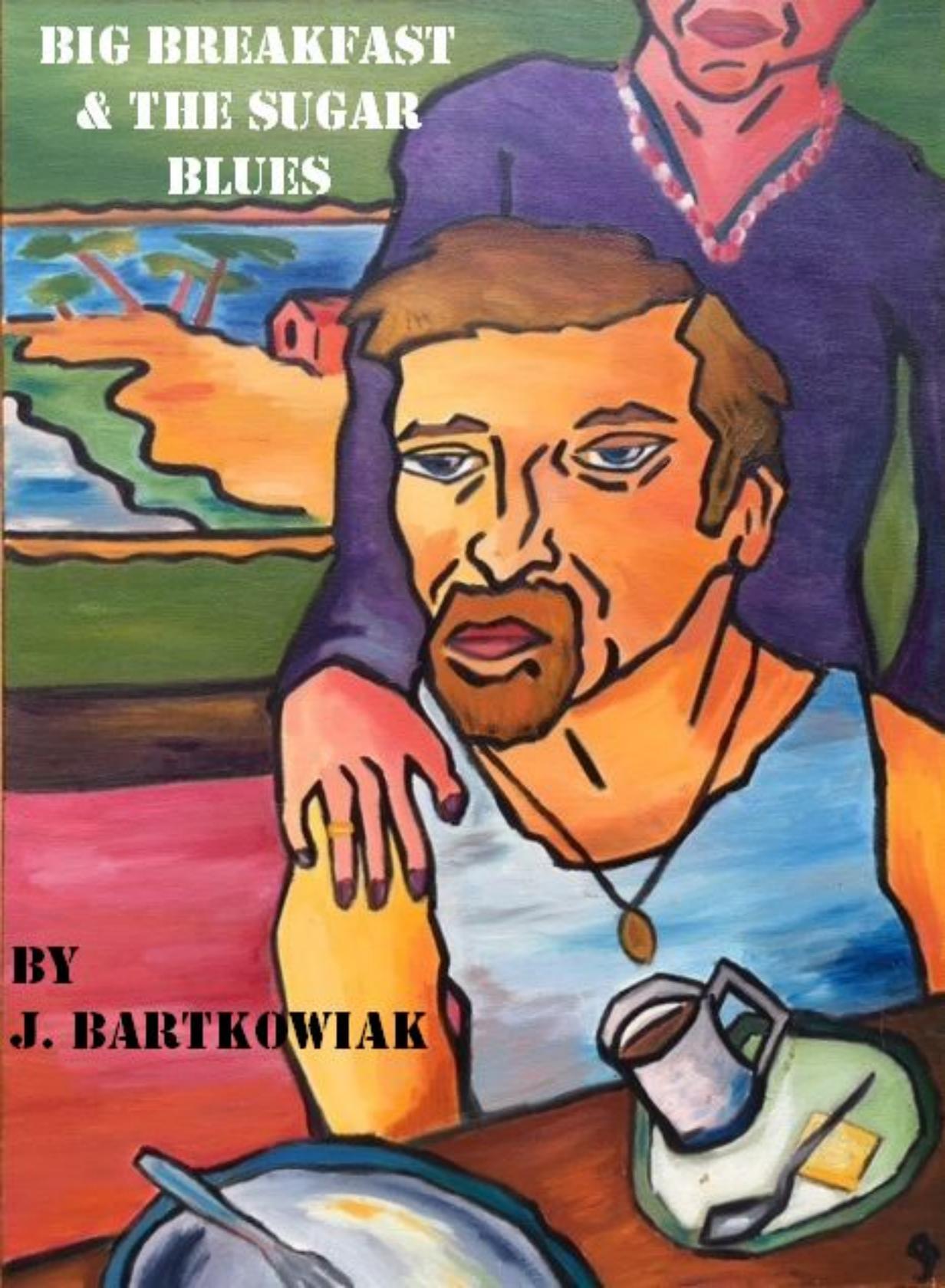


BIG BREAKFAST & THE SUGAR BLUES

**BY
J. BARTKOWIAK**



This story is dedicated to my brother, Brian, who left us too soon.

Keep on Rockin' in the Free World!

Thanks to E.D. for inspiring me to start this story and the ghost of Captain Clough for encouraging me to finish it.

Special Thanks to Team Two, Ben C. and to Charles from the CB for their help in editing this mess.

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THE BEGINNING

Enrico's had ten stools, three tables, a few beer posters of bikini women on the walls, and a kitchen in the back. I came for the kitchen two to three nights a week. It was run by a hip young kid named Emmanuel. E-Man is what everyone called him and he cooked some pretty decent Chinese for a half Filipino Mexican from The Mission. My favorite was No. 5 on the menu, the eggplant, tofu and string beans dish cooked in a garlic chili sauce. The Chicken Chow Mein was a close second. His business was all word of mouth and Twitter and YELP and all that. It was also ninety percent take out. People would rush in, grab their plastic bags of food and pay with one foot already out the door. Enrico's was not a place to linger, unless you were set on drinking. It smelled like a frat house on a Sunday morning and was as dark as Halloween inside. There was no music, no pool table, no dart board. There was not even a clock on the wall. In Enrico's time ceased to exist.

I was much too lazy to take my dinner to the one bedroom I was renting just down on Telegraph Ave. I don't think I had eaten anything there, except canned tomato soup and my pride, since Annie and I split for good back in March – more on that later. You should know I plan on telling you everything that happened that summer, warts and all. Suffice it to say, on the night that broke the camel's back I was escorted in handcuffs off the premises into the backseat of a squad car, while the neighbors watched like the Roman elite from their windows and their poodle mixed dogs howled at the sirens. It was not my finest moment in a lifetime of not so fine moments. But I'm getting off track, which may happen, since lately I'm not used to writing anything but my signature on child support checks. Besides, I've always been much more of a talker and I'm only writing now so my daughter, Margo, will know in the far off distant future that her father was not a bad guy, just one who made some rather dubious decisions. She'll learn soon enough on her own that people are too emotionally messy for some things to be explained in simple terms of black and white, good/bad, right or wrong. She also no doubt will learn that people are capable of great feats of stupidity.

Anyway, about E-Man...E-Man was not a bad guy, either, despite his correctional center appearance. He had a shaven head, a beard that hung like moss from his chin and arms covered with ink from elbows to wrists. It was a look only a mother and a prison warden could love. During the day he worked at a trendy \$20 a bowl Raman shop across from the Old Tribune building. When I asked him what he was doing in a dump like Enrico's, he said he was saving his pennies to buy a food truck in San Francisco. That was his dream. I told him it was a good dream with much better scenery and I offered to help him in any way I could. When he wasn't busy in the kitchen, he used to come out and work the crowd. He was one of those guys that was always smiling and quick to laugh, even if the sky was raining frogs. When he found out I was a baseball fan, he put his hooks in me. Ever since then we'd shoot the shit about the Giants and the A's. He seemed to know his stuff and wasn't just talking bull. He told me he thought the Giants had a shot at another title if Bumgarner stayed healthy. You might say E-Man and I had become friends. I had even invited him to the Giants/Padres game the following Thursday courtesy of a happy client who threw a couple of free tix my way. I know he was

going to get married soon, too but I didn't know when. Enrico's wasn't the kind of place you talked about marriage. It's too bad E-Man got killed. It's too bad anyone *good* gets killed.

CHAPTER 1 – YOU STUPID LOST BASTARD

It was still early on a Tuesday night in June but the fog had already made its way to Oakland like an unwanted guest stretching out on the living room couch. Enrico's was emptier than usual, which is pretty empty and that was alright with me. I prefer having my elbow space while I'm drinking. I recognized right away the two regulars sitting in the middle of the bar. The one guy, the larger of two by nearly a foot and a hundred pounds, had cornered me a week or so ago into listening to his youthful exploits as a member of the Black Panthers. Supposedly, he did a nickel for robbing a Wells Fargo bank in Vallejo back in the early 70's. The plan had been to buy guns for the revolution that never came. He told me he got caught in Miami waiting for a boat to take him to Cuba. "I was almost eating dinner and smoking cigars with Fidel." It was a great story but smelled like two feet of bullshit and I nearly laughed out loud while wading through it. The guy looked as radical as a basset hound with his big, sad, bloodshot eyes and drooping jowls. I think his name was Barry or Edwin or Barry Edwin. I'd have to look at his obituary again to confirm it. He nodded in my direction when I walked in as if he knew me from way back in his pickled memory bank but he wasn't quite sure. I gave him a friendly wave but sat at the stool closest to the door to keep my distance. He and his buddy, a younger guy with a gaunt, toothy face and a poor excuse for a moustache all shadowed under an Oakland A's ball cap, were in the middle of a booze-fueled discussion. His name on the police report was simply, "Customer No. 2." When I heard Barry Edwin use the words "technology," "drones," and "God" in the same sentence, I turned my head and tuned them out. Once you get sucked into those kinds of drunken conversations, especially with someone who's been sipping rum and coke from a straw since noon, it's harder than Alcatraz to escape. I admit I like to drink, and I talk more when I drink - it's the Irish in me - but I absolutely loath philosophical drunks. They're self-righteous and boring like my mother's Uncle Stan on the 4th of July.

When Anthony, the bartender came over, I ordered a Tecate', a shot of bourbon and a Chicken Chow Mein from the menu. Anthony, who wore the same red cardigan sweater every night, was curmudgeonly as the old man next door who wouldn't return the ball over the fence, but underneath his rough facade he really was a good egg and he didn't cheat on his pours. He was one of those bartenders who didn't seem to give a flying fuck about you one way or the other, which was alright by me. I wasn't there to make any lasting friendships - befriending E-Man was a purely accidental. (Try as I might, I sometimes couldn't avoid making friends.) Anthony told me he took me for a cop the first time I came in, and I guess I did fit the profile. I was a middle-aged white guy with a grey receding crew cut and goatee, walking into a mostly black bar to drink alone. When I told him I was a graphic designer, he laughed. Then he laughed even harder when I told him I was thinking about getting into "green" construction. He told me he didn't know what the fuck that was and that I still looked like a fucking cop. It was the only time I've seen him laugh. Unfortunately, it was at my expense. I heard later from the police that he had a wife and mentally challenged adult daughter down in San Leandro. I still

plan on looking them up and giving them some of the money I found up in Truckee. I figure I'd make up a story about being an old friend who had borrowed money and was now repaying the debt. I'm guessing a bartender's widow living in San Leandro would not turn down free cash or ask too many questions on where it came from.

The Giants game was on the t.v. above the bar, which was another reason I came to Enrico's – I didn't own a television. Pablo Sandoval was batting, which immediately made me think of Annie. Sandoval, a.k.a. "The Panda," was her favorite player. She liked the fact he always seemed to be having fun even when the Giants were getting their asses handed to them. Of course, she was disappointed when the news came out that he was accused of raping a woman down in Santa Cruz, but that's neither here nor there. We used to go to a lot of games before Margo was born. Annie would dress in orange and black. She knew all the players - who was on a hitting streak and who was in a slump. She even kept score at the games, which I used to kid her about. "Only old ladies keep score." I quickly washed the memories from my head like bitter medicine when the bourbon arrived. Maybe I was getting sentimental or maybe it was the gnawing guilt of being a failed husband and an absentee father. As to that, The City and County of San Francisco had blessed me with only supervised visits with Margo every other Sunday. Believe me when I say you don't know the meaning of the word humiliation until you walk your daughter to the neighborhood playground with a city employee trailing three steps behind like the East German police. Oh, I did try crawling back to Annie with roses, chocolate, and a litany of promises but this time she was having none of it. I don't blame her. I guess she had had enough. She hadn't twisted my arm to stay out late or sometimes not come home at all. Nor did she force me to sleep with our real estate agent, or our Puerto Rican nanny, or my business partner Julia (more on her later) or any of the others whose names I don't remember. Still, she must have known from the beginning that I wasn't cut out for family life any more than my father was. I tried. I tried real hard for two years and not so hard for another two. Some guys just can't handle folding laundry, washing dishes or shopping at Cost Plus for bath rugs, just like some guys can't sing in tune no matter how many songs they sing. I waved Anthony over and ordered another bourbon, Maker's Mark, por favor." When it came I lifted the glass to my lips and toasted myself, "To your health you stupid lost bastard."

E-Man came out from the kitchen to see how I liked the food. I gave him a thumbs up and told him it was "excellent as always." He responded with a gold toothy smile. We talked a bit about the Dodgers making a move on the Giants. E-Man said he wasn't sweating it too much because the Dodgers had too many multi-million dollar egos on the team.

"They'll fuck themselves in the end. You'll see. Puig is a cancer. I'm more worried about the Nats in the East. Bryce Harper is the real deal and they have Strasburg coming back in the rotation. They screwed themselves by shelving him because of innings at the end of last year. The most backass move I've ever seen. You have a shot at the title – you gotta go for it. Hey, Anthony, what do you think about it?"

E-Man loved to mess with Anthony but Anthony always seemed to prove himself a more than capable sparring partner.

“Think about what?”

“The Giants. What’d you think we’re talking about? Chess?”

“Why would I give two shits about that? I’d rather watch a cactus grow or go to fucking church than watch baseball. I only have it on because you keep bugging the piss out of me about it.”

Anthony had the voice of someone who ate cigarettes like mints and his speech was heavily salted with f-bombs.

“When was the last time you went to ‘fucking’ church?” E-Man continued to jab.

“Back when your Momma was still swaddling your little chorizo with a tortilla.” Anthony counterpunched.

