you're getting a little hungry now *yourself*, so maybe they're some leftovers.

Ken introduced Chris to Eva. She was a pretty girl, a few more visible tats than Chris would hope to see--which likely meant there were plenty more *invisible* ones--but obviously who was *he* to judge anyone's personal expression.

But you couldn't help wonder what business she was in, *that* was human nature, so he said, "So where did you two meet?"

"We work together in the adult film industry," Eva said, as casually as if they worked the snack bar together at a bowling alley . . . So there you had it, no build-up or unnecessary dancing around the subject, that was for sure.

"*What* Boss?" Ken said. "You're looking at us funny."

"He's wondering," Eva said, "if that means we hook *up* at work, or we just know each other from there . . . Or if we hook up *outside* of work."

Chris said, "I'll give you credit. You're not a bad judge of people."

That got a little smile out of Eva and she said, not quite as much edge to her now, "I get that line of questioning a lot. I'm sure you can understand."

"This is somewhat embarrassing," Ken said.

"So let's change subjects," Chris said. "Where are you from?"

"He always asks that, when he meets new people," Ken said.

"I do?"

"A lot of times, yeah. I don't have a problem with it or anything, I'm just pointing it out."

"My dad's that way too," Eva said. "He's naturally curious."

"That's a good quality," Chris said. "*My* thing is, I always like to find out how people get from Point A to Point B."

"You mean literally?" Eva said. "Or in figurative terms."

Chris said, “Jeez . . . you’re turning out to be a pretty smart kid . . . Either/or I guess, whatever they want to volunteer.”

“Well I can tell where you’re going with this,” she said. “You’re applying that to me.”

Chris didn’t think he was, necessarily, when he asked where she was from. Wasn’t that an innocent enough question?

But you could feel this little situation going south in a hurry, and your guess would be Eva had to spend plenty of time in her life defending various actions, and she’s naturally defensive, and who wouldn’t be.

So even though it was the last thing he felt like, Chris suggested playing some cards, and Eva said that sounded great, and it was like a switch went on, and Ken got into it too . . . and next thing it’s four in the morning.

They played about 10 different games, some of them really silly like Crazy 8’s, and Fish, and Chris went in the kitchen two separate times and made up batches of buttered pop corn, and by the end Eva said thank you so *much*, that was so much fun . . . and what could you say . . . and then boom, no signal, nothing, Ken and Eva were up and out the door.

Chris headed back to the bedroom wondering, where do you go *out to* at 4 in the morning, but it wasn’t his problem, and this was after all the young generation . . . albeit an unusual branch of it.

Meaning it wasn’t a concept you conveniently wrapped your head around: *Well, I spent the evening playing cards with a couple of porn stars . . .* but it wasn’t worth toying with at this point, the semantics of it, and what he *did* know was he was totally shot . . . and when he hit the pillow he was out cold until noon.

So it was 10 to 2 now in Peet’s, as Chris checked his phone for the first time today. And the *new leaf* of getting the beach walk out of the way at 7 in the morning? . . . That was becoming pretty dang laughable.

And it had been a few days since he checked, so you might as well take a look at the usual suspects up north, meaning the Chronicle and the Bay City Beat and the San Jose Mercury News and even the Examiner, what the heck, it was *another* once-proud daily that is a non-factor at this point, but you never know . . . And why not throw in at least an inconspicuous glance at the Chico and Modesto and Reno online news sites for good measure . . . just take a look . . . so you're more or less scanning the works.

And they all came up empty, nothing new on his prior situations . . . or his letters . . . *that is except for one.*

And wouldn't you know, the Bay City Beat already had his post card message printed from the other *night*, which was a bit hard to believe, at least the timing . . . and Chris thinking back, he'd sent it off Thursday after the psychologist appointment, and he *had* managed to find the post office with the late pick-up . . . so it wouldn't have gotten there Friday, that was *too* quick, but they must have received it in today's mail . . . and that was the magic of the internet wasn't it, which Chris was pretty sure he'd never get used to . . . but bottom line, *there it was.*

And what the devil did he even *say* in that thing anyway . . . he was drawing a blank, and obviously it was right in front of him ready to be read, but he felt like testing himself first, since for Gosh sakes that should be simple enough to keep straight.

And it was coming back to him now . . . *that* was the one where he's mad that no one seems to be paying attention, so he starts off with the *Announcement* . . . and for verification purposes, reminds the police of the fake name he used when he got a hold of Towne, since that fake name shouldn't be public knowledge and they'd have to take him, the post card writer, seriously.

Shouldn't they have to this time?

At any rate he went ahead and read it online, and he thought he did a decent job with it, it flowed pretty clean.

ANNOUNCEMENT

This is Doug Lewellyn of Animal Resources.

I gave Towne a friendly chance but he didn't run with it.

There will be no more chances given in Berkeley.

It's in everyone's best interest that you

pass the word.

Your Friendly Friend

He was thinking the way he wrapped it up though, *your friendly friend*, that was kind of idiotic, not sure what he was thinking there, but you weren't exactly going to call up the Beat and edit the thing.

This wasn't Facebook, after all.

So that was that, and if they don't take you seriously this time, then to heck *with* 'em . . . but you at least did your part . . . and Chris was thinking it wasn't unlike the guy who recycles the plastic Gatorade bottles from Safeway, and the guy who *doesn't* . . . the *first* guy may not make a dent in the scope of the problem either, but at least he can sleep at night knowing he's doing his part.

The Peet's crowd, being typically older and more traditional than at your other coffee houses, they tended to read the New York Times and Wall Street Journal, and Barron's business journal, and whenever Chris was in here he was on the lookout for loose ones left behind, but today all you had was the LA Times scattered around, so before he left you might as well take

a quick browse--on the off chance you'd be surprised by something, such as rain in the southern California weather forecast, and of course that was so ludicrous it wasn't even funny.

And . . . he wasn't sure what *getting up and leaving* today entailed, since he was feeling mighty lazy, any and all exercise options that were staring him in the face seemed awfully unpleasant--but you could at least wander down to the beach, just two and half blocks from here, and that shouldn't set you back too much.

But first, that quick peruse of today's LA Times . . .

And what the heck was *THIS* now. You've got to be kidding . . . Son of a bitch.

Not at the very top of Page One-- but not very far down either-- meaning the LA Times considered this pretty damn important, was the following:

**Letter Received by Times Has Earmarks of Serial Killer
by Magdalena Willingham**

December 23rd, 2017 --BREAKING--A cryptic message on a post card received by the LA Times this morning shows preliminary indications of having been penned by a person of interest in three recent area homicides.

Police suspect the same individual in all three cases, and have expressed previous concern that a serial killer pattern is emerging.