“That’s racist.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is. Isn’t it?” E-Man asked, turning to me for support.

“It’s at least culturally insensitive.”

“Yeah, it’s culturally insensitive. Plus, my mother ain’t even Mexican. She’s from Manila.”

“Alright then she wrapped your little whatchamacallit...you know?”

“Lumpia,” I threw him.

“Yeah, lumpia, she’d wrap your little lumpia up with rice paper just like your baby Jesus in the manger.”

“You’re going to go to hell if you keep talking like that,” E-Man said, throwing another punch, even though it was clear he had already lost the fight.

“Talking like what?”

“Talking like that about Jesus and about my mother.”

“Are you kidding me? Look at this fuckin’ place,” Anthony said, waving his hand out like a showroom model. “Look around you – what does this look like? Hell? We’re already there.”

“Do they have bourbon in hell?” I chimed in, but Anthony was already walking away towards Barry Edwin and Customer No. 2.

“He’s really a teddy bear,” E-Man said smiling at me and pointing his thumb Anthony’s way.

“Yeah, he’s real soft and cuddly alright,” I added.

“Okay, I got to get back to the back. I got an order to fill. Remember, Bumgarner. And Pagan, too – he needs to stay healthy – he’s tough as nails but fragile as a wine glass. Those two are the key. Of course, Posey is still the man. You can stick a knife in them if they lose him. Hey, we’re still on for the game next week?”

“You bet, they play the Padres – great seats, too – just a few rows up from the third base dugout.”

“It’s Thursday, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Phew, we’re supposed to check out a hall for the wedding on Wednesday.”

“You still want to go through with it after seeing me come in here night after night?”

“No but she’d kill me if I back out now – and her mother would kill me, too,” he said laughing. “Alright, I’ll talk to you later, Man,” E-Man said giving me a fist bump. He always called me Man. I don’t think he knew my name.

But, I never did talk to him later. E-Man went back to the kitchen and I went back to my plate of noodles and the game. Buster Posey had just hit a double to left center, scoring Pagan and moving Pence over to third, when the door flew open to let in what was left of the day followed by three men dressed in suits. I heard Barry Edwin say from down the bar, “Jesus Christ! Would ya look what just walked in.” At first I assumed the men were picking up food but when I glanced over my shoulder, I saw them preparing to sit at one of the bar’s three round tables where I had never seen anyone sit. I continued to watch them through the reflection in the large oval mirror above the bar. They looked Japanese but I wasn’t sure until I heard them talk. I have spent enough money in sushi bars to know the sound of the language. It was Annie’s favorite food. We used to the same place on 24th St. once a week. Anyway, one of them, the shortest of the three, was carrying a metallic briefcase very close to his body like it was a seeing eye dog. When he sat down he placed it on his lap and it morphed into a cat. He seemed so attached to it that I was half surprised when he didn’t pat it. He adjusted his tie and

clasped his hands together on the table. He was not only the shortest but the oldest by at least a decade, with patches of grey above the ears and a well-groomed mustache. He looked as dignified and composed as an English butler. The other two sat down at his sides, sandwiching him at the table. One of them had slicked back hair and was wearing a light blue suit that looked like it cost a few bucks; it was the same color as the Ford Tempo I once owned in college. (God, I hated that car. It was a peace offering of sorts from my father, so of course it was always breaking down.) The third man had short cropped hair that stuck up in front like a crown. He wore thick framed glasses that covered half his boney face. He was the youngest of the three by far and I referred to him in the statement I gave to the cops as "the Kid." He looked out of place in his black suit, which was too large for his skinny frame. They were an odd threesome, and the fact that they landed in a shit hole like Enrico's on a Tuesday night made them even more of an oddity.

They had only been seated for half a minute when things got a little stranger. Looking in the mirror, I saw the older man, The Butler, giving a verbal lashing to the blue suit guy. It was all in Japanese, so I have no idea what he was saying. I wish I had, it could possibly have saved me a lot of time and trouble down the line. The blue suit guy's face reddened the color of the inside of a grapefruit and it looked nearly ripe enough to explode, but he sat there taking it like a boot camp cadet. When he finally did speak, the Butler silenced him by slamming the table with his palm, while moving his head back and forth like a pecking hen. He worked himself into such a tizzy that his perfect hair fell over his forehead like an ear flap. His tantrum generated chuckles from the peanut gallery in the middle of the bar. They appeared to be finding it as amusing as a Tom and Jerry cartoon. Barry Edwin even had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

The next thing I knew the blue suit guy was standing right beside me. I looked over at him and he greeted me with a nodding smile like nothing had just happened back at the table.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello. Your friend has got quite the temper," I said back. "Did you forget to take out the trash?"

I didn't know if he understood me or not because he responded only with another nod and smile.

Anthony bellied up to the opposite side of the bar to take the guy's order.

"What can I get you?"

If Anthony was surprised by the diverse new clientele, he didn't show it. His face had all the emotion of granite, with deep crevices running down both sides of his round, flattened nose. Everything about him had the look that he had seen it all before. Unfortunately, he had never seen what was about to go down.

“Two scotch and waters and a coke,” the blue suit guy responded in perfect English but with a heavy accent. “Do you have Glenlivet?”

“We don’t have ‘Glen’ anything. We have good, bad and ugly...and Johnny Walker,” Anthony said, turning around to look at the bottles on the shelf.

The man opted for the only option, Johnny Walker. I gave him a quick once over as he ordered. He was clean shaven with sculpted sideburns and had the self-assured air of a man who was happy with the way he looked. I could smell a recent cigarette on him. Later, when the cops asked me if he appeared nervous or anxious, I told them “no,” but looking back, I do remember him eyeing the door once or twice. But none of that meant anything to me at the time.

I could see the two regulars down the bar staring at the man. It was probably the most interesting thing that happened to them all day...hell, all week. It also stopped their chatter about “God” and “drones.” (Now the world will never be blessed with their bar stool wisdom.)

“Who’s winning?” he asked me nodding towards the television. The guy liked to nod.

“The Dodgers are, 4-2.”

“That’s too bad,” he responded. He took out his wallet from the inside pocket of his blue suit and pulled out a crisp twenty which he placed gently like a napkin on the bar. It was then that I saw he was missing most of the little finger on his right hand. I tried not to stare at it but it was such a strange useless looking stub that it was hard not to, and I also *knew* what it meant.

“You a Giants fan?” I asked, feeling like I should keep the conversation going for no reason other than I think he caught me looking at his stub.

“Yes, the Tokyo Giants,” he said smiling.

“Never heard of them. Are they a minor league team?”

“Last year they played like one,” he replied, almost but not quite laughing at his own joke.

And that was the extent of what I later described to the police as “our brief awkward conversation about baseball.”

When Anthony returned with his drinks, the man asked him if he had a number for a taxi. Anthony turned around, grabbed a yellow card from atop the cash register and slid it onto the bar in front of him.

“Do you know if they’ll drive to the San Francisco airport?” the man asked, turning the card back and forth in his hand.

“They’ll drive you all the way to the fuckin’ Las Vegas airport if you show them the money,” Anthony replied. “Ask for Jake. He’s a friend of the bar.”

“This bar has a friend?” I asked. If any bar was friendless, it was definitely Enrico’s.

Anthony ignored my comment. Like I said, he could give a flying fuck.

The man gathered up the three drinks carefully and walked back to the table without waiting for his change. Anthony grabbed the twenty off the bar, looked at me, shrugged his bony shoulders that pointed up like tent poles from his red sweater and then headed towards the kitchen.

I returned again to the game and my noodles. After I finished eating, I had a strong urge to have some “sugar” for desert. I tried to resist it but my resistance was halfhearted at best. My will power had left town a few months back without so much as a Dear John letter. “Sugar” is what I called the chemical romance I had developed while pulling all-nighters in front of the computer scrambling to finish my design projects. It blossomed into a true love affair since I moved over to Oakland from the City and was put in touch with a new reliable source, Clifford (not his real name), who conveniently lived right off Piedmont Ave. I also no longer had to hide it from Annie, which made it ten times easier to abuse. There was no more sneaking off to the store to get another quart of milk or spending ten minutes just to bring the garbage downstairs to the garage.

I finished my beer and walked over towards the bathroom in the back of the bar. Enrico’s only had one bathroom for both sexes which wasn’t a problem because there rarely was a woman in the place, except for an old bar queen I called Suzie, who would sit quietly at the end of the bar drinking scotch and water and reading Stephen King books. Fortunately for Suzie, she wasn’t there that night. I passed the three men sitting at the table along the way. The blue suit guy had moved his chair around the table and was now seated facing the door. He was on his cellphone but looked up at me and nodded and smiled as I passed. I looked across the table where the Butler now was scolding the Kid. The Kid sat there taking it with his head down like he had just dented the family car. I felt sorry for him. He seemed like he should have been eating a Chipotle burrito and writing code for some start-up down in Mountain View. It turns out the Kid was the nephew of the Butler but I didn’t find that out until much later.

The bathroom at Enrico’s is the size of a jail cell with one urinal, one stall, and a sink. There was a framed poster on the wall of a stone villa and vineyard with the word “Tuscany” on the bottom. I assumed it was a left over from when Enrico’s was an Italian restaurant probably a thousand years ago. I locked both the door and the stall behind me, sat down and carefully pulled out the small paper package from my front pocket and unfolded it with the skill of a

surgeon. I scooped some of the white powder onto the groove of my house key and vacuumed it up my nose. I closed my eyes, waited....waited...waited...and then everything was right again. All my problems and all the problems of the world vanished the second the signal reached my brain. There was no more separation from Margo and Annie, no more Islamic terrorism, no more global warming, no more four years of Californian drought, no more clients calling, no more shoe box apartment, no more Dancing with the Stars or Kardashians or Donald Fucking Trump, no more bills, no Enrico's, no nothing. None of that shit mattered to me. I felt above it all, completely free and unburdened like a stowaway on a cruise liner heading towards Mars.

But my chemical Nirvana came and left the station as fast as a bullet train. There were shouts coming from the bar. I couldn't understand it. It didn't sound English or Japanese and it didn't sound *good*. I then heard shouting in English, it sounded like Anthony's gravel voice, but I still couldn't make it out. This was followed by a gunshot. There was more shouting and two more shots and then another two or three that sounded like firecrackers. I folded the package and jammed it in my back pocket, spilling some of the powder on the floor in my haste. My pulse was racing and my hands were shaking. I looked at the small rectangular window above the stall and wondered if I could squeeze through it. I didn't think so. I was trapped. Thoughts of Margo and Annie ran through my head, along with the fact that I was going to die sitting on the toilet in a dive bar. How would my mother react to that, I wondered? Maybe she wouldn't be surprised. I had always thought I would go out doing something more adventurous and heroic like jumping from a plane to lead an orphanage of children from an encroaching lava flow. Thoughts of my mortality were interrupted by a long blast of gun fire that froze me as stiff as a store front dummy. I heard screaming in the same foreign voice and another rapid progression of shots and then nothing but silence. The quietest silence I have ever heard. So quiet I could hear my watch ticking. I put my hand over it to muffle the sound. So, this is how it ends. I didn't know whether to be relieved or terrified. I kept waiting to hear footsteps approach the bathroom but none did. The whole thing took less than the time it took to take a morning piss. I waited for a long chunk of silence to elapse before working up the courage to unlock the stall and then, slowly like a cat on a diving board, I opened the bathroom door.

What I saw has haunted my nightmares ever since. The room smelled of gun powder and a layer of smoke hung eye level throughout. There was no sound except for the television – another Chevy truck commercial. The first bodies I saw were that of the Kid and the blue suit guy. The Kid was slumped face down over the table with one arm extended forward. His broken glasses lay at his side and his coke had been knocked over and was spilling onto the linoleum floor. The blue suit guy was lying face up. His snappy blue suit was spotted with dark red holes. His right hand was clutching a handgun. There was no sign of the Butler or his brief case. They seemed to have vanished. Over near the bar, Barry Edwin's large body was flopped like a walrus on the floor with blood flowing like lava from his stomach. His big sad eyes were open and fixed on the ceiling. His friend, "Customer No. 2," had fallen over on the stool next to him. His A's cap was still on his head. I yelled for Anthony and E-Man but got no reply. I thought the worse and my stomach dropped like a roller coaster. As I walked around Barry Edwin's body to peer over the bar, I heard movement from behind me. Turning around, I saw the blue suit guy trying to sit up, only his arms didn't seem to know his chest was plugged full of

lead. I went and knelt over him and lifted his head. There was blood trickling from the side of his mouth. He opened his eyes and looked at me with a hint of recognition.

“No police. No police,” he pleaded.

Then with great effort, he lifted his closed left hand off the floor, brought it towards my face and slowly unclenched it. In his palm was a thumb drive.

“No police...you promise,” he said again, staring me straight in the eye as if to make sure I understood him.

“Alright, no police,” I replied taking the thumb drive. His arm immediately fell back to the floor.

“Who did this? Who was it?”

It was hard to watch the enormous strain it took for him to push enough air from his lungs to say the words.

“Chim-Chimney Folk,” he mumbled and then closed his eyes...forever. It happened just like that – just like you’ve seen a hundred times in the movies.

“Chimney Folk?” Is that what he said? What the hell did that mean? “Chimney Folk?” I said it again out loud.

I laid his head back down on the floor, careful not to hurt him, as if that mattered anymore. He looked years younger dead than he had alive. I looked at the thumb drive. There was a piece of white tape with Japanese characters written on it. I put it in my pocket.

I still don’t know why I did what I did next...I guess was curious to know who the guy was. Plus, I wasn’t thinking straight at the time. Who knows why people do stupid things but it’s been going on since the beginning of time from Adam and Eve to King Louis to Kanye West and the Octomom. Anyway, I quickly went through his outside pockets and found a hotel card key, the taxi card Anthony had given him, a house key with an odd shaped head, a restaurant receipt, and an almost full pack of Camel Lights. I was going to check his inside pockets for his wallet, too, but his chest was all soaked in blood and I couldn’t get myself to do it. I stood and jammed everything I found in the front pockets of my jeans as the siren from down the street got louder.

CHAPTER 2 – IT COULD HAVE BEEN GREEK

The drive down Broadway in the squad car, past the deserted car dealerships of Auto Row and into the ghost town streets of downtown Oakland, was a blur of passing yellow and white street lights. I was so fixated on the image of Anthony's and E-Man's bodies being wheeled out from Enrico's and into the coroner's van that I don't even remember arriving at the parking garage underneath the police station where I was escorted by a uniformed cop upstairs and through a maze of white, well-lit corridors before being left in an office with a desk and two folding chairs. I sat there for a while twiddling my thumbs before the same policeman brought me down another hall to another office with a desk and two chairs. This time, one of the chairs was occupied by a brown curly haired man who looked to be about my age, give or take a few years. Besides the cheap sports coat and poorly tied tie, he didn't look like other plains clothes cops I had had the pleasure of knowing. He had a clean shaven boyish face and reminded me a lot of the actor Will Farrell, so I kept expecting him to say something funny, but he turned out to be about as humorous as a Good Friday mass. To his side was a yellow notepad covered with what looked like scribble down half the page.

"Mr. Donovan, have a seat. I'm Lt. Walker," he said, looking up from a steaming coffee mug he was spinning around on the table. His voice didn't fit his face at all. It was deep as a desert well, not quite Johnny Cash but still, it would have been a great anchor for a barbershop quartet.

I sat down and folded my arms.

"You're a very lucky man, Mr. Donovan."

"I guess I should thank my weak bladder for that." I was in no mood for being nice. I was tired and was pissed they had played the office shell game with me. I didn't know if that was a mess-up or some sort of police tactic. The whole thing smelled more like an interrogation, even though I already had given my statement twice. Maybe the cops suspected I had something to do with it. I'm guessing they had run my name through their database and had seen my bogus domestic violence charge from March (bogus in that, yes, I broke a window in a fit of anger, but I never ever lifted a finger at Annie) and my borderline DUI back in 2008. God Bless the LAPD for that...the car was parked...on my Cousin Arnie's neighbor's front lawn, sure, but still parked. Then there was the drunk and disorderly from 2010 and the indecent exposure charge in college (I was 50% dressed - evidently it was the wrong 50%). Maybe even my shoplifting arrest from high school was still showing up - one week of community service for getting caught stuffing CDs of London Calling and Zeppelin's Houses of the Holy down my pants. Anyway... it was the first time in my life I had been in a police station not having done anything wrong, but I still felt guilty as hell.

"You want some coffee?" the Lieutenant asked.

"I'd rather go home and have a drink. I didn't get to finish mine back at the bar."

"I'm glad you're finding the humor in this, Mr. Donovan." There was a hint of irritation in his voice.

"No, I don't find anything particularly funny about finding six dead bodies."

"Well, we would have found *seven* if it weren't for your weak bladder," he said, staring me straight in the eye.

"All the more reason I'm not laughing," I replied, holding his stare.

He blinked first and then waved off the policeman who had brought me to the room and waited for him to leave.

"I've just read the statement you gave at the scene but I was hoping you might have recalled something more on the drive down," he said, leaning over the table and putting his hands together like he was about to pray.

"Besides remembering why my friends warned me against moving to Oakland, no...nothing I haven't already said at least twice before back at the bar. I went to the restroom and when I came back everyone was dead."

"Not everyone...Do you remember anything more about this third Japanese man, the one you say is missing? Tell me about him."

He took a sip from his mug. It was a slow annoying slurp. I wondered how long he was going to keep me. I looked at my watch to give him a hint. It was almost 1:30 in the morning. It had been over four hours since the shooting.

"Well, he was much older than the other two guys and I think I already mentioned the silver briefcase he was carrying around like a security blanket, and that he had been yelling at the guy in the blue suit and the Kid."

"Yelling? Do you know what he was yelling about?" he asked, scratching the back of his head.

"I wish I knew. Maybe he didn't get what he wanted for Christmas – it was all in Japanese, who knows?"

"Would you say it was a small yell or a big yell?"

"I'd say it was more a medium yell – somewhere between my ex-wife and a drill sergeant."

It was obvious by his pained expression, which looked like he had just bit down on a rock, that he didn't appreciate my sense of humor.

“Did he show any other signs of violence?” he asked, continuing in a very patient, methodical manner that was beginning to irritate like a pimple on my ass. I wanted a drink and some sugar and then another drink, until I woke up and realized it was all a bad dream and that E-Man and Anthony were both still breathing and still exchanging verbal blows about baseball.

“Well, he slammed the table once or twice.”

“Can you show me?”

“Show you? What, how he slammed the table?” I couldn’t tell if he was messing with me or not.

“Yes, how hard did he hit it?” He had his pen in his hand and was poised to start writing.

“About this hard,” I said, slamming the table hard enough to make his coffee mug jump off the table and loud enough for the uniform cop, who had brought me to the room and who must have been standing just outside doing God knows what, to come rushing into the room with a “what’s happening” look on his face. The Lieutenant put up his hand like a Buddhist monk to reassure him everything was okay and he went back out.

“Look, if you’re asking me if I think this guy shot up the place and then disappeared into the fog, I would say you’re way off base. He looked as dangerous as a dentist.”

Lt. Walker gave me another pained look. Who knows – maybe his dad had been a dentist.

In my own defense on my defensiveness to Lt. Walker’s questions, I should say after all my previous run-ins with the police (most recently when Annie invited a locksmith over to work his trade on our doors), I was always left with a sour taste in my mouth. I know they were there to serve and protect but I didn’t have much faith in them doing either. I also knew there were a hundred homicides a year in Oakland and I’m guessing very few, if any, were investigated let alone solved. *Why would this be any different?* The streets were filled with killers. The system was broken and the good guys could no longer catch the bad guys. It was a simple numbers game. And if they did by chance happen to make an arrest it no doubt would drag on in the legal system for years like a t.v. sitcom starring Tony Danza.

"Anything else you can recall?" he asked, moving his pen between his fingers. "Anything that might be useful?" He emphasized the word "useful" by stretching the word out like a throw rug.

I knew that was my opportunity to come clean and tell him the last words of the blue suit guy and about the thumb drive that was sitting like a hot piece of coal in my pocket...but I didn’t do either and I’m not sure why. I surely don’t remember granting the blue suit guy a last request. He forced his “no police” plea on me but he was dead and I didn’t kill him. I didn’t owe him any favors. If anything, he and his two friends owed me a truck load of karma for bringing their baggage and brief case through Enrico’s door. That said, I really didn’t want to come across as adversarial, especially sitting there with a quarter of an eight ball of blow in my pocket. If they had searched

me, and I'm surprised they hadn't, I'm positive my Sunday visits with Margo would have become a thing of the past.

"I already told the police back at the bar about hearing shouts in another language...not in English or Japanese." I offered Lt. Walker a different bone to chew, which he seemed happy to bite down on.

"That's right. Do you know what it sounded like? Could you tell whether it was European or Asian?"

"Asian, I think, but it could have been Greek. I really have no idea. It happened so quickly and I was inside the bathroom."

He wrote some more chicken scratch on his pad and then took another sip from his mug, which was no longer steaming.

I took advantage of the silence to throw out my two cents on what I thought happened, which of course is exactly the last thing a policeman wants to hear. "If you ask me I think they accidentally stumbled upon Enrico's because if they wanted a taxi they must not have had a car, so, they had to have walked from somewhere on Telegraph, a restaurant maybe or another bar. Maybe they were being followed and needed to get off the street or maybe they were meeting someone there – although it would be a strange place to meet someone."

My theory was met with a quizzical stare followed by the Lieutenant cracking his neck to one side and then the other. The guy seemed to have more tics than a hunting dog.

"O.K. Mr. Donovan. I think that's it for now. We'll contact you if we have any other questions."

"Really? That's it?" I asked. I really wanted to get the hell out of there but I could not believe they had dragged me all the way downtown just to hear me pound on the table.

"Yes."

"You brought me down for two minutes of questions I already answered?"

"I was hoping you'd have something more to tell us - something you remembered away from the scene."

"I do have more to say but it's all questions. Like, who the hell were these Japanese guys and what were they doing there in Enrico's of all places? Didn't someone see them? Someone must have. They stuck out like a sore thumb." I was so upset that I couldn't stop myself from raising my voice.

"Well, we're looking into that. They both had Japanese passports on them and we're running checks."

"What about their cellphones? I know the blue suit guy had a cellphone. I saw him talking on it."

"Like I said, we're looking into it. I can't tell you anything more than that right now." It sounded like he was quoting straight from the police manual.

"Can't or won't?" I asked starting to stand up from the table.

"When we find out something we'll let you know," he said, continuing to play matador with my questions. "We'll have one of our officers drive you home."

"No offense, but I'd rather not be seen having the police drop me off just down the street from the bar. I know it sounds crazy but I'm feeling a bit paranoid right now," I said, not trying to hide my sarcasm. "Whoever did this is still out there."

"Well, we can call you a cab or you're free to have someone to pick you up," he said, standing up and putting his hands on the hips of his beige corduroy pants. He was actually much taller than I thought he'd be. "I'm sure we're going to need to talk again soon, so, stay available. You're the only lead we have right now."

"Even though I didn't see anything?"

"You saw this third man," he said with his lips expanding like a worm on his face as he opened the door.

Right before I walked out I turned and said, "Oh, there is another thing I do remember...it's probably nothing and you might already have this in your report, but the guy, the one in the blue suit... he was missing his little finger." I stuck out my little finger just so there was no mistaking which one I was referring to.

Lt. Walker didn't say a word, except for a deep "Hmm" but it sounded more like "Hmm, that's very interesting," and led me to believe that he knew what the missing finger *meant* and I felt for the first time I might be dealing with someone who didn't have their head up their ass.

"The officer outside will escort you back to the lobby," he said, awkwardly extending his hand for me to shake. I could smell the coffee on his breath. I took his hand and then left the room more confused than when I walked in.

CHAPTER 3 – YOU HAD ME AT VODKA

Julie was waiting for me in the street parking across from the police station in her new red Mini Cooper. She beeped her horn and waved through the open window. When I collapsed down into the passenger seat, she reached over and gave me an awkward hug. She was dressed casually in sweats and a blue Berkeley sweatshirt and her long blond hair was tied back in a ponytail and covered with a baseball cap.

“Donovan, this is so insane. I can’t believe it,” were her first words to me. She always called me by my last name as did everyone else except my mother and Annie.

“Well, it’s true and thanks for coming to get me.”

“Are you kidding? Besides, picking you up from the police station seems to have become part of my job description,” she said, referring to having retrieved me back in March from the Mission Street Station.

“At least this time you didn’t need to post bail.”

“That’s too bad. I was really looking forward to seeing the guy at the bail bonds place again. You know I’m a sucker for bald men with monster sideburns and tear drop tattoos.”

“Next time I’ll make sure they charge me with something.”

“Where to?” she asked, turning down the radio, which was tuned to the same crappy pop station she was always playing at work.

“As far away from here as possible. Do you have anything to drink at your place?”

“I’ve got enough. Vodka, wine, beer, tequila...”

“Stop. You had me at vodka.”

She started the engine and we pulled away from the curb.

I actually forgot Julia’s exact age but I knew she was about ten years younger than me. She was from New York and had been dipped in L.A. for a few years, which is a dangerous combination. We had met through a client of mine who said she was looking to make a move up to S.F. Something happened down in L.A. that made her want to leave town fast. I had my theories and they all included making a break from some asshole guy. Anyway, I threw a couple of projects her way and she proved her worth and then some. Actually, she was a much better designer than I was and a better artist and probably a better technician, too, but I’d never tell her

any of that. She had a healthy enough ego as it was. It was a good partnership – she did the bulk of the heavy lifting while I went out and brought in the business through my smoozing and boozing, and everything had been hunky dory ever since. Well, until Enrico's.

Soon we were driving past the shipyards, train yards and truck yards that make up the industrial wasteland of West Oakland. There was little traffic and within minutes we were on the Bay Bridge. San Francisco had been my home for ten years and it still felt like home, especially with Margo there, and if I could have found a one bedroom for less than the price of a small Caribbean island, I would never have moved across the Bay, and that night would never have happened to *me*. I guess I have the mass migration of software engineers and wannabe Zuckerbergs blowing the roof off the rental market to thank for that.

"What did the police say?"

"The police don't say anything. They ask questions – the same questions over and over."

"Well, somebody must have seen something. It's not like it's a quiet street. What about surveillance cameras?"

I could tell it was killing her not to have all the answers. It was the New Yorker in her.

"The place is a dive bar – it's not an Applebee's. I'm sure there are no cameras. It barely has lights."

"So, how are you feeling now?" she asked taking her eyes off the road to glance over at me. There was a genuine concern in her voice that I wasn't used to.