Today's loosely-rhyming 6-line communication contained references to all three episodes: the first victim an artist in Culver City identified as 29-year-old Ellie Dubuque, the second a man in a park in Beverly Glen, identified as 38-year-old

Dagwood Beaverton, and the most recent victim, 52-year old Ramona Englebright, in a hotel on Wilshire Boulevard.

The handwritten post card text is the following:

**“Supermarket artist be careful in the night air.....
Park people, don’t mix your coffee with your affair.....
Even with a headache, an elevator you should not share.....
More POWER of ASSERTION, you need to beware.....
Does that make sense?
(If not, stay tuned.)”**

The card was postmarked Pasadena.

The LA Times has forwarded the communication to LAPD.

The department has yet to issue a comment.

Chris’s *initial* reaction was different than what he would have thought.

What he didn’t like at all--which was incorrect, since he of course didn’t like *any* of it--but what jumped out and bugged him was the part about the Power of Assertion.

Because wasn’t that what someone called *him*? One of the news writeups, he couldn’t remember which one, the whole mess was starting to run together now . . . but one of the so-called experts, reviewing *his* post cards, didn’t they say *he* was a Power-Assertive serial killer?

Which he’d mostly dismissed, since they couldn’t have more off target, as he obviously was *not* a serial killer, and when he’d read that he resented the implication.

Though who was he kidding of course . . . he hoped more than once that his activity *might* be mistakenly identified as the work of a serial

maniac, which could at least keep the police busy for a while . . . so you couldn't really beat up the *expert* for assuming that's what you *were*.

But getting back to this . . . this mope using Power of Assertion, and seeming proud of his sorry self for it as well--didn't that mean the guy must have read about *him*? Where they called *him* that? . . . And all of it, in conjunction with the post cards *he* wrote?

Chris had to take a deep breath and get a handle on this one.

You got a loose piece of scum . . . already eternally evil . . . terrorizing half of the South Bay . . . and to top it off, the prick has to copy *him*?

And brag about it? . . .

This most definitely was not what Chris needed added to his plate today. He was actually feeling pretty dang good about Christmas, and Christmas Eve was tomorrow.

Not that he had any plans, or any idea who'd be around . . . and sure there were plenty of unresolved issues dangling out there . . . too many to count probably, if you really got serious about it.

But the bottom line was he feeling good physically, was coming up on that 11-month mark, he was once-again adjusting to MB living after the little bump in the road there in the Nevada high desert, and maybe you had something developing with Marlene, or maybe not . . . but who knows.

This new business with the Power-Assertive motherfucker running around killing people and writing copycat post cards though--and Chris couldn't help thinking if he'd gone to Starbucks or been an hour earlier or *whatever*, he probably wouldn't have found this out just yet--and his day--and Christmas--wouldn't be ruined now.

So he motored on out of Peet's down toward the beach, and ten minutes ago he had no spunk at all but now he was energized in the weird way it can happen when you get mad.

The *problem* being, what are you going to *do* about this?

He was thinking now he should have paid more *attention*, once they linked the guy's first two murders . . . you *knew* this was trouble and you ignored it or denied it, and hoped it would pass.

Chris also knew of course that his reasonable logic was running away from him, when you start thinking like *that* . . . Things happen, that's the universe, there's not always an easy fix.

In fact he'd been ticked off about something else up in the Bay Area last time, dealing with Towne and so forth--one night in the motel room a commercial comes on from a law firm up in Sonoma County, where they had the major fires last fall when he was up there working it out with Jerry Smith.

The law firm commercial is blaming the power company, PG&E, for the fire disasters, and they're looking for victims to sign up and file lawsuits.

Part of Chris, that moment in the motel, felt like getting in the car and driving straight to Santa Rosa and finding that law office and smacking the person behind the ads in the face.

But of course, something like that, it would only end badly all around, so all you could do was stay mad about it.

But the point was we have a tendency--especially lawyers, but regular citizens too--to blame whatever bad things happen on *something*.

And the thing with this serial copycat mutant--these terrible things happened, three of them . . . and they just *did*. They didn't happen because you or anyone else did something wrong.

That seemed so obvious, but Chris had to force the notion on himself, which he'd been doing plenty lately, that you can't save the world.

Meaning all you can do is contribute your small part.

Meaning . . . *you need to end this*.

Chris turned left at the pier, working a determined gate now toward Hermosa, and the intent was to blow off steam and to figure something

out . . . except he knew where he was *really* headed, not exactly sure why, other than basic instinct . . . and he passed the Strand house with the motorcycles in the window and kept going a little ways further, and next thing he knew he was ringing the bell again, from the other day.

There was no answer though, and he rang it a second time and waited and he was about to leave when Mancuso himself opens the door.

Chris said, "Jeez, you're handling it all on your own today, or what?"

"Slow weekend as you'd expect," Ned said. "Most everyone's off. Just a scaled-down shoot today. What are you doing for Christmas?"

That was kind of a weird question thrown into the mix, like you'd ask an old buddy you ran into on the street, not necessarily the relationship the two of *them* had going . . . but regardless, Chris got down to business.

"There's a guy loose," he said. "And he started writing letters now, bragging about his exploits. It's not sitting right."

"No it ain't," Ned said.

"Come again?"

"I know exactly what you're talking about. I saw it on the news. Some guy claiming responsibility."

"It was on the news already too? You mean TV?"

"Whatever the fuck, what's the difference . . . Next?"

"What does that mean," Chris said. "Next item on my agenda?"

"Could be that," Ned said, "but could be you haven't gotten it all off your chest yet."

"Yeah, well . . . I think I want to do something about it."

Ned didn't miss a beat. "But you're not sure how."

"Pretty much it in a nutshell."

"And you think I *do*."

"You might, yeah . . . have a suggestion."

"Listen I'm in the middle of this," Ned said, pointing upstairs with his head. "Give me a minute. In fact, come on up."

Chris figured it wouldn't hurt to see what might be going on up there today, though hopefully Ken wasn't around, and Eva either, and Jeez, you had to think about Rory too--and Chris realized there was a list developing now, individuals you needed to avoid in this situation--but today did seem awful quiet, and Mancuso likely would have said something if Kenny happened to be here.

And what unfolded up there was a simple scene, two women, with a middle-eastern motif in the set and furnishings, and one of the women wore a headdress, as though a sacred line was being crossed, though neither of the performers looked remotely middle-eastern.

Both women were curvaceous, though the headdress one was admittedly more voluptuous than the other, and Chris thought of maybe asking Mancuso later if everything was real . . . but that was stupid, and not why he was here.

The scene concluded and the women put on robes, and one of them lit a cigarette and they hung around for a few minutes, joking with the cameraman, the one with the headdress sounding like she was from Arkansas or some place, and pretty soon everyone left the main area.

Ned said, "That's it for now. Joesphine's got the late session. They don't need me tonight unless there's an emergency. What do you got in mind?"