"I'll let you know once I wake up and have some vodka."

The truth was I felt angry, very angry – it was like someone without asking my permission had changed my life forever...for the worse.

"What about the Japanese guys - who were they? The police must at least know that?"

"You would think that but who knows? They have their I.D.'s – they know they're Japanese but not much else. The whole thing's like a bad joke...Three Japanese businessmen walk into a bar and the whole place turns into a shooting gallery..."

"The punch line needs a little work."

As we exited the Treasure Island Tunnel the fog was so thick that I could barely see the lights of the San Francisco skyline.

"Mind if I smoke?" I asked pulling out the pack of cigarettes I had nicked off the blue suit guy.

“Really? It’s a brand new car.”

“Well, then it needs breaking in. It’ll help get rid of that new car smell.”

Julia sighed but didn’t object any further. She was being sympathetic and I was taking advantage of it. Normally, she would have told me to go smoke it up my ass.

I lit one up and then rolled down the window. The cold damp air felt good blowing against my face and the cigarette felt good filling my lungs. They both helped thaw the numbness I was feeling. The rest of the ride I kept silent, thinking about Enrico’s. My thoughts were a jumbled mess of question marks spinning around me like the rings around Saturn. *What were the Japanese doing there? How did they get there? Were they followed to Enrico’s? What happened to the Butler? What was in his briefcase? Why didn’t they kill him? And of course, who the did it?*

Julia had a one bedroom, third floor apartment on 22nd and Sanchez in the Noe Valley neighborhood known mainly for its strollers and tiny white dogs. It was a cozy little place decorated with Pottery Barn furniture and black and white photos that she had taken herself, mostly Georgia O’Keefe-like erotic close-ups of leaves and flowers. From her living room you could see the red blinking lights of the giant radio antenna of Sutro Tower on Twin Peaks. Half her income must go to seeing that antenna. She had a cat somewhere but it never once came out while I was there, although its litter box couldn’t be missed – it took up half the bathroom.

She led me into the kitchen, which was the size of a walk-in closet, and pulled a chilled bottle of Stoli from the freezer. I took a seat at the Formica table crammed into the corner of the room near the open window that looked down on the neighbor’s roof. She poured us each a healthy glassful. It felt like antifreeze going down but it was exactly what the doctor ordered. We sat and I told her about E-Man and Anthony and what the blue suit guy had said before he died. “Chimney Folk.” It didn’t mean anything to her either. *Maybe I had heard it wrong. Maybe it was Japanese. It didn’t sound Japanese. Or maybe it was nothing, just the crazy babble of a dying man.* I also told her about the gun in his hand and about his missing finger and how he spoke good English and had wanted to call a cab to take them to SFO.

“What does a missing finger have to do with anything?”

“It means he’s a member of the Yakuza.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s the Japanese mafia. They chop off their little fingers as some sort of rite of passage or initiation,” I explained, pushing my glass towards her for a refill.

“How do you know that?” she asked, filling my glass again close to the rim. It was a small glass.

“I saw it in a movie once.”

“So? And I saw a movie about sharks falling from the sky,” she said laughing. “He could have lost his finger in an accident. I bet hundreds of fingers are lost every year in sushi bars.”

“And how many of those sushi chefs with missing little fingers go around carrying guns? This guy was connected. You could smell it on him.”

“Well, I’m just glad you’re okay,” she said, reaching over and touching my hand on the table. It was a rare caring moment between us and it immediately made us both a little uncomfortable like accidentally rubbing up against a stranger on a bus.

“That’s the second time you said something nice to me tonight. It’s making me nervous,” I said, instantly regretted saying it. Sometimes my mouth was faster on the draw than my brain.

“Good, then I’ll stop,” she said, pulling back her hand.

“No, don’t...maybe I could get used to it. Perhaps I need more niceness in my life. Perhaps that’s why this *thing* happened to me.”

“Now you’re not making any sense,” she said standing up. “And I think I need to lie down. You should try and get some sleep, too.”

“I don’t think I can,” I replied reaching for the bottle.

She left the room but came back in a minute or two brushing out her blonde hair. She had changed clothes and was now wearing only a white tank top and pink shorts.

“Here I thought you might want this,” she said, handing me a little white pill.

“What is it?”

“It’s a valium. It’s strong enough to take down a horse...well, at least a large pony.”

“How about a jackass?”

“If the shoe fits.”

I took it from her thinking it might come in handy later and then watched her as she left the room.

Julia and I had started sleeping together a few months after she started working with me and that was almost two years ago. I still remember the first time. We had just finished a big project and gone out for a celebratory cocktail and when we came back to our office space on Folsom Street it just kind of happened naturally...well, with the assistance of a joint and a pitcher of strawberry margaritas. Since then it was never an agreed upon time or place and was rarely more than once or twice a month. Sometimes when the work got too stressful we found ourselves together, often times using one of the desks for a prop. I admit it was a strange but convenient

arrangement. She has always had a boyfriend or boyfriends ever since I've known her but never anyone serious. In fact, that night when I called her from the police station, she told me she had to first "get rid of" someone. I didn't have feelings for her in that way and she didn't for me, at least I hoped she didn't...that would have been problematic. I didn't think I was even her type. She preferred young, pretty boys and I was neither. What we had was strictly business partners with benefits. I always felt Annie suspected something considering my track record, but she never said anything, at least not until the very end when she somehow put two and two together, and then she threw it in my face like a mud pie. I'm sure she felt doubly betrayed because she and Julia had gotten along so well. They used to go shopping and have lunch together.

I sat on the sofa in the living room that was separated from the bedroom by French doors. I flipped the channels for an hour trying to dull my brain on Conan O'Brien, Frasier and baseball highlights (Brandon Crawford hit a game winning home run and the Giants came back to beat the Dodgers 6-5 in 11 innings) but my brain was too busy working overtime on complicated calculus equations such as, *What does the silver briefcase plus the cab ride to the airport plus the last words of the blue suit guy equal?* I turned off the t.v. and went into the bedroom and stood over Julia as she slept. She was lying on her side with the blanket covering only her lower half. It looked too inviting to ignore, so I didn't. I took off my clothes and left them on the floor before sliding into the bed and rolling up against her warm body. She released a soft moan as I started pulling off her shorts. I thought she was going to shut me down but she didn't. She was probably being sympathetic again. It was a momentary escape and almost life affirming to feel flesh on flesh after seeing what I had seen that night. I admit that when it was all said and done it was not my best performance but if she was disappointed she didn't let on and soon she was fast asleep. I lay there staring at the street light shining on the wall in the living room. The digital clock on the dresser read 4:40. I waited until it turned to 4:45 and then I disentangled my arm from underneath her head, slid out of the bed, grabbed my pants from the floor and went back out into the living room where Julia kept her Mac.

While waiting for the computer to boot up I did a keyful of sugar. I had no desire to sleep. There was too much to mull over. I pulled out everything I had taken off the blue suit guy and laid it on the computer desk: the thumb drive, the house key, the hotel cardkey, and the restaurant receipt, which was for a place on Grant Avenue called the Red Dragon. It was dated two days ago and was for the amount of \$82.52. I googled the address and found it was in the middle of Chinatown. The hotel cardkey was in a small envelope sleeve with the numbers "2552" handwritten on it. The cardkey itself was imprinted with, "San Francisco Marriot." I studied the house key but didn't find anything telling about it besides its unusual shaped head that looked like a four leaf clover.

I plugged in the thumb drive. There were four folders on it. Two of them were filled with emails in Japanese. The third contained Excel spreadsheets that were also in Japanese and the last folder contained mechanical drawings of what looked like a car engine, but they too were in Japanese. As I sat browsing the documents trying to make heads or tails out of them, Julia snuck up from behind me. She had the blanket from the bed wrapped around her shoulders.

"What's this?" she asked, putting a hand on my back.

"The Japanese guy, the one with the missing finger, gave me this thumb drive right before he died."

"What? Donovan, tell me you're kidding?"

"I'm not kidding."

"I meant what are you still doing with it?"

"He pleaded with me not to give it to the police."

"And you didn't?"

I didn't reply. I knew how stupid it sounded not only to have not given it to the police but to have made a promise to a dying Japanese gangster.

"I wanted to see what was on it- maybe it's a clue."

"Are you high? Of course it's a clue. It's also withholding evidence."

"I'm just looking at it. It's not like I'm tampering with it."

"I think you need to look up the definition of tampering."

"Don't worry I'll send it to the police tomorrow," I said, but I had no intentions of giving it to the police. I had already crossed that line.

"You do know you're not a detective and this is not a Hardy Boys episode. This is for real – these are real people. You design fucking logos and company brochures!"

I let her fume for a moment. Of course she was right but she hadn't been *there*. She hadn't hid in the bathroom frightened as a nun on her wedding night or found the bodies of men who just seconds earlier were breathing and talking about drones and God and baseball. Maybe I was playing detective, but if I was it was purely out of revenge. Revenge not only for E-Man, and Anthony, but Barry Edwin and Customer No. 2 and even the two Japanese guys but also revenge for *myself* on whomever made me have to relive that night, every night, for the rest of my life.

"Can you read Japanese?" I asked.

"Yeah sure, I just read the Japanese translation of *Moby Dick*. You're not going to listen to me are you?"

"You know I'm not."

"I didn't think so."

"Do you really think the cops are going to do anything about this? There are one hundred shootings a year in Oakland alone! One hundred! That's qualifies as a war zone. They're not going to do shit about this after tonight, so either help me figure out what *this* is or else go back to bed."

"You're being a complete asshole!" she said, stomping the floor like she did when she got really angry.

"Well, we all have our faults. Now humor me and tell me what you think this is."

Despite being mad I knew how her mind worked and I could tell she was really curious, so I continued to egg her on. "There's no crime in *you* looking at it. I'm the one that opened it up – not you. If anyone gets in trouble it'll be me."

"You promise you'll give it to the police tomorrow?"

"Scout's honor," I lied again and this time she probably knew it.

"Alright move over," she said nudging me out the way and taking control of the mouse. While she began scrolling through the documents, I tried rubbing her outer thigh because it was right there in front of me. She quickly put the kibosh on it with a school teacher's slap.

"Well these look like some sort of financial accounting statements for Toyota," she said, pointing to the Toyota symbol in the right hand corner of the document.

I hadn't even noticed but there on the top of every page was the Toyota symbol.

"Besides that, I haven't got a clue – even the numbers are in Japanese. This symbol here that keeps repeating is probably their yen sign."

"I need your car. And before you get all huffy about it and start stomping the floor – I only need it for an hour."

"Donovan, it's five fucking thirty in the morning! You need to go to bed."

"That can wait. I need your car," I said standing up.

"What for?"

"I found this in the pocket of the same guy who gave me the thumb drive," I said, showing her the hotel cardkey.

"You're serious?"

"Very."

"You're an asshole."

“You already said that and I’m not arguing the point. So, how ‘bout it?”

She stood for a moment looking at me like I had two heads before finally replying, "Alright but there is no way in hell I’m letting you drive my *new* car.”

CHAPTER 4 – THE ELEVATOR PLAYED SLOW VANILLA JAZZ

Julia insisted on waiting in the parking garage, catty corner from the Marriot on 4th Street. I assured her I'd be back in 15 minutes but somehow I knew beforehand I wasn't coming back. I also knew she wouldn't accept me telling her I wasn't coming back, so I fed her another white lie on a thin crisp cracker. At the rate I was lying I'd have a year of penance to do before it was all over.

The SF Marriot is somewhere between the Holiday Inn and the Hyatt, classy but not snooty. On the top floor there's a two star cocktail lounge with a four star panoramic view of downtown. I remember going there once with Annie after dinner with friends. I hadn't thought about that night until now probably because there was nothing memorable about it other than we were both happy...at the same time. It's funny, if you live in a city, any city, long enough, everywhere you go reminds you of somebody you once knew. Some days I see ghosts everywhere...on the street, in store windows, on buses... some days the city is one big ghost town.

The hotel's lobby was just starting to wake as I spun through the revolving front doors. Men and women in business clothes with coffee drinks in hand, and tourists inappropriately dressed for the San Francisco summer in shorts and t-shirts, were rushing around the polished marbled floor and mauve colored furniture. I took some pride knowing none of them could have had a night that came remotely close to topping mine. I was beginning to feel what must be an inherent arrogance that comes with surviving a mass shooting. It was as though I was walking above the clouds and couldn't be seen or touched. That said, I expected it to be replaced very soon with a painful guilt that would last a hell of a lot longer.

Perhaps I had watched too many cop shows but I took the precaution of wearing a San Francisco 49ers ball cap from Julia's closet to help hide my face and a cleaning glove from underneath her sink to cover my fingerprints. I put them on in the elevator on the way up to the 25th Floor. Room 2552 was all the way down at the end of a long carpeted hallway that was deserted except for an unattended maid's cart and a tray of last night's dinner outside one of the rooms. I knocked on the door once, just in case someone was there, and when there was no answer, I put the card key in the lock. I knew there was a chance the Japanese may have checked out the day before but when I saw the green light on the lock handle light up, I knew they hadn't.

Room 2552 was connected to the adjacent room by an open door. One room had two queen beds and the other a king. Both had the same view of downtown with the Bay, the Port of Oakland and then the Oakland Hills in the background. It would have been nice to sit with my feet up and a Bloody Mary in hand and enjoy it for a while but I wanted to get the hell in and out faster than a priest in a whorehouse. I searched the double room first. It was recently cleaned and both beds were made. There was one suitcase on a chair and another on the table. In the closet there were two dress shirts. On the night stand between the beds was a bag of Sun Chips, a half-empty fifth of J.D., a can of coke, and a glass. It didn't take a "real" detective to figure out they intended on coming back. Unfortunately someone had put a dozen bullets in that plan. I went into the

bathroom. The towels were fresh and the room looked unused, except a toothbrush, a shaving kit, and hair gel on the counter above the sink.

I assumed the room with the king bed was the Butler's since he obviously was the leader of the group. There was an empty can of Red Bull on the t.v. stand, along with a pair of glasses. A copy of the Wall Street Journal was on the table near the window with an empty glass being used as a paper weight for a small stack of restaurant and taxi receipts. I quickly thumbed through them but nothing jumped out at me except for one that I had seen before. It was a receipt from the Red Dragon, the same restaurant as the receipt I found on the blue suit guy, but for a different night. Even more interesting was a computer printout at the very bottom of the pile showing the flight info for round trip tickets on Southwest from Oakland to Reno. The sheet didn't list names, just flight numbers and the departure and return dates, which were both for the same day - yesterday.

In the closet a brown leather suitcase lay open on the floor. Besides clothes, the suitcase contained a Penthouse, a book in Japanese, and a folding map of San Francisco. There was nothing out of the ordinary, that is until I unzipped the inside pocket. That's where he kept his goodies. It's always interesting to see what people leave behind when they don't expect to die. My aforementioned Uncle Stan left behind quite a stash of 1970's stag films that would have Bob Crane and other old school pornographers salivating. I'm not sure who in the family ended up inheriting them - most likely my mother made sure they found the inside of an incinerator. She was always protective of her older brother - even in death.

Anyway...inside the Butler's secret pocket was a pair of orange neon panties, a pair of handcuffs, clothesline clips, a blindfold, a vile of unlabeled blue pills, which I'm pretty positive weren't Advils, and a small white envelope with the address "1638 Horseshoe Way" scribbled in pencil on the front. In the envelope was a key with the same four leaf clover head as the one I found on the blue suit guy. I pulled out that key, which I still had in my pocket, and lined it up next to the one in the suitcase. The cuts were exactly the same. I put the envelope and both keys in my back pocket. I thought about taking the blue pills, too, but was running out of pocket room.

Satisfied I hadn't overlooked anything, I backed out of the Butler's room and into the hallway. No sooner had I closed the door then out of the corner of my eye I saw a man approaching from down the hall. Even from 50 feet away I could sense there was something not quite right about him. Actually he was a walking red flag, but there was nothing I could do but play it cool and act as though I was just another hotel guest. As we approached each other his features came into focus. He was Asian; I'm guessing maybe Chinese or Vietnamese, dressed in a black sweater, black jeans and black cowboy boots. He was definitely not a man you see every day, even in San Francisco where you see it all, every day. Not only was he tall, six foot five or so, and skinny as a junkie with long black hair combed straight back over his head, but he was pale as a crosswalk and had the cold determined look of a reptile on a hunt. I gave him a fake smile but avoided direct eye contact as we passed. Once I was behind him a few steps, I turned to see him sticking a hotel card-key in the lock of Room 2552. I knew he wasn't there to change the linens and unless he was as dumb as my Cousin Bob, I knew in about 15 seconds or less he'd figure out that Room 2552 was connected to the room he had just seen me leave from. I picked up my pace towards the elevators. There was no one there. I pressed the down button and waited...and waited. When it finally did come, I hammered the "Close Door" button several times like it was a pinball machine, but right

before the doors closed, The Iceman, as I fondly came to call him, came flying out of nowhere towards the elevator with a face like an attacking Apache warrior. He slid a cowboy boot between the closing doors, while at the same time trying to pry them open with his hands, but surprising even myself, I reacted without thinking and kicked him in the shin as hard as I could with my work boots while poetically yelling “Fuck You! You Fuck!” at the top of my lungs. The Iceman immediately let go of the doors and cursed something non-English as they closed in front of his face.

On the way down to the lobby, the elevator played slow vanilla jazz but it did little to help curb my nerves. I was shaking like a leaf on a persimmon tree. I knew I had escaped only by a second – that one *lucky* second that can change the course of everything. That second had played in my favor at Enrico’s and now once again with The Iceman. As I gathered myself before the elevator reached the lobby, I couldn’t help but wonder how many lucky seconds I had left.

CHAPTER 5 – LIKE BACON IN FRONT OF A DOG

Outside the hotel, I ditched the glove and cap in the nearest trash can and hurried down 4th St. towards Union Square. Along the way, I sent Julia a quick text “Heading back home – nothing to report.” I stopped at an ATM and withdrew \$200 dollars and then grabbed a double macchiato at a café directly across the way from the green pagodas that mark the entrance to Chinatown at Bush and Grant. I found a front section of the *SF Chronicle* someone left behind on a table and scanned it for anything regarding Enrico’s...but there was nothing. Perhaps it was buried deep in the paper or it happened too late for the morning edition or maybe the old San Francisco adage was true that what happens in Oakland stays in Oakland. I didn’t know if I was upset or relieved there was no press and for a moment I thought maybe it hadn’t happened.

Grant Avenue is a narrow one way that runs through the heart of Chinatown. It’s decorated yearlong with red Chinese lanterns strung overhead from building to building. The Red Dragon restaurant was easy to find not only because of its oversized red neon sign but the fact it was constructed of concrete and glass, which made it stick out from the rest of the old brick Chinatown buildings like a baritone in the girls choir. Annie and I had gone to a similar Chinese banquet-size restaurant a few summers back for one of her coworker’s wedding reception. I remember it well because I apparently had a little too much of everything to drink and started dancing with several members of the bride’s family, much to the chagrin of Annie and the bride and her groom and her father. Back home that night I remember telling Annie after she brought up the subject with one of her signature “what the hell were you thinking” glares, “I thought that’s what weddings were all about...drinking and dancing and having fun.” “Not when it’s your boss’s wedding!” she yelled back. It was the last work function I was ever invited to but believe me when I say I could not have been happier.

Inside the Red Dragon I was escorted to a small table along the front window. The dining area was huge, maybe 30 tables. It looked like it could easily seat Charlie Sheen’s entire black book at once. As soon as I was seated, a sober waiter dressed in a red vest came by and plopped a ceramic pot of tea on my table and a second later the same waiter came by and brought me a glass of water. Both times he spilled on the table. Most of the clientele was elderly Chinese but there were a few tourists, who were also seated near the front window, probably as bait to catch more tourists. The place had little in the way of decor. The walls were covered with gilded framed mirrors and four large ink brush paintings of dragons...dragons fighting, dragons flying, dragons sleeping, and dragons either hugging or dancing the tango. There was Chinese music playing from speakers on the wall that sounded as pleasing as a cat scratching a chalkboard with some wind chimes tied to its tail. Soon waiters were stopping by every thirty seconds with their dim sum carts full of pastries, pork buns, egg rolls, chicken legs and the like. I pointed to a few dishes that were then placed on my table but I wasn’t hungry. I didn’t know when I would be hungry again. I drank some tea and wondered why the three Japanese would come to the same restaurant two nights in a row. It couldn’t have been for the ambience or the service, or, I’m guessing, the food. There are too many restaurants in San Francisco, especially Chinese, to choose the same one twice. It would be like dating the same girl all through college. *What did they come for then?* I didn’t have to wait

long for my answer. It appeared in the form of a black BMW sedan that came to a quick stop in the middle of the street. I should have been surprised but for some reason wasn't when my friend from the hotel, The Iceman, worked his long skinny legs out from the passenger side door and planted his cowboy boots, one at a time, firmly on the pavement. His cold snake eyes were hidden behind state trooper sunglasses, but he still looked as warm and fuzzy as a German Shepard on guard duty.

I stood and was about to make a mad dash through the kitchen and out the back door when I saw The Iceman wasn't actually heading for the restaurant but towards the other side of the street. I watched as he calmly approached a red door that was tightly sandwiched between a bakery and a small eatery with roasted chickens of various shades of brown hanging in the front window. He pressed an intercom, waited to be buzzed in, and then disappeared up a flight of stairs. There was writing on the glass pane of the door but I couldn't read it from where I sat some fifty feet away. When the next waiter came around to my table I tried asking him about the red door across the street but he didn't understand a word I was saying and handed me a dish containing two quail eggs.

I threw a twenty on the table and walked down the street, crossed over to the other side, doubled backed and then quickly glanced at the writing stenciled on the window of the red door. It read "Ming's Sunrise Tours - Casino Trips to Tahoe & Reno." I crossed back to the doorway of the Red Dragon and looked up towards the two curtained windows on the second floor above the red door. It definitely did not look like a place where someone would book a trip to Tahoe or even Reno or anywhere for that matter, but it did seem like a place you'd keep a kidnapped Japanese businessman. I was contemplating my next move when The Iceman came busting out the red door like a mad dog in a hen house. He stood there for a second, flipped his sunglasses down over his eyes, and then appeared to look straight across the street in my direction. There was no sign of recognition on his face and I couldn't tell if he was looking *at* me or *past* me. I may have looked slightly different without the 49ers cap I had been wearing at the hotel but when he took a step towards the curb, I didn't stick around to find out. I hurried down the sidewalk hoping to blend in with the mostly elderly men and women shuffling along with their pink plastic market day shopping bags. When I glanced back over my shoulder I saw The Iceman was less than thirty feet behind me. He didn't seem in any hurry and I still couldn't tell if he was following me or not. If I had had a weapon I would have turned and faced him or if I knew for a fact he didn't have one I would have done the same with just my fists. I've never been afraid to use my knuckles, even though my last real fight was probably fifteen years ago and that honestly was more of a drunken wrestling match on a beach in Ft. Lauderdale, over a girl whose face I no longer remember. When I looked back again, a man pushing a delivery cart full of crates of vegetables was now blocking the sidewalk, leaving The Iceman momentarily stuck behind. Seeing my chance, I ducked into the first open door I saw, which happened to be a massage parlor, one of many that were peppered throughout Chinatown like freckles on an Irish girl's nose. This one was euphemistically called "The Laughing Buddha's Garden Therapeutic Massage" but I can attest that there was nothing the least bit amusing or agricultural about it.

In the small entrance a middle aged woman sat behind an empty glass counter fingering away on her cellphone. She looked both surprised and irritated to see she had a customer. She was a very plain looking woman, and that is being kind, in a pink polo shirt, chubby with short black hair, painted on eye brows, and a puckered expression that looked like someone had just force fed

her vinegar mixed with lemon juice. It was a face that didn't look like it had cracked a smile since the invention of the cellphone. Behind her on a shelf was a small statue of a Buddha laughing and holding his belly. The place smelled like a damp gym towel and under normal circumstances I would have done a 180 but this was not normal circumstances and I needed to get off the street ASAP.

"I'd like a massage," I said, turning my back to the curtained front window.

She eyed me suspiciously before responding, "How long you want? Half hour? One hour?"

"How much for an hour?"

She looked me up and down like a slab of tuna at the fish market and then said, "You eighty dollars." I couldn't tell if she was just pulling the price out of thin air or not, but I was willing to pay \$80 just to hide out for an hour.

She then pointed to a handwritten sign above the counter that read "CASH ONLY." I handed her four twenties from my wallet and she inspected each with the scrutiny of an art dealer. I looked anxiously out the window expecting to see The Iceman pass by any second.

Finally prying herself from her stool, she waved for me to follow her through a pink curtain that looked like it had once been used as a bed sheet and then through another curtain that acted as a door to a room the size of dental office. In the middle of the room stood a massage table and on a stand in the corner was another laughing Buddha, along with some burning incense. The walls were barren and the room had all the charm of a Romanian hospital. She instructed me to take off my clothes and put them on the chair in the corner, and then to get face down under the white sheets. After that, she disappeared like the Great Oz behind the curtain.

I tried not to think too much about whether the sheets had been washed since their last use and I didn't much like the idea of being naked with The Iceman lurking outside but it felt good to be lying down in the dark with the incense burning and the Buddha laughing at me. I was more tired than I thought. I had been awake for over 24 hours and it would have been easy just to close my eyes and drift off to dreamland but I needed to think through a few new parts to the equation. *What was the connection to Ming's Sunset Tours? Why were the Japanese here in Chinatown? Did they fly to Reno? And if so, why? And who was The Iceman working for?* The other nagging question I had while lying there like a dead flounder was how I was going to get a gun. I wished I still had the one Annie made me get rid of when Margo was born. Funny, I hadn't missed it until now. The truth is I had grown very anti-gun over the years. That's not to say that I still didn't wish I owned one. I just didn't want other people having them – like whoever shot up Enrico's.

My thoughts were interrupted by a sheepish "hello." I turned my head to see a different woman wearing the same pink polo shirt as Ms. Puckered Face. She looked like she could have been her little sister, except she was a little more comely, had dyed orange hair and her lips were almost forming a smile...almost. I listened as she twisted an alarm clock and then lathered her hands up with oil, producing a rather unpleasant squishy sound. She then pressed a button and Chinese music filled the room. This time it was more soothing, almost angelic sounding with just a

harp and a flute. She didn't talk as she went about her work but occasionally let out a grunt. This was okay with me. There's nothing worse than a chatty masseuse. The woman proved to be no magician but she did seem to know where all the muscles were and I was nearly in lala land when she told me to turn over. She then grabbed me without warning and started stroking. It was very methodical and unemotional like a wet nurse burping a baby. I admit it was all a bit pathetic but I wasn't above pathetic. Most men aren't and if they say they aren't they're lying.