Giving Chris his pretty full attention now.

"You don't mind my asking something else first," Chris said, " but in *your* business, what constitutes an emergency?"

"What are you a comedian all of a sudden?" Ned said. "And you're stalling."

"I am . . . You got some guy in Pasadena--give or take 50 miles and a population density of 6 million people. Maybe that's part of the reason."

"So you're frustrated. Which I get . . . You want my honest opinion? Go talk to Chandler."

Now *that* was out of left field.

Did that mean go talk to Chandler to calm me down, Chris wondered, and set me straight? Kind of like a legal-guy therapist?

Or . . . was Ned's suggestion more Machiavellian?

Chris said, "That's an interesting angle, I must say. Any chance you can come *with* me?"

"Sure, that's fine."

"Oh," Chris said, and this was starting to get interesting, for a *few* reasons, and you might as well roll with it and see what happens.

Though you couldn't help wonder what a supposedly retired attorney like Chandler might have to offer on the subject--except Chris had given up trying to figure *that* guy out, since the surprises kept on coming.

And separately, Chris was a little surprised Mancuso would be so agreeable to tagging along. Or was it just he was such a *nice guy* and wanted to make sure Chris could find Chandler's house.

The real surprise, it turned out, was where Chandler lived.

They got up there, the hills with the commanding 40-mile wall to wall Pacific Ocean view, Malibu to Palos Verdes, and Chris realized, son of a gun, if he'd ever detoured just a block and a half on his walk into town from the *Cheater Five* he would have passed right by Chandler's house.

Ned had driven Chris in his car, a pretty spanking new Land Rover SUV, which had to run you close to a hundred grand after the bells and whistles, and Chris was going to make a comment how the surprises *do* keep on coming, meaning Chandler *and* Ned, but he kept his mouth shut for now and they went up the steps to the front door and Ned could tell Chris was looking for the doorbell and he told him don't forget, everything's casual down here, and Ned rapped on the door and a minute later Chandler seemed happy to see them both and ushered them inside.

Chris said, "I was getting ready to tell Ned here, that we're almost neighbors, you and me."

“Well if I’d known that,” Chandler said, “we could have been taking one vehicle to play tennis. Save on the wear and tear.”

“Save some gas too,” Chris said. “This is where I scratch my head--I’m not saying it in a critical way, just an observer. But I run into you that first day, you have to excuse yourself because you’re going to be late for the bargain matinee.”

“What you’re getting at,” Ned said, “it’s not obvious on the surface, but he’s a player. Just like a lot of others.”

“Something I’ve been learning,” Chris said.

And the multi-million-dollar spread up here was only one *more* example of Chandler surprising you.

You had the *first* business he dropped on you, that he was a consultant on the OJ Simpson trial.

Then of course, Chris fearing the worst up there in Bodega Bay when that cop calls from Redondo Beach, the Craigslist episode, and Chandler contacts an old buddy up in Sonoma and without making a big deal about it, figures out that Chris probably is the Donny person.

And don’t forget the guy’s *own* Craigslist story, the motorcycle guy who Chandler had some definite characters rough up, and which still doesn’t sit right with him apparently, that he didn’t go far *enough*.

Most recently you had the Bingham, Nevada, business, where admittedly Chandler helped save his ass.

All in a day’s work, Chris supposed, for a middle-aged retired guy whose life revolved around tennis and of course the discount afternoons at the movies, and from the looks of the front garden, some serious time spent there too.

“Anyhow,” Chandler said. “Call me a genius of deduction, but I’m pretty sure something’s up, you fellas in the unlikely position of standing here together at the moment.”

“You may be overthinking,” Ned said. “Me and Chrissie, we hit it off pretty good, back from when we were simultaneously studying the volleyball players.”

And *that* part was true of course, and Ned liked Chris’s way of analyzing the action--or so he said--and bought him a drink.

Chandler got a little different perspective from Chris, because when they played tennis Chris was always asking him questions about Ned, trying to get to the bottom of the guy, not trusting him and not able to pinpoint exactly why.

Then of course his brother Floyd is in town for a visit and out of the blue punches Ned, something likely lingering from them crossing paths one time in Las Vegas.

So all that . . . plenty under the bridge, both Chandler and Ned, and plenty of mystery to both of them *still*.

But that was irrelevant right now.

Chandler said, “Well we’d better go downstairs, see what we have here.”

“If you have a minute,” Chris said.

“We’re not disturbing you or anything, are we?” Ned said.

Neither of them saying it like they cared what the answer was.

Chandler didn’t answer anyway, but opened a surprisingly beat-up door between the kitchen and garage, and he turned on the light by pulling on a piece of string that was hanging from a bare bulb.

It was pretty cozy down there, the basement, not a real underground one like you’d have back east but still under the main house and sufficiently private. There was a section with boxes piled up, and what house didn’t have one of those, and then a social area in the back, nice and simple, no TV or computer or anything, just some magazines and old books scattered around and some comfy overstuffed chairs that might have come from Goodwill.

Chandler said, "This is always a bit more secluded. Since I never know what could pop out of someone's mouth." Looking at both of them now, waiting.

"Okay," Chris said. "Taking a direct line *to* it . . . Some fucker's out there now, wasting people, and to make matters worse, he started *writing* about it."

"Boasting, is how it comes across," Ned chimed in.

"I'm aware of it," Chandler said. "Though I don't know any more than you boys do, just what I've read in the news."

"I should have been paying attention earlier," Chris said. "Maybe there would have been . . . I don't know . . . some way of cutting him off at the pass."

"Before he inflicted more unnecessary damage, you're saying," Ned said.

"Like I say," Chris said, "I'm not *sure*. It's just . . . frustrating to know he's out there . . . and dangling this shit in front of our face."

"And laughing about it," Ned said. "Having a good old time."

Chris said, "I don't know if you're jerking *my* chain, having fun with *me* . . . but yeah, all that."

Chandler said to Ned, "Christian here,"--and that already showed you Chandler had his hands in his business, picking that up when he'd been suspicious initially and run his name, because Chris rarely went by Christian anymore, especially since he'd moved to Manhattan Beach.

Anyhow Chandler finished saying to Ned, "He took care of the Zodiac."

Mancuso was wide-eyed. "The cat up north, you're talking about? The one they made the movie about?"

"That's him," Chandler said. "Chris went outside the box and tracked him down."

"But . . . you *wasted* him?" Ned said.

“He’s exaggerating,” Chris said. “Either way, this current prick, that’s got nothing to *do* with the Zodiac.”

“Oh it has everything to do with it,” Chandler said. “He’s starting to *remind* you of the Zodiac, isn’t he, and that’s hard to stomach.”

“Okay knock it off,” Chris said, “you were doing better before.”

Chandler said, “And writing a letter to a newspaper, the gentleman’s not very creative is he? That sounds like a wannabee *copycat* Zodiac.”