"This is extra, okay," she said with no feeling in her voice.

I didn't say anything. It was not the time to haggle. Besides, I had been around the block. I had once visited a motel down by the airport that offered the same service and of course, I have been to Amsterdam. I closed my eyes and thought of someone from long ago but it still took a lot of concentration on my part to see it through to the end.

After I was done she handed me a towel and then stood like a sentry with folded arms over by the curtain. It took me a second to realize she was waiting for her tip. She probably didn't want Ms. Puckered Face getting any of it. I don't blame her. She had done all the work. I sat up, modestly keeping the sheet over my lower half, and bent over to reach for my pants on the chair.

"Do you know who owns Ming's Tours across the street - the red door next to the bakery?" I asked pulling out a twenty from my wallet.

I could tell she knew what I was asking by the way her expression changed from complete indifference to fear.

"You do know who owns it?"

She did not reply.

"I'm a police officer - you must tell me if you know. I could have you arrested for violating Code 5850b. Believe me I can shut this place down in a heartbeat," I said as convincingly as I could while wearing only a bed sheet. I then dangled the twenty in front of her like bacon in front of a dog. She hesitated a second and then snatched it from my hand.

"That's Fish Boy's place."

"Fish Boy?"

"Yes."

"What's his real name?"

"Fish Boy," she replied.

"Do you know the tall, skinny man dressed all in black - the guy who looks like Frankenstein on a diet?"

She shook her head furiously and then hurried out of the room.

After I was finished dressing I walked back into the entrance where both women were now standing behind the glass counter whispering in Chinese like two conspirators. I knew they were talking about me because they stopped when I entered. I didn't care. I got what I came for and a little unexpected extra. I said goodbye and walked out. As soon as I was five steps down the block, I turned around to see Ms. Puckered Face scurry like a mouse across the street and in the direction of the red door. I picked up my pace and hurried right on Sacramento St. and down the hill towards the Ferry Building, peering backwards the entire way until I was sure I was safely out of Chinatown and The Iceman was not coming.

CHAPTER 6 – IT DOESN'T EVEN HAVE TO WORK

I took the BART train to Oakland, got off at the McArthur Station and then took a waiting cab back to my apartment. Along the way we passed Enrico's. Everything was the same as always except for the yellow police tape strung across the doorway. From the outside it was just a harmless, little corner bar that could have been anywhere between Kansas and Kalamazoo. All the darkness was trapped inside like toxic gas. It would take a priest in a hazmat suit with a bucketful of holy water to exorcise it now.

I took a shower, shaved, dressed and made myself a fried egg sandwich (eggs and bread were the only things I had left in the fridge). I still wasn't hungry but I forced myself to eat. I needed protein. I also needed a beer, so I cracked open my last Tecate' and then booted up my computer. I was feeling better and even more so after a big, fat line of sugar. I looked around the apartment. It was still filled with the boxes I had yet to unpack after five months of bachelorhood and that was only half of the shit I owned. The other half was still in a storage space off Highway 101 down in South City. It was a rather sad excuse of a place to call home and so I hadn't spent much time bothering to fix it up. I looked on it more as a depository for my stuff until I found some place else – some place better. Anyway, all that would have to wait. I texted Julia a quick message, "Everything ok. Back in Oaktown. Got a massage. Call u later." I figured that should satisfy her for a while. She immediately texted me back a photo of her upturned middle finger with the message, "Never been stood up in a parking garage before – Asshole!" That was O.K. I would rather have her pissed at me than have her follow me down the rabbit hole I felt I was falling into.

I ran a search for "Fish Boy San Francisco Chinatown." It turns out he was quite the internet celeb. He even had his own Wikipedia page with a photo. He looked like a regular guy, except for the fu-manchu moustache and the jail house tattoos crawling up his neck. His real name was Edward Fa. The nickname "Fish Boy" came from working in his uncle's fish market. He joined a Hong Kong triad at the ripe age of twelve and when he turned eighteen he was given a one way ticket to San Francisco to fulfill his potential in burglary, racketeering, prostitution, drugs, money laundering, and "other criminal endeavors." In 2009 he was sentenced to ten years in San Quentin for bribing local SF politicians but was paroled after serving only three. He now allegedly has gone straight and started several legit businesses in and around Chinatown. This made me laugh. Ming's Sunset Tours looked as kosher as a three dollar bill.

After reading up on Fish Boy, I googled the address on the envelope with the four leaf clover key I found in the Butler's suitcase. There turns out to be six 1638 Horseshoe Ways in California. Two of them are in Southern Cal, one was just outside of Fresno, another was up in the Redding area, and the last one in Truckee. Of those six, the Truckee address was the only one that made any sense. It was just thirty minutes from Reno where the Japanese had possibly flown the day before. I had no idea how it fit with everything else, maybe it didn't, but I printed directions and planned to find out. Even if it proved to be nothing, a road trip could only do me some good. At least that's what I thought at the time.

The next thing on my "to do" list was to contact Clifford to replenish my sugar supply, which was getting dangerously low. There was always a ritual when setting up a meeting with Clifford. First you called and left your first name on a recorded number. Second, you texted a different number and said "see you soon" and lastly, you waited for a response email from him with a designated time to come over. It was long tedious process especially when you were jonesing, but like a doctor, he didn't want two patients showing up at once. Actually, Clifford used to be a doctor, a psychiatrist, until he hurt his back and then went out on disability from his job at the V.A. Hospital while at the same time getting hooked on pain meds. When he failed to return to work, he got canned, sued the federal government for wrongful termination and disability discrimination and then went into business with one of his V.A. patients, an ex-marine, who just happened to be one of the biggest suppliers in the Bay Area. It was not your typical career path but it made Clifford a boat load richer than he would have been if he had continued prescribing anti-anxiety meds to vets from Operation Desert Storm.

Clifford lived alone on a dead end street near the cemetery side of Piedmont Avenue in a mustard colored bungalow with light blue trim and two giant palm trees standing like sentries in the front yard. He used to be married but that was before I knew him. There was a photo of him and a somewhat attractive strawberry blonde on the coffee table but I wasn't sure if that was her or not. I guessed there are guys that would keep photos of their ex-wife out for viewing, but I definitely wasn't one of them. To me it would be like keeping an old cast from a broken leg on the fireplace mantel. Clifford's backyard bordered the cemetery wall, which for someone in his trade was very advantageous. It meant he didn't have to worry about anyone peeking over his back hedges.

"Heya, Donovan. Comon' in," he said, greeting me at the front door. The television in the living room was on. It was always on. He was watching a black and white movie with the volume turned way up.

The house was decorated with modern looking furniture and an extensive collection of Mexican folk art. There was too much Day of Dead skeleton stuff on the walls for my taste, especially considering its proximity to the cemetery, but the house had a lot of natural light and an overall sunny vibe to it. It was the complete opposite of every mother's nightmare version of a drug dealer's den.

"It's Hitchcock's *Saboteur*, you ever see it?" he asked, nodding to the t.v. as he led me into the kitchen, a very neat and tidy kitchen that looked like it had been recently updated with new appliances. It's where he liked to transact his business.

"No, is it any good?"

"Of course, it's Hitchcock," he said rather indignantly.

"Is there any bad Hitchcock?"

"Sure, just like there's bad champagne. You know it was the French that rediscovered him. They saw his genius."

"Hmm. I didn't know that. Hurray for the French."

"Yes, hurray for the French indeed. So, I'm a little surprised - I'm not used to seeing you so early."

"Well, I wanted to get my shopping out of the way."

"How much do you need?"

"The usual"

"Alright, the usual it is. Take a load off. I'll be right back," he said and left the room. He seemed to be in unusually good spirits. I'm guessing his pain meds were kicking in.

While he was gone, I stood and looked out his kitchen window at the rows and rows of gravestones that rolled up the cemetery's steep hill. It was a somber view, especially shrouded in the late morning fog and it made me think again about the night before and how close I had come to being placed six feet in the ground. I didn't much like the idea. In fact, it threw another 55 gallon drum of fuel on my desire for revenge.

When Clifford came back we exchanged cash for sugar. There was no haggling or negotiation. The price had already been agreed upon at the beginning of our business relationship and I gave him the exact amount in twenties just the way he liked it.

"How about some coffee?" he asked.

Clifford was a very hospitable guy and he loved to sit and chitchat around the table like an old Irish auntie. I think it was the only time he got to socialize because he was always at home. He had to be. He didn't make any money if he was out shopping for jeans at the GAP or drinking a strawberry smoothie down at Jamba Juice. I never turned down his offer. It was not easy to find such a reliable source, so I thought it best to play friendly whenever I visited. Plus, he made really strong, decent coffee from a French press.

He brought two mugs back to the table. He drank his black and I did the same. We talked about a movie he had just seen on t.v. starring Liam Neeson. I don't remember the name because I wasn't listening. I couldn't focus on the trivial. My head was back at Enrico's and Chinatown. I wanted to test out a line of the blow, too. My hands were all fidgety. They needed something to do. I picked up a spoon from the table and starting playing with it. The "force" was strong. It was tugging on my gut hard like a nagging child but it was against Clifford's rules to sample the merchandise in his house. Some dealers didn't care but Clifford wasn't one of them. Of course most didn't have a nice house like Clifford's - actually most didn't live in houses.

"Have you ever heard of a Fish Boy in Chinatown?" I asked cutting him off during his long winded comparison of Liam Neeson and Bruce Willis. ("Neeson is much less self-deprecating which is interesting because he's Irish and the Irish as you know can be very self-deprecating...")

"Fish Boy?" Clifford laughed. "Of course, everyone has heard of Fish Boy. Why do you want to know?" he asked, taking a sip of his coffee. He had an unusual way of closing his eyes when he drank. It was very zen like. I thought I'd try it myself sometime...when I was alone.

"No reason. I just heard the name somewhere and was curious. I mean it's a pretty unfortunate nickname, Fish Boy – don't you think? It's like Aquaman or something but smellier and not as cool sounding. So, what's he into?"

Clifford gave me a look to let me know that he knew I wasn't being straight with him but continued anyway. He was bored and like I said, he loved to talk. "Fish Boy has his fingers in a lot of pies. He was busted a few years back for greasing the palms of some City Supervisors in return for some construction bids, including the new Chinatown to Market Street underground, which if you ask me is a complete fucking waste of money, actually, don't get me started on that, anyhow now he's out acting like he found Jesus in the pen - throwing money at charities like confetti...taking pictures with the Mayor, riding with Ms. Chinatown in the New Year's parade. It's pretty funny actually. I mean once you're bad, I mean real bad inside like Fish Boy is, you're always bad – it's like a feral dog. No matter how many times you wash it you can never get out all the wildness out."

"You don't think people can change?"

"Oh, I'd like to think they can but I don't see much evidence in it. Why, do you?"

"I'm not sure," I replied thinking back on the distractible, rowdy, selfish, troublemaker boy I once was and the scattered, incorrigible, self-centered, addictive man that I've become. There wasn't much difference between the two no matter how many birthdays came between them. "Maybe – maybe not – possibly," I shrugged.

We changed the topic to Clifford's favorite subject, politics. Despite looking like he'd make a nice Nazi officer with his blue eyes and clean cut blonde hair parted neatly on the side, Clifford was a staunch Libertarian, who thought the government should "stay the fuck out of everyone's business," which of course was a good motto for any drug dealer to have. His latest political beef was with drones taking over the world. "I don't want to live in a world with tiny helicopters delivering my pizza or hovering outside my bathroom taking photos..." It made me think about the Barry Edwin and Customer No. 2 discussion from the other night and I zoned out for most of Clifford's rant. When he was through I asked him if he had heard about the shooting at Enrico's. He said he saw it on the morning news.

"What's your take on it?" I asked playing dumb.

"To me it seems like your typical gang shooting, spraying without aiming, but something doesn't sit right about it - none of the people that were killed were gang bangers and two of them were from Japan. It's very odd – very odd indeed."

"What about witnesses? Did they say if there were any witnesses?"

"Supposedly someone saw three men come out of the bar and drive away in a black car." He paused to take another sip of coffee. "I also heard someone was kidnapped...well not kidnapped -taken or abducted."

"Was that on the news, too?" I was surprised anyone but the Oakland PD would know that.

"No, that part wasn't. You'd be amazed at all the things I hear through the grapevine just sitting in my kitchen. Things you won't read in the paper or hear on Channel 2." I could tell he was proud to be sharing his inside knowledge by the sly smile that appeared on his face. Maybe someone on the force was one of Clifford's clients. It wouldn't surprise me – it's well known that lots of cops need a little mother's helper to keep going and then need a parachute to come back down. "Anyway, just another night in Oakland, although a little too close to home, if you ask me."

"Speaking of, I was thinking about getting myself some protection...you know some heat. Any chance you can help me in that department?" I asked coolly like I was simply asking for the name of decent burrito joint in the neighborhood.

"What?" Clifford asked laughing. His laugh was more like a baby blowing raspberries.

"Do you know how I can get a gun?"

"I heard you. Yeah, I suggest you try a gun shop...and by the way, no one uses the word 'heat' anymore – not since Starsky and Hutch split up."

"I'd like to get it today," I said but realizing that sounded too desperate, so I quickly added, "I mean soon."