“A post card, I think,” Chris said, though admittedly he just got slapped in the face by Chandler too, since *he* was doing the same copycat thing up north--and in fact that was the thing, he likely gave *this* mope the *idea*.

“Okay fine,” Ned said. “What would be the next step *here*? Anything?”

“You mean as far as apprehending the individual?” Chandler said.

“Or whatever,” Chris said.

And Chandler took a hard look at Chris, and Chris had that slight but persistent head-nod thing going, not intending to, but it just happened sometimes.

“Something tells me you gentleman are serious. At least one of you.”

“We’ll get out of your hair,” Chris said. “Much appreciated, as always.”

And Chandler walked them back upstairs and let them out.

Back at the car Ned said, “You want to, I don’t know, grab a bite?”

“There always is that possibility,” Chris said.

“How about this though?” Ned said. “Let’s see your *place*, your digs. You say it’s right here.”

“Right here is a figure of speaking. Four, five blocks from here yeah. But right off PCH, different animal.”

“Let’s go,” Ned said, and they left the SUV in front of Chandler’s house, and who would have thought you’d be walking over to the *Cheater*

Five with Ned Mancuso . . . but there was very little that could throw Chris off these days.

Once again, pretty dang balmy for a December 23rd *anyplace*, and there was something blooming that Chris never bothered trying to pinpoint, but you could smell it real strong this evening against the heavy chlorine from the pool, and they were relaxing out there now, Chris and Ned and Marlene too.

Marlene had offered to make drinks and some appetizers, and Chris didn't fight her, and when she disappeared into her apartment Ned winked at Chris and said you have a winner there.

"Well you might be a little premature with that," Chris said. "We're in the feeling out process, at best."

Ned said, "Let's see how she does with the booze and food, and then I'll update my evaluation," and Chris laughed, which made him realize he hadn't been doing enough of that lately, especially with another guy, more or less his age, who'd been through some similar life experiences.

Though that wasn't quite right, since there was no telling *what* Ned may or may not have been through . . . but either way being on the same page with someone, even for an hour sitting around a pool, wasn't the worst thing.

"You got a sweet set-up here," Ned said. "Any empty apartments?"

"You're kidding."

"Yes and no . . . I'll tell ya, sometimes it would be nice to be able to disappear."

Marlene showed up with a tray and handed out drinks, nice frosty glasses with surprise beverages inside.

She went back in the apartment and Chris said quietly, "*I* disappeared not too long ago. It can be a little lonely, but it gives you perspective."

"Where'd you disappear *to*?" Ned said.

“Small town Nevada.”

You could tell Ned was massaging it, putting two and two together, since he'd already pointed out to Chris that he'd heard the cops were looking for him a while back, and now this business today, Chandler needing to inform everyone that Chris finished off the Zodiac.

But Ned didn't follow it up, which showed Chris a little something, maybe even a little character, and Ned redirected it to, “I like wide open spaces. Big cloud formations.”

“I know,” Chris said. “When you catch it right, the sky out there's like a dome.”

Ned's phone rang and he got up and walked outside the pool to take the call. Marlene was back with pastry wraps, mini Vienna-type sausages inside.

“A Costco effort?” Chris said.

Marlene said, “There's three things you don't ask a woman. Her age . . . her secret culinary ingredients . . . and where was I going with the *third*?”

“Her weight,” Chris said.

“Oh yes of course, that one's completely off limits . . . Meanwhile, your friend is quite handsome.”

“Oh Jesus, here we go,” Chris said.

“It's simply an honest observation . . . Have you been friends long?”

Chris was pretty sure he'd mentioned Mancuso to Marlene by now at least a couple times, but she didn't make any connection and was starting over like this was someone brand new who just dropped onto the scene tonight.

And frankly Chris couldn't keep it all straight either, *who* he'd told about *what*, who he'd had to leave things out *from*, who he'd said something to that he *shouldn't* have . . . and ad infinitum.

Chris said, “I actually met that guy early on, down here. We come and go.”

“Well that’s nice. Is he married, or what?”

Chris said, “To follow up on that third item on your list--how much *do* you weigh, anyhow?”

“I beg your pardon.”

“I mean everything’s pretty tight, at least that’s been my observation. So what’s the big deal, you shouldn’t react like it’s a question from outer space.”

“If you must know,” she said, “I don’t own a scale.”

“Well here comes Ned,” Chris said. “Shall we have him guess your weight?”

“Chris, don’t you *dare*.”

Ned was coming in through the gate now. Chris said, “Marlene was just saying . . . she was hoping you wouldn’t be out there too long, since the food’s cooling off.” You could tell Marlene was relieved Chris hadn’t gone a different direction, after the *Marlene was just saying* part.

Ned said, “Well I was just remarking to Chris, you’re an attractive woman.”

So what difference *did* it make, Ned responded just as though Chris *had* blurted out what Marlene had told him privately. What could you do?

“That’s very kind of you,” Marlene was saying. “I was just suggesting to Chris, next time let me *really* cook for you. Both of you.”

She asked if they wanted refills and Ned said he’d love a glass of water and Marlene went back inside.

Ned said, “That was Chandler. Have to give him credit, he *handles* stuff . . . Anyhow I got a lead for you . . . On your *Mr. Author*.”

“Jeez. You *do*?”

Now that Chris heard this, that there might be a hint of something concrete, he wasn’t sure what to do about it, or if he even *wanted* to.

“What?” Ned said.

“Nothing,” Chris said.

“Except you feel like your bluff’s been called.”

“You might say that.”

Ned lit a cigarette, and Marlene came back, and Ned asked her a few polite questions, small talk, and Marlene was more than happy to be asked, and she got long-winded with her answers, and Ned put his head back in the lounge chair and listened politely but you could tell his mind was somewhere else.

After a while Ned told Marlene it had been a pleasure, the whole experience, and he said he better be going.

Chapter Fourteen

“I’ll walk you back to the car,” Chris said, and when they got around the corner he said, “Not that I felt like it. But what did Chandler say . . . exactly?”

“He said they have a bead on the probable guy,” Ned said.

“You gotta speak English here.”

“The word is, they’re picking him up Tuesday, this mope.”

Chris processed it for a moment and said, “You have to admit, that’s a little confusing . . . You’re saying they *have* the guy? . . . So why wait?”

Ned said, “According to Chandler--and he’s done this to me before, come up with unlikely *shit*--but Monday being Christmas, that’s how they’re evidently working it.”

Chris said, “He’s come up with stuff on my end too.”

“Solid?”

“More or less, yeah . . . one example being, the two guys re-appearing at the apartment when I happened to be away, Chandler knew the story, which was very minor, they were clearing me in some little deal . . . That thing you brought up.”

“If you say so.”

“Forget that though. So let’s say that’s accurate. Again, the waiting . . . You got a serial killer out there. Wouldn’t that be just a trifle irresponsible?”

“I asked Chandler the same thing, and he says it’s complicated. The dicknose is apparently a rich guy, big contributor to the PBA . . . They’re keeping an eye on him, between now and Tuesday.”

“Policemen’s Benevolent Association?”

“Something like that. At any rate, Chandler dropped the address on me, you want to check the guy out. High-rent district, it sounds like for sure, out in Bel Air.”

“Holy shit . . .”

“That’s what I figured,” Ned said. “I mean what were you thinking?”

“Well,” Chris said, “not sure *what* I was thinking . . . I know what I want to have *happen*, if that makes any difference.”

“And what’s that?”

“Be good to keep him out of the system is all.”

“I hear you brother,” Ned said. “Anything can happen, once the wheels of justice start turning.”

“Be good to avoid that.”

“Not leave it to chance, you’re saying.”

Chris said, “My guess is Chandler would agree with that. Look at OJ Simpson. What *wasn’t* his blood on? But a-hole walks out of the courtroom, throws a party.”

Ned said, “Maybe that’s why he happened to forward an address just now. Who knows?”

“All in the name of justice,” Chris said.

“Anyhow . . . here it is.” Showing him the address on his phone, Chris pulling a scrap of paper out of his wallet and writing it down.

“Well thanks. I appreciate it . . . And I don’t want to admit it, but it wasn’t too bad hanging out with you for a little while.”

“It wasn’t. Great pool and all.”

“Yeah well now you’re going a bit too far. *Workable*. I’ll leave it at that.”

They were back at Ned’s car, in front of Chandler’s house. Ned said, “So all right then. Maybe I’ll see you at the *Nest* this weekend.”

“Maybe even later tonight, you never know.”

“Meaning . . . you were going to take a run out there first? The guy’s place and all?”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

Ned stood there for a minute, not getting in the car quite yet.

Finally he said, “You need any help?”

It took Chris a moment. First he assumed Ned meant help from the cheap seats, like does he need him to pull out his *phone* and *GPS* it for him.

Then Chris realized Ned was cold-hard serious, that he was in his corner, and he wasn’t going anywhere right now if Chris didn’t want him to.

“Well I don’t know what to say,” Chris said. “Except the answer would be yes.”

“Fine, you got it,” Ned said, “let’s get outta here.”

And they got in the SUV, and with no fanfare, no second-guessing, Ned shot pretty quick down Sepulveda to Rosekrans, and then they were on the 405, and traffic was a little dicey at first but thinned out when you crossed the 10, and they got out to Bel Air in 45 minutes.

“Always taking a chance jumping on the freeway,” Ned said.

“Tell me about it,” Chris said. “I thought you were going to go straight down PCH.”

“Normally yeah, this hour. But this is a weird Saturday night, Christmas Eve tomorrow and all. We got a little lucky.”

Ned was awful casual, which Chris appreciated, and they could have been shooting the breeze about traffic on their way to a Dodgers game.

Chris still had no idea if Ned’s *helping out* part meant driving him out there, seeing what we got . . . and then heading back to the *Crowe’s Nest* for a nightcap and some holiday cheer . . . though Chris also had no handle on what his *own part*, was going to be. If anything.

“Help me out here, will ya,” Ned said, meaning the GPS as they started up into the Bel Air hills. “What is it again, *Hazelton* something?”

“119 Chesterfield Circle,” Chris said, and this was going to be interesting, since you could tell right away all the houses were set back, and what were you going to do exactly, when you *did* find the place, pull up la-di-da down the driveway and ring the bell?

“Questionable at night, trying to nail down this shit,” Ned said.

“I know. They need that much privacy, they can’t even give us an address on a mailbox or something?”

“Nothing to work with,” Ned said. “Though I guess if you see a cop car, unmarked, let me know.”

“Oh yeah. Since they’re watching the guy until Tuesday. Supposedly.”

“Which is gonna be BS, would be my guess. Especially the holiday weekend.”

“Lighter staff, you’re saying. Even for the cops.”

“Not the uniforms. But the plainclothes, yeah. Plus they *hate* this shit. . . . And your guy, he doesn’t know there’s any heat on him, so it’s not like they’re worried about him taking off.”

Your guy.

“Yeah, not taking *off*,” Chris said, “just maybe killing someone *else* though.”

“There is that possibility,” Ned said.

Chris said, “I mean . . . wouldn’t there be *hell* to pay? If that *did* actually happen before Tuesday?”

“You don’t understand the history of LAPD,” Ned said. “At most, that would be a pimple on the department’s butt. Take my word for it, they’re not worried about it.”

You couldn’t see a lot, there were no streetlights at all, and even though you were a half hour from downtown LA, which was only the second largest city in the nation, it wasn’t all that different from being in the mountains someplace.

Chris said, "Something tells me we might have just repeated ourselves, made a big loop . . . You get that feeling?"

"Unh-huh," Ned said.

"Well you might as well pull over for a second. Let me try something."

And Chris entered the guy's name in a white pages search . . . and here was the thing, you kept thinking it was impossible for so-and-so to have an old fashioned landline, much less the number to be actually listed . . . but the track record had been pretty dang good . . . and it continued with Harrison, why not, and there was his number, area-code included.

Chris said, "You'd think a fancy rich guy, he'd want to stay under the radar."

"Yeah you'd think so," Ned said, "but I remember when I moved out here, trying to break into the acting business like I was telling you? Someone said I reminded them of a young Al Pacino. Not resembled him so much, but delivered lines the same way . . . One night I'm with some people, I get a buzz on, I'm feeling a little loose, I decide to call him up."

"Al Pacino."

"Sure, why not. I knew he lived in Malibu at the time--but also had a spread in Aspen--and I pull out the phone book and of course there's nothing in Malibu, so I dial that 800-411 you used to be able to do. You know what I'm talking about?"

"Yeah. Long distance information."

"Exactly. So I got a Colorado operator and ask for the phone number for Al Pacino in Aspen, and I get the *one moment please*, and she comes back with it. Totally routine."

"Dang . . . so you really called him up then?"

"I did. And he answered. But he hung up on me. It *was* a little late."

"You knew it was him?"

“Bud. I’m an actor. I recognize a voice, okay? . . . My story, I’m only telling you because don’t *assume* shit.”

“That’s what I’m learning,” Chris said. “Meanwhile . . . should we call him up?”

“Yeah, screw this driving around shit,” Ned said, pulling out his phone. “What’s the number?”

“Okay now hold on,” Chris said. “You’re going to think I’m paranoid probably . . . but when I’ve been down this road before, I use a fresh cell.”

“Meaning one of those throw-away jobs? Fine, whatever.”