"Guns are not my business," he said, sitting back in his chair and raising up his hands and showing me his palms. "Pills and powder, only. That not to say as a libertarian I don't support your constitutional right to own a gun. I completely support your right to that. Besides, it's proven that gun laws don't do shit to curb violence, just like the war on drugs - another utter waste of time and money. I think you and I are both living proof of that," he added, laughing again.

"It doesn't even have to work. I just thought it would be good to have around for protection."

"I thought you were a designer or something?" he asked, staring into my eyes like a carnival psychic trying to find some deep buried secret. "No, I can't help you, mi amigo," Then he added, "Besides, a gun that doesn't work is only going to get you killed."

"You can't put me in touch with someone? A connection?"

"No. Sorry." It was a flat refusal.

I let it die there. I didn't want to push him too hard and risk having him going cold on me. I needed him as long as I needed the sugar. Of course every dealer knows that and uses it to their

advantage. He talked a bit more about Liam Neeson until I finished my coffee. Then I stood and said goodbye - passing back through the living room where the Hitchcock movie was still playing. Outside, the fog was finally starting to lift and a hint of blue sky was trying to muscle its way through.

CHAPTER 7 – AT LEAST THEY DIDN'T TAKE THAT

I got a call on my phone from Lt. Walker while I gassing up my truck (more on the truck later). At first I thought he wanted to ask me more questions, so I was caught off guard when he told me they had found a middle-aged Japanese man bobbing for apples in the Oakland Estuary. He wanted me to come down to the morgue across from the police headquarters in the afternoon and confirm it was our Third Man. I fed him a lie about having to be in San Francisco in the afternoon for business, to which he then asked if I could come down now to the Alameda side of the Estuary to view the body. He even offered to have a car come and pick me up but I told him I was already driving and could be there in 20 minutes.

I drove through the Webster Tunnel that runs underneath the Estuary to the island town of Alameda and then into the old Naval Base on the northern tip of the island. The Base, which has been shut down since the Clinton years, has the look and feel of a film set for an apocalyptic zombie movie. Most of the buildings are covered in weeds and graffiti and boarded up with plywood. Lt. Walker had given me directions but as it turned out all I needed to do was to spot the Coroner's truck and two squad cars parked along the road that ran above the grassy slope leading to the water's edge. Across on the Port of Oakland side of the Estuary towered two large cargo ships loaded with freight containers stacked one on top of another, some as many as six or seven high. Overhead, seagulls squawked in circles. Lt. Walker was down by the water. He was wearing glasses and blue plastic gloves and sporting the same sports coat from the night before, which now seemed like days ago but was actually only ten hours. The body was at his feet and covered in black plastic. When he saw me, he waved for me to come down and shouted for one of the uniformed policeman to let me through the temporary rope set up to keep out any bystanders, of which there appeared to be none.

"A guy in a sailboat found him this morning around eleven," he explained. "We're guessing he's been in the water since five or six. We fished him out about forty minutes ago. I should warn you it isn't pretty."

"I think I can handle it after last night," I said, probably sounding more boastful than intended.

"Well, this might be different. It's a slice wound that's been marinating in salt water for a few hours. Last year we pulled out a guy that had been in the Bay for a week. He looked like the Phantom of the Opera after the fish got to him."

He pulled back the black plastic to reveal the dead face of the Butler. The skin was white as paper, except for a dark purplish bruised color around the eyes, or eye, since he only had one now. The right eye looked like it had been scooped out like an avocado pit, leaving just an empty cavity. His hair was fallen over his forehead and his moustache looked like a wet caterpillar. His tie and suit were gone and his white collared shirt was stained crimson from the giant slash across his neck that left two thick flabs of skin on both sides of the cut where the blood had yet to coagulate. The

Lieutenant was right - it wasn't pretty. The gash across the throat reminded me of a butcher shop counter and for a moment I thought my egg sandwich was going to make a surprise appearance.

"Why'd they take his eye out?"

"Sorry, I should have mentioned that," he said but he didn't sound sorry. "Who knows? It could be a sign or symbol of some sort or it could be nothing"

"Well, it's definitely him," I said, turning away. Of course the probability of it having being another missing middle-aged Japanese man were probably about the same as the Raiders winning the Super Bowl.

"We're sending photos to the Japanese consulate to see if they can help ID him," Lt. Walker said, covering back up the Butler's dead face with the black plastic. He then instructed two policemen to move the body up to the Coroner's truck. "One thing is for certain, whoever took him from the bar didn't need him for long."

"Maybe they just wanted what was in the briefcase?" I suggested.

"Well, if that's the case why didn't they just take it from him at the bar? Plus, they worked him over pretty well before they sliced his throat. The fingers on his right hand were broken and both his legs were covered in welts. Whoever did it wanted something that he didn't have on him."

"Did it happen here?"

"No, there would have been a lot of blood and a lot of screaming. I'm guessing they probably dumped him somewhere up the Estuary and he started drifting out towards the Bay with the ebb tide," he replied, sounding more like he was thinking out loud than talking to me. "Obviously they didn't care if he was found or they wanted him to be found," he continued, snapping off his plastic gloves and then immediately scratching the back of his head.

"And what about the other two Japanese? Do you know any more about them?"

"No, so far nothing but we're canvassing the neighborhood to see if anyone saw them before the shooting. We're also checking with hotels in the area. We know they just didn't beam down from nowhere," he said, stopping at the top of the grassy slope. "Is there anything else you can remember from last night?" he asked, turning and looking down at me. "Anything at all?"

"I think I already mentioned the one guy asking about a taxi to take them to SFO," I said trying to walk the tightrope of giving him something but while giving him nothing at the same time. "Maybe they had plane tickets?"

"We're checking into that, too," he said sounding a little disappointed. "We're going to need you to come downtown later and make an official ID. It's just your signature on a few forms. I'll call you when that needs to happen. Oh, and one more thing."

“Yes.”

“This guy, the Third Man...he wasn't missing any fingers.” He lifted up the pinkie of his right hand to show me exactly which finger he meant.

“Well, at least they didn't take that.”

“Yes, I suppose that was nice of them. Okay, we'll be in touch if we find out anything new,” he said, stretching his neck to one side and then the other before turning around to walk towards the Coroner's truck.

Lt. Walker was starting to seem like a pretty decent cop. Maybe he had been having a bad day the night before or maybe he was starting to trust me now that the Butler had materialized as a non-fictional character. Either way I was surprised he had been so candid with me, which made me feel bad I wasn't being straight with him. But then I knew tomorrow there'd be another murder or murders in Oakland, and the next day, and the day after that, and Lt. Walker would be assigned to those cases and E-Man and Anthony would be lost forever and Enrico's would be just another cold case buried in a manila folder in a locked file cabinet at a storage facility down along the highway. It wasn't that I was trying to sabotage his investigation. I simply saw no reason to aid it. If that makes any sense, which at the time it did to me.

I drove back to my apartment as quickly as I could and threw some clean clothes in my gym bag. I took the keys for Horseshoe Way and the directions I had printed out. I found a safe place to hide the thumb drive in the fishing tackle box I kept in the tenants' storage room down in the basement of the building. Then I vacuumed up a line of blow, just enough to maintain equilibrium, did a quick thirty push-ups on the hardwood floor, and left running down the stairs.

CHAPTER 8 – I SWEAR I’M JUST GOING TO PUT IT UNDER MY PILLOW

It felt good to be on the road out of town and behind the wheel of my black Toyota Tundra SR5. It was my home away from home, my metallic buffer from the outside world, and at times, it felt like my best friend. Its only downside was it was as difficult as a Sherman Tank to park, especially in the City. There were a few nights after Annie and I split that I had no place to stay and instead of checking into a hotel I ended up parking it along the edge of Golden Gate Park on Fulton Street and sleeping in the back bed under the stars. I bought it a few years back when I was already thinking about making the switch from graphic design to construction. I could bore you with how I always wanted to build things with my hands ever since I nailed the family coffee table to the floor, and how sitting in front of a computer all day was slowly siphoning the cosmic energy from my soul. But I won’t because I know it would sound like just another man who has gone soft as an overripe mango while drowning in a midlife ocean. And it wasn’t that. I’m not boasting when I say I’m good at what I do, but it’s not nearly as fulfilling as using power tools all day.

Traffic on I-80 wasn’t bad, but in another hour it would be a nightmare getting through the sprawling clusterfuck Sacramento had become. I had the windows open and Amy Winehouse’s *Back in Black* cranked on the stereo. With each mile I could feel the road pushing me further... past the ugly decaying sadness that is Reno and the moonscape nothingness of Nevada; past the barren, dying Salt Lake and the cornfields of Iowa and Illinois; all the way through Pennsylvania to upstate New Jersey to the lake town where I was born. I would do it in a heartbeat, too, if not for Margo. I was never going to leave her. I was never going to let another man step in and pretend to be her father. Fuck that! She was all I had and I was confident if I played the game, at least for a while, Annie would slowly allow me back into Margo’s life. Of course, what I was doing now was probably going to blow a big cannon ball right through that ship, but I couldn’t stop myself - I needed to see this through as far as I could, hopefully all the way to the end, wherever that may be.

I made a pit stop at a fruit stand along the highway, just west of Davis, and bought a half gallon of apple cider and a bag of almonds. I drank some of the cider in the gravel parking lot under the burning Central Californian sun and lit another of the blue suit guy’s smokes. The thermometer on my dash read 104 degrees, an incredible thirty five degrees warmer than Oakland. It was suffocating - like wearing a parka in a sauna. Yet, as hot as it was, the heat was a welcome relief after months of mentally debilitating Pacific fog and it filled my head with a hundred memories of growing up on the Lake – wasting days swimming, water skiing, getting high off New Jersey grass (bought from a friend who worked at the local hardware store), and singing along to Jane’s Addiction and Guns and Roses over and over. It’s funny how the past never goes away. It is always right behind, smirking, playing hide and seek, ready to jump out and pounce at any moment like a chimpanzee - sometimes playfully - sometimes cruelly with malice. I finished my smoke and listened for a while with my eyes closed to the endless symphony of the highway and then went back to my truck to do another line. It was grade A stuff, which is another reason I didn't want to risk severing ties with Clifford. I realize now how stupid it had been to ask his help getting a gun. I

completely miscalculated that one. I guess I wasn't thinking straight, which I now blame on a lack of sleep. But I did know I needed one. I could sense it like a farmer could sense rain, and I had a good idea how I could get one.

My good friend, Bryce, had dropped out of the rat race a few years back. He had been a sales manager selling antivirus software that became obsolete in less time than it took to download it. It was a job filled with sales quotas, spreadsheets, the hiring and firing of employees, heartburn, irritable bowel syndrome and chronic migraines. He stomached it for years because it paid well, but one night after taking an ounce of magic mushrooms out at Ocean Beach and talking to a tribunal of Jesus, Mark Twain, and James Dean, he had an epiphany to quit his job. He gave up his enviable two bedroom apartment across from Yerba Buena Park in the Upper Haight and moved to an old mining town just outside Nevada City where a woman he had met at a meditation retreat was living. Bryce did all of these things with the revolutionary fervor of an executioner chopping off the King's head. He sold most of what he owned and bought two acres of land on the edge of town with money from his 401K and family trust fund. The only structure existing on the property at the time was a yurt, which he used as his home until he built a proper house for him and his new bride, the girl from the meditation retreat, Lulu Belle. Bryce was a peacenik, nature lover (he knew a lot about birds and was a member of the Audubon Society) and a social liberal but he also was a good ol' boy from South Carolina, who loved to drink beers, tell school boy jokes, listen to the Allman Brothers and play with guns. I knew he had an extensive collection because he showed it to me once, and I was hoping he might have a piece he would be willing to part with. I texted him and told him I was going to stop by on my way to Tahoe but I left out any details. He responded within minutes with, "Call me when you get to the saloon :)"

Bryce's town of Salvation Springs was more an outpost than a town. It consisted of a gas station, a convenience store that doubled as a community center, and an old saloon made of brick that had two black dogs sleeping on the worn wooden floor, an ancient pool table, and lots of deer heads peering down from the walls. With my newly acquired fear of public restrooms, I took a piss outside amongst the ruins of rusting old mining equipment scattered behind the building before entering. (It took me nearly a year after Enrico's before I felt secure enough to use a men's room again.) There were a handful of afternoon drinkers inside when I walked in. They all turned to look at me as I took a seat at the bar but when they saw I wasn't Elvis or wearing a blue uniform, they all went back to their Happy Hour haze. There was country music playing from a juke box in the back that helped fill the silence. Bryce told me on the phone it would be easier if he came and met me instead of me trying to find his place and risk getting shot at by an overprotective farmer or even worse, one of the meth heads (or tweakers as he called them) who were overrunning the Foothills like "toothless hyenas." "How can it be worse?" I asked. "The tweakers don't fire warning shots," he said. Of course after Enrico's I didn't like the thought of anyone firing anything at me, not even if it were a Victoria Secret swimsuit model shooting a squirt gun. I ordered myself a Negro Modelo and texted Annie while waiting for Bryce to show. "Hi Margo, it's Daddy. I'll see you Sunday. Big Kiss." After sending it I realized I didn't even know what day it was.