And they drove back down the hill and they used the current phone to GPS a 7-11, and you had to go about 5 miles, a whole bunch of stoplights, which was a pain in the ass, but they picked up a flip phone and got it working and headed back up to Harrison’s.

Though you had to assume Ned had been through this kind of thing before, likely to have had to call someone up and threaten them or something . . . and Ned being so nonchalant about using his own phone, this pointed out, didn’t it, that he operated in a different circle.

As opposed to Chris, who felt like a nervous Nellie dragging Ned to 7-11, but it was done now.

They got back up in the hills to where they thought they were close to the guy’s address, and Ned said, “Give me that thing.”

He dialed and there was no answer, and Ned left a message, a surprisingly good one actually, saying he was Sergeant something or other from LAPD, and they were in the neighborhood and had a couple questions for him, no urgency, but to get back to him when he could.

“Jeez,” Chris said. “I would have faked being from the power company or something. But I see where you’re going.”

“Yeah, that’s the only way,” Ned said. “You got to put the fear of God into them. While at the same time making it sound routine.”

Chris remembered, yeah, the Modesto detective calling him out of the blue, pretty happy-go-lucky actually, and Chris was *still* a little shook up re-living it. When you didn't do anything wrong, a call like that was bad enough--but when you did, or *might* have, it was a downright nasty experience.

"Well," Chris said. "Nothing more we can do at the moment. You want to get that bite to eat? Or did Marleen's little appetizers hold you."

"Wasn't much to 'em, I have to admit."

But the phone rang, the 7-11 one.

"Yeah," Ned answered.

"Unh-huh," he said.

"If that's not inconvenient," he said.

"We could work it that way too, if you like," he said.

"Fine, we're parked on the main drag, your Chesterfield Circle. An SUV. We're working plainclothes. Not that we want to be . . . Christmas and all." Ned laughed.

And then the call was over.

Chris said, "Man, I should be taking *lessons* from you, that was pretty dang smooth. Now what though?"

"The prick's supposed to meet us. He said that would be better than us coming to the house."

"What a surprise," Chris said, and of course identifying with the guy in *that* regard. And he wondered how the guy was necessarily going to find them out there, since Chesterfield was a few miles long at least, and they could easily be on a different part of it . . . but then again you really didn't see any other cars parked on the road, they all had their estates, so the guy would figure it out.

Chris said, "What do you think of a guy though, last name first? I mean I've known a few of those guys, and they're normal, but it always throws me off."

“I think we got something,” Ned said, and an old-model Volkswagen came pulling up from behind, surprising at first, something so modest, but then again Chris figured these rich guys had their toys.

Harrison got out and came to the driver’s side and Ned stepped out and shook hands and said, “Sargeant Brinkman, good to meet you.”

And Chris got out too now and introduced himself as Officer Schilesterman, one of the fake spur of the moment names that just kept adding onto itself, but meanwhile this Harrison fellow was in enough of a panic, it looked like, that he wasn’t about to challenge the credibility of the two of them being cops.

“Nice night,” Ned said. “The wife’s already ticked off at me, I took an extra swing shift. She doesn’t understand, it’s not just the Christmas gifts that cost money.”

“All the peripherals,” Chris said. “Mine nags me at the holidays too. Almost easier to work.”

Harrison forced a smile but was clearly waiting for the punch line.

Ned said, “Let’s go inside for a minute. Warm up.” Meaning the vehicle.

Chris got in back and Ned motioned Harrison into the passenger’s seat.

Ned lit a cigarette and said, “What they got us doing, the reason we’re bothering you, this guy got the short end of the stick, in the park. You might have seen it on the news.”

Harrison said he had.

“There’s a restaurant, coffee bar, something,” Ned continued. “At any rate, they got us canvassing the regular patrons, see if they saw anything suspicious . . . Our understanding, there was a man and woman, they met there most evenings.”

Harrison said there were plenty of couples there, but yeah, he can picture one after work, pretty consistent . . . and my Lord . . . was *that* the couple in the park?

Chris said, “When you wrote your postcard, did you lick an old-fashioned stamp? Or were you worried about DNA?”

Harrison turned around, wide-eyed now, toward Chris in the back seat..

“What I liked though,” Chris said, “you were Power-Assertive. At least in your estimation of yourself. Do you know the other categories?”

Harrison seemed to be breathing strangely now, and said that he didn’t quite follow what Chris was talking about.

“What we’re getting at,” Chris said, “and the real reason we’re here . . . We know you wrote that post card . . . and we know it’s a fake.”

“But still awful stupid,” Ned said.

Chris said, “We’re obviously not accusing you of *killing* anybody, so you can relax. In fact they picked up the guy this morning, they’re pretty sure is *him* . . . But why would you get involved sending a silly letter to the LA Times?”

Harrison seemed to have recovered slightly and said he wasn’t aware they’d arrested someone, and that was interesting, and who *was* it, did they know?”

“Some guy named Sager, Sanger, it’ll all come out,” Chris said. “But you didn’t answer *my* question. I mean I can’t wrap my head why a decent citizen like yourself, would be sending wise-guy post cards.”

“Just *one* post card,” Harrison blurted out. “I don’t *know* why. Only that my *friend* told me to.”

And of course this wasn’t about a post card, even the *real* case . . . since the cops had their *other* reasons for liking this guy, and they were set to make a move on him before any post card was in the picture.

Chris obviously had faked the cops picking up the *Sanger* guy, which relaxed Harrison enough to admit to the post card . . . but now was time for a little hardball.

Chris said, “You say your friend told you to. The only problem then, your friend knows a lot about the three cases, doesn’t he?”

“Details, pal,” Ned said, “that only you and your friend would be privy to.”

Harrison started shifting around in the passenger seat, and coughing strangely and erratically, like maybe he was having a panic attack.

He tried to open the door and get out, but it didn’t work, Ned apparently having secured matters from a master switch.

Chris said, “You have a poetic touch, in your writing. Which I can admire. Unfortunately you gave us two, if not three or four items that the general public wouldn’t know about.”

“Only us or the protagonist,” Ned said.

“The power-assertive one,” Chris said.

And of course neither Chris or Ned knew anything more about the case than what they read, so they had no idea if the guy’d *really* given away any intimate clues in the post card, but it seemed to be working because the guy certainly wasn’t going back over the thing line by line and challenging them, that was for sure.

“I’m authorized to tell you,” Ned said, “that we’ll cut you a deal.”

Harrison didn’t say anything, but his coughing fit eased slightly, and he was at full attention.

Ned looked at Chris. “What did they instruct us to offer him again?”

Chris looked at Ned. This meant neither one of them had thought it through.

Chris said to Harrison, “You know what? What they gave us, *fuck that shit*, it was complicated . . . It’s Christmas, we’re not trying to break balls here, any more than necessary . . . 30 years, straight up.”

“You’re out of your mind,” Harrison said, but the delivery was thin.

“20, you’re eligible for parole in 16,” Ned said. “Probably the best we can do.”

Harrison stayed quiet.

“You gotta be a good boy and work with us,” Chris said, “come on.”

They waited and after a minute Harrison mumbled, “We’re not going to prison.”

Chris said, “Here’s your final . . . 20, 16, and you get a Sweet Camp.”

“That’s slang for a minimum-security facility,” Ned said, looking sideways at Chris to make sure that’s what it meant, and Chris eyeballing that it was.

“That part,” Chris said, “you’ll thank us every day. You have to take our word for it.”

Harrison sat still.

“But the deal being,” Ned said, “we’re gonna need you to shake on it. Within 30 seconds.” Ned looked at his watch and started counting it down.

Chris said, “Don’t worry, we’re not bringing you in tonight. You can call your lawyer, sleep in your comfy bed . . . But the deal on the table, there’s no extension.”

Ned got down to *five*, and he’d been kind of sing-songing it as he called out the seconds and it was starting to get on Chris’s nerves.

At *three* Harrison put his hand up and said all right.

“Well you’re a wise man,” Chris said, “and you’re doing the right thing. *Here* . . . shake on it.”

And Harrison shifted his body halfway to the left so he could reach back to Chris, and as their hands met Ned smashed Harrison in the side of the head with a short steel bar.

Harrison fell toward the door and his head kerplunked against the glass, and he didn’t look good for too much at the moment.

Ned said, “Ever since I got my license, 16 years old back in the Bronx, I carry something like this under the driver’s seat. It doesn’t matter which vehicle, you never know.”

“You don’t,” Chris said. “When I lived back there I got convinced pretty quick, so I picked up a bat at Herman’s.”

“I remember that place well,” Ned said. “The internet killed off good old-fashioned sporting goods stores.”

“Meanwhile,” Chris said, “what’s the plan?”

Ned said, “I was kind of working on that, when you’re taking all the time dicking around with the guy on the post card shit . . . Let me see if I can *reach* a guy.”

Ned stepped out of the SUV and plugged one ear and made his call, and Chris thought Jeez, shouldn’t we at least get *out* of here?

But then again, there was no one around, just them parked in the pitch dark and the guy’s VW in behind them, so barring an unusual development--such as the *real* cops happening to drive by and stop--you should be fine.

Ned was back, and he started the engine and threw it in gear, and Chris said, “We’re just . . . leaving it as is for now?”

“The guy? Yeah, just sit him up a little, like he’s got his head back taking a nap . . . Be better if he was laying in the *way* back, but you start moving guys around, you can get in trouble.”

Chris reached forward and adjusted Harrison, and he said, “I think I heard a low groan come out of him.”

“Yeah, he’s still gonna be hanging in there,” Ned said.

“Meaning?”

“Temporarily at least. I got a hold of my guy.”

Ooh boy. This was the thing now. On the one hand it was admittedly awful nice to have some help here. It wasn’t necessarily something you could pull off on your own, maybe not even close.

On the other hand, Chris felt a little like a fish out of water. It wasn't just the lack of control, it was the *unknown* factors . . . such as where the Hell are we going now?

Ned must of felt what he was thinking and said, "Don't worry, we got this . . . And least we *should*."

"Well you're the beacon of confidence up there, so that's good to hear. Meanwhile, what did Chandler say, exactly, why the cops broke through on this guy?"

And Chris realized *he* could be getting confused now, after throwing in to Harrison that they had a line on *another* guy . . . but he reminded himself don't overthink.

Ned said, "All he said was, someone at that restaurant called it in, his plate number. It sounded like the guy went back there the next day like nothing happened, and one of those Barista people thought he might have been looking at the two people funny the day before."

"Jeez."

"I think you get that a lot," Ned said. "These killer guys, they think of everything, take every precaution--gloves, not getting bodily fluids on anything, disposal of weapons, the rest of the laundry list--but then they butcher the *key* thing."

"You mean showing their face the next day, scene of the crime, like everything's normal."

"Yeah."

Chris was looking at it a little different, that if you *didn't* show up, that might raise somebody's attention *as well*--but yeah, you'd have to say, not great to be ogling the people and then return right away when one of them just happens to be involved in a mile-away homicide..

Of course Ned's larger point . . . about these guys crossing the t's and dotting the i's--but then missing the main *thing*--now he unfortunately was running back through his *own* deals, seeing if that applied at all.

Ned turned the radio on and Chris walked once again, in his head through Donny . . . and then Chip . . . and then the Idaho pick-up-truck guy . . . and this was getting pretty ridiculous, not to mention what were you going to do about it, if you *did* pull up some glaring omission . . . and luckily Ned started talking again and Chris forgot about it.

Ned said, “You never were clear the other day when I asked you, what do you got going for Christmas?”

Chris had *nothing* going, that he knew of, so the easiest thing was to lie about it, and he said, “Ah I got a little something up north, the usual routine.”

“Flying or driving?”

This was the continued thing about the guy, he was obnoxiously direct at times, though again Chris had to admit that’s how *he* could be too.

“Little of each,” Chris said. “But meanwhile where are *we* going?”

The landscape had changed, not so urban anymore. You couldn’t quite tell what *was* out there, not much moon tonight, but they were on I-15 in what Chris was guessing was eastern Riverside County.

Ned said, “Buddy of mine, he owns one of those race tracks? Not the real version, the amusement one.”

“You mean like Malibu Grand Prix?”

Ned brought his hand off the wheel and tapped it a couple times. “You’re *right on* with that knowledge. I haven’t heard that place mentioned in a while. That was a blast, until it finally folded.”

“But *like* that, you’re saying.”

“Not as good. The turns aren’t nearly as challenging. I don’t think the cars have the same horse power either, though he won’t admit that.”

“Your buddy.”

“Yeah . . . the other thing he’s got, adjacent . . . one of those animal sanctuaries.”

Chris wasn't sure about the direction now. "You mean a *rescue* type place? Dogs and cats and cows and goats? Wounded birds?"

"Not sure about the dogs and cats. Probably the rest of the stuff. Also wild animals."

"What *kind* of wild animals?"

"You know, lions and shit . . . Rescued from the circus."

"Hmm," Chris said, looking at Harrison still leaning back like he's out cold, though the guy was starting to groan slightly more often it seemed like.

That seemed like enough questions for now, and they rode in silence for another 20 minutes, until they passed Lake Elsinore, and Ned commented that you had a rare, fresh-water lake, going back to the Native Americans, and naturally someone turns it into a resort town and wrecks it.

Chris asked if they were almost there, and Ned said to keep your shirt on, and a little further, on the outskirts of Temecula, Ned leans forward concentrating pretty hard, making sure he's got the exit right, and they turn off onto a dirt road.

"You sure about this?" Chris said. "Surprising your racing place would be down one of these."

"It's not far," Ned said, and it wasn't, maybe a hundred yards more, and there it was, the car place, big neon sign, and behind that you could make another area but nothing was lit up back there.

Ned continued around the race track to the un-lit-up facility, and parked and turned off the engine.

"Feels pretty quiet," Chris said, thinking the *other* way now, maybe a little *too* quiet if you're actually telling me we got wild animals running around here.

"It is. Fortunate timing, Christmas weekend and everything, they got it all shut down, the racing *and* the animals . . . Couple trainers come in, sun-up, sun-down, and feed 'em, that's about it."

“Jeez. So he . . . left it open for you? . . . or what?”

“Exactly,” Ned said, and Chris was liking the feel of this a lot less, but Ned suggested they get a move on.

This meant hauling the guy out of the vehicle and bringing him along, which they did the simplest way, Chris under the armpits, Ned with the feet, and sure enough the front gate was open and Chris decided you had to trust Ned at this point . . . that he’d been here before and knew enough not to walk you into a lion pit or something . . .

And that’s what they did, not walked into it *themselves*, but *used* it, an actual lion pit in the place, no shit, back in there a ways, on the other side of a couple barns . . . a deep pit with a high wall, similar to a zoo, not as extensive, but it was what it was . . . and Ned and Chris got a good grip and a little momentum and tossed Harrison in there.

Chapter Fifteen

Sunday was Christmas Eve, and you had the feeling things were already thinning out at the *Cheater Five*.

Ken said he had an aunt in Baldwin Park and when Chris got up it looked like he'd taken off, and Marlene had an older couple, friends of the family she said, in San Diego, and when Ned dropped Chris off last night after their deal, she was already on the road.

Ned, the reasonably considerate person he was turning out to be, invited Chris to his place, whatever *that* meant, for Christmas Eve . . . if he didn't have anywhere to go, Ned obviously seeing through the smokescreen of Chris going up north.

And yeah it *was* nice of the guy but you're not doing that, for a variety of reasons, and Chris let the day unfold, appreciating what he had in front of him, and he was okay with being on his own.

Though around 4 o'clock he thought maybe he'd head over to the Big Wok tonight, since it was a friendly family running the place and they were Chinese and Chris didn't think they made too big a deal about Christmas, and it would be more or less a regular night in there.

But then the phone rang, and it was Sharif, and he insisted Chris come over for Christmas Eve dinner with his family.

Chris said what if he had something else to do, and Sharif laughed and said he was taking a chance calling up then, but please come.

So he did, the family motel on Sepulveda, where Chris had a little bit of history already with Sharif, and indirectly with his family, and son of a gun . . . Sharif's wife and sister pull one of the best turkeys out of the oven

that Chris had ever tasted, and meanwhile they're all decked out in their traditional attire.

Everyone was in an upbeat mood, including the grandparents, both sets of them, and the whole gang lived together under one roof, cheerfully making it work . . . and Chris told Sharif he didn't expect him to be into turkey, and Sharif smiled and patted him on the back and said the only thing missing tonight was a game on TV, because you can't beat turkey and football.

Chris had to laugh, and the crazy thing was Sharif was serious . . . and they all retired to the living room and Chris said he was going to pass, and he wished everyone well.

Sharif was a little disappointed but saw him out and Chris said he was pretty sure there *were* a couple of NFL games on tomorrow, and apparently Sharif hadn't thought of that since that'd be Christmas Day, and that seemed to perk him up a bit and he was back to normal when they said goodnight.

But now what?

It was still kind of early, not quite 8 o'clock.

What really didn't sound bad was heading down to the beach. But he'd dressed up a little bit tonight, a rarity, so he went back to the apartment first to put on some looser clothes.

And while you're there . . . okay fine, look around a little bit . . . which meant go online and hopefully not find something of concern right away about an incident last night near Temecula.

Thankfully there wasn't anything in the LA Times, so nothing to screw up your Christmas on that front . . . and for kicks, before you shut it down, yeah, you might as well check up north too.

And surprisingly he got onto the Chronicle right away and the whole page loaded, an issue they really *did* have to work on up there, but Chris

figured at least tonight traffic was light all around and everything was pretty quick.

Now you *had* something, front page, one guy in Berkeley shooting another guy on the corner of Le Roy and Ridge, a block off campus on the northside.

The guy got shot in the leg, and was going to live . . . but the *twist* here, they're saying the guy that shot him was the *good* guy.

The article didn't *say* that in so many words of course, but *Holy Toledo* . . . what we seem to have happening here--Chris reading further along, and putting it together--is some guy with a backpack, acting as a *decoy*--and when the mutant comes along and tries to hold him up, the *victim* opens fire.

Wow . . .

This was a lot to digest tonight, and Chris didn't want to go there, and no doubt there'd be some follow ups.

But *maybe* . . . he had something to do with it.

He closed the computer and was out the door, and started up the familiar initial hill toward the beach, and then the right, and the left, and the downhill . . . and the houses along the way were lit up with good cheer . . . and growing up, this was his favorite time of year, and some good memories came flooding back.

But when he got to the bottom, and stepped up onto the pier and worked his way out to the end, no one else there except one old guy with a fishing line in the water, Chris felt a strong urge to talk to Ray.

So he called him.

"Seely, you mother-*fucker*," Ray said.

"How you doing, man?" Chris said.

"Always suspicious when you on the line," Ray said. "You're not fixing to drop in on me right now are you?"

"I wish I could. I'm down in L.A."

“Well that’s a relief then,” Ray said, though Chris could tell he didn’t mean it.

“How about your hip? The accident, picking up those wrestling tickets.”

“Whyn’t you be worrying about your *own* two hips . . . Answer your question, it’s serviceable.”

“So that means you can have lunch or something? Maybe after the 1st of the year?”

“A possibility. Long as you don’t drag me to that one place.”

“Weatherbee’s. I thought you said that place was growing on you.”

“Fine. We can deal with it.”

Chris said, “Well . . . I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas. It’s been an unusual year . . . Not the worst thing I guess, that we’re both still around.”

Ray was quiet for a minute and said, “Well you’ve been good to me.”

Chris said, “See this is why I don’t like calling you.”

“What? Too much drama for you to handle?”

“Something like that . . . you okay tomorrow, and everything?”

“Don’t be worrying about me.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

“Yeah I’m okay,” Ray said.

“Well I guess that makes two of us,” Chris said, and they said goodbye, and the one guy fishing was gone now, and Chris had the end of the pier to himself, and the waves kept rolling in in the dark, and after a while he supposed he should head back . . . except really, what was the hurry?

The End

If you enjoyed '**Justice Wrap**' and feel like leaving a review on **Amazon**, that is always appreciated!

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