When Bryce showed up I barely recognized him. He was skinny as a P.O.W. and had long Jesus length hair and beard. He was wearing a t-shirt that read "KISS ME" on it, patched jeans and cowboy boots. He looked like he had just walked out of a 1970's rock album cover. He greeted me

with a big bear hug. It had been a while and it was good to see him again. We used to be thick as thieves before I became a father and he had his epiphany out at the beach. I could fill a notebook about those days. The last entry of which would be our infamous, ill-advised and ill-fated road trip down to Tijuana...the details of which are too convoluted to expand on and will have to wait for another time, less I get too sidetracked. I will say this, the incident involved a parrot, a dune buggy chase, and the little sister of the Mayor of Ensenada. Tijuana was important though – important in that Bryce owed me a favor...a big favor. Thanks to me, he never had the pleasure of becoming a drug cartel's Yankee bitch inside a Tijuana prison.

"Hey everyone, this is Big Breakfast!" he shouted to the half dozen people in the bar. One of them waved back and another gave a half-hearted nod (so much for country hospitality). Bryce always called me Big Breakfast but I'm not sure where the name originated – I rarely ate breakfast let alone a big breakfast. Bryce was one of those guys that had a nickname for everyone, some less flattering than others, like his old girlfriend, Sandra, who he referred to endearingly as Vanilla Pudding. He followed his introduction with one of his big room filling, sometimes room clearing, laughs that I didn't realize I missed until I heard it again.

After bullshitting over a few beers, I followed Bryce in his red Subaru a few miles from the saloon before turning onto a ruddy dirt road for two miles or so. It was a very secluded spot that would have been tricky to find even with directions, which considering his newly chosen agricultural occupation, was probably a good thing. Bryce's house was a two story wood frame with a wraparound plantation deck that overlooked the entire four acre property. The rear of the house butted up against the side of a hill. The original yurt he once lived in was still standing and now being rented out. His wife Lulu Belle came out to greet us, with their two yellow Labrador retrievers in tow. Lulu Belle was a petite blond, similar in size and shape to Julia but that's where the similarities ended. She had none of the urban edginess that Julia had. In fact, she had grown up on a commune. Living off the land and scraping by was the only life she knew. When she hooked up with Bryce it was the equivalent to winning the lotto. I liked her well enough but I wasn't sure how she felt about me. I got the sense she saw me as a reminder of Bryce's urban, spiritually broken, rudderless past and I guess I was...and now here I was showing up out of the blue to get Bryce to lend me a gun.

Lulu Belle made us a salad for dinner from the vegetables she picked from her garden, along with homemade bread and honey. We sat on folding chairs around a folding card table in the dining room and talked about Lulu Belle's garden. I feigned interest when she started talking about her kale and cabbage but Bryce seemed both riveted and nurturing at the same time, like a proud father listening to his daughter read her book report. After dinner, Bryce and I took a walk to see his crops. It was still early summer, so the plants were only waist high. Harvest wasn't for another few months. He educated me on the different types of plants and the quality and type of "high" each plant produced. He talked about them like they were good friends and gave them each stony nicknames like Wild Willy Williams, Surfer Joe Cartwright, Remember the Eskimo, and California No. 9 Dreamin'.

As we stood in the middle of the field and sampled some of last year's crop, Bryce professed to me the love he had for his new life. And what was there not to love? He had a young, attractive wife, a new house, and a six figure tax free job that he worked at fewer hours than Santa Claus.

"So, how are you doing, Big Breakfast?" he asked earnestly.

It was a simple question but one I found difficult to answer. I told him about Annie and what went down back in March with the cops but I refrained from telling him about Enrico's. I really wanted to but the voice in my head warned against it. Instead, I told him a fabrication about a break-in/shooting that happened in my apartment building, which I then used to segue into asking him about a gun.

"Do you even know how to use one?" he asked, handing me the joint that was already half gone.

"Of course, I'm from Jersey! They give you one when you get your driver's license. Look, I would go to a gun shop except I wouldn't pass the background check because of this trumped up domestic violence thing hanging over my head."

"And you only want it for protection?" He asked it like he wanted me to know he knew I was feeding him a load of bull.

"I swear I'm just going to put it under my pillow like a tooth. Well, I may pop off a few 7-Elevens just for fun and then possibly work my way up to gas stations and Senior Centers."

I thought that would produce one of his big laughs but instead he stood there looking at me like a concerned mother.

"Tell me what's happening, Big Breakfast. It's me, Bryce. What's going on up there?" he asked pointing to my head while grabbing the joint from my hand.

I have to say it was unusually perceptive of him to notice something happening with someone other than himself but I wasn't about to tell him shit all. I already felt I had told Julia too much, but then she was the one person in the world I could trust 100%.

"I wish I could tell you but I can't," I replied and then added, "You know you still owe me a favor."

"I haven't forgotten but thanks for reminding me." He then gave me one of his patented big laughs. "Look, I'll think about it, it's not like you're asking to borrow a toothbrush. This requires some thought. But now let's go have some fun," he said, winking and patting me on the back. "You still like to have fun – don't you, Big Breakfast?"

That night Bryce and Lulu Belle took me to a friend's birthday party at a small ranch house built on a bluff overlooking the Yuba River. Before we left, I snuck away to my truck, closed the windows and did another line to make sure I had enough energy to hold up my head, let alone a conversation. I didn't know how much longer I could keep cheating sleep, maybe another 8 or 10 hours tops. Once, about a year before, I went nearly 75 hours trying to finish a project for some tech firm run by some Ivy League assholes that didn't know what the hell they wanted. Of course, I had chemical assistance then, too.

Rolling back down the windows, I let the country sunlight wash over me. I was higher than Peter Pan over London. So much so that everything from the other night seemed surreal: E-Man and Anthony dying with me hiding in the bathroom, and the blue suit guy dead on the floor and then the Butler washing up like a drowned pirate with one eye missing. As much as I didn't want to accept it, my fate was now tied in with all of it, and all the horseflies and honeybees flying around the wild flowers outside Bryce's house, as the summer sun slowly turned from California poppy orange to a blood red, could not change that.

CHAPTER 9 – I'M FROM A PLANET THAT ORBITS THAT STAR

A lot of old hippies came rolling down from the hills for the birthday party. Some of them looked as though they had been asleep for 50 years and some smelled like it, too. There were also recent “tune in/drop outs” like Bryce, who had flipped the bird at society, and a few members of the local religious cult, who were easy to spot in the crowd - they were the ones drinking from the punch bowl labeled “Additive Free.” The only members of town not invited to the party were the tweakers. They were the pariahs of the community, who hadn’t read the brochure that Salvation Springs was all about exploring your spiritual path and not about blowing up your chemistry lab in the woods while jamming out to death metal. On the back wooden porch a band was playing old school country like Hank Williams and George Jones and Patsy Cline. They had a pimply faced fiddle player, who looked like he was thirteen or fourteen tops, and a woman singer with long flowing gray hair, who sang every song in a scratchy voice like it might be her last. They were good and tight and had a lot of people on their feet dancing. Set up against a tool shed were two picnic tables full of food and enough homemade beer and wine to last a couple of days. Lulu Belle had brought a kale and beets salad. There of course was also a non-stop fire brigade of joints being passed around. One old timer, a short guy with Willie Nelson braids and a red bandana, handed me one he called “the Hawaiian Purple Dragon.” His stubble face wrinkled every which way as he smiled and spat out “Beware the Dragon. Beware the Dragon.” The night wasn’t the same after that.

Bryce quickly pulled a disappearing act, leaving me alone with Lulu Belle and the two dogs. Bryce was a complex man with a lot of energy, who only seemed able to sit still when he was crossed legged on a yoga mat. In his absence, Lulu Belle talked about the best way to get rid of snails from the garden. As she talked, she nervously played with strands of her long blonde hair. I kept trying to redirect the conversation but it kept returning to snails. When Bryce finally came back he had a tall brunette attached to his arm. She was wearing an orange summer dress, that fit her like a banana peel above the waist, leaving just enough to the imagination. Her long brown hair was tied up on top with a clip the size of a pine cone. There was so much of it that it was leaning over to the side like a eucalyptus branch bending in the wind. When she moved into the light of a tiki torch I got an illuminated view of her face. She had thick eyebrows that arched over a pair of dark eyes, high cheekbones, and a slightly upturned nose. It was a very mature face. I guessed her age as early thirties but it could have been five years either side of that. I was always bad at guessing ages, which might have something to do with never feeling my own. In fact, sometimes I forgot how old I am and can’t believe it when I remember.

“This is Etta but you can call her Fresh Mint. She’s from Poland. Fresh Mint, this is Big Breakfast. He’s from San Francisco. He’s a city boy. Tell her a little about yourself, Big Breakfast,” Bryce said winking at me.

“Well, I’m a Leo who enjoys water sports and building things and my favorite color is orange,” I said, flashing her my pearly whites. I could be downright charming when the mood struck.

“Orange? Really? That’s quite a coincidence,” she said, smiling back. She had a big wide smile with dimples.

“Are you really Polish from Poland?”

“Tak, Jestemz Poliski. Przysięgam na Boga.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Fresh Mint is renting the yurt from me,” Bryce said, proudly rubbing Etta on the bare upper arm and back. “I’m her landlord.”

“How capitalistic of you,” I shot back.

“Yes, I’m the girl in the yurt.”

“And it’s always been your dream to live in yurt?” I asked.

“No, actually when I was young I always wanted to live in a circus tent,” she replied laughing and putting a hand over her mouth. Her accent was noticeable but not thick or clumsy. She had obviously been speaking English for a long time.

Around this time Bryce winked and snuck away like a cat from the conversation with Lulu Belle in hand. From her quietness, I sensed Lulu Belle wasn’t pleased with Bryce’s overt friendliness towards Etta. If I had been in a comforting mood I would have told her that Bryce was touchy feely with everyone and that it was all harmless but I’m sure she already knew that. It’s just the way he was. He also had a foot fetish, which he was very open and unashamed about it, but that’s neither here nor there.

“So, what are you doing so far from home – here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Is this the middle of nowhere?” she asked.

“That’s what it says on the map. Actually, it’s not even on the map.”

“I’m here studying Reiki massage and healing. Have you ever heard of it?”

“No, but I had a massage this morning...in Chinatown.”

“Oh, was it good?”

“Umm, I would say it was interesting.”

I could tell she didn't know what to say to that, so I helped her out, "What's Reekie massage?"

"Reike Massage," she corrected. "It's a massage that works your body's energy not your muscles. There's no touching involved...physically."

"Wait – there's no touching?"

"Yes, the goal is to replace the patient's bad or negative energy with good positive energy."

"It sounds a bit like an exorcism?"

"Well, sort of but not really. There are no crucifixes or dead chickens involved," she said laughing and gifting me another big smile.

She then asked, so I told her all the "real world" stuff about me like what I did for a living, where I was from, my marital status was, my shoe size, etc. I never liked talking about myself and was surprised when I met other people that did. Etta (I could not get myself to call her Fresh Mint) came across as a little shy, which might explain why she was still talking with me but who knows, maybe she was one of those rare women who didn't know she was gorgeous. Or maybe it had something to do with the fact that I was the only guy at the party without a Civil War era beard or didn't look like he prayed to Jesus every night before bed.

Eventually Bryce found his way back to us. Like most people who enjoyed playing matchmaker, he couldn't resist stirring the pot.

"Hey you two. I'm glad you're getting along so fabulously," he said, putting on arm around each of us. "I wanted to share something beautiful with you all. It's a little present from me to you. I'm sensing you really need this, Big Breakfast," he said, pulling out a rolled up sandwich bag from his pocket. Then he started singing, "Take the load off Fanny, take the load for free, take the load off Fanny, and...and you put the load right on me." This was followed by another of his big laughs.

Considering all that had happened to me over the past two days, one would think that the last thing I needed was to take a hallucinogenic substance, but after seeing Etta accept the mushrooms so willingly as if they were marshmallows for making smores, I stuck out my hand. Bryce gave me two wrinkled stems and a button. "God be with you, my son," he joked making the sign of the cross. They tasted awful, like moldy wood chips and I needed the aid of few swigs of beer to keep them down.

Things started changing while Etta and I were dancing on the cinder block patio in front of the band. It was silly Grateful Dead dancing that wouldn't win us any style points from the judges but in Salvation Springs there were no judges. After the band finished one of their songs, Etta took my hand and led me away from the party and down a dirt path that led to the river. We both took off our shoes and waded up to our knees in the ice cold water that flowed all the way down from the Sierras. A warm wind blew through the river valley and rustled the top of the trees. My senses

were in overdrive. I could hear night birds singing from someplace not too far off and crickets chirping all along the shore. Everything around us seemed to be alive and breathing, even the rocks and water. I stood still and embraced it all with open arms, heart and mind; it being Nature, or God, Krishna or the Buddha or whatever name you want to call *It*. I shook as it passed through me like a bolt of energy, and for just that one moment in time I swear I could feel the very lightness of my existence. I felt cleansed, truly cleansed like a 500 lb. gorilla had been lifted from my shoulders. I think I almost cried.

Etta led me further down the river until we came to a small sandy beach. It seemed we had been walking for an hour but I knew we hadn't because I could still hear the music from the party, although it now came to me in waves of algebraic equations. I actually saw the numbers and musical notes floating past me in space and I was convinced I was on the verge of some universal truth that would set the entire world free of mental oppression...that is until the image of The Iceman's amphibian face hijacked my consciousness. I kept beating it down but it kept popping back up like a broken jack-in-the-box. When I heard something moving in the bushes on the far side the river, I yelled and threw a rock at it, thinking it was either The Iceman stalking me or a group of tweakers upset they weren't invited to the party and who now were going to get all *Deliverance* on Etta and me. My heart started racing and I shouted to Etta to run and take cover. "No, no. You run. I've been running my entire life. I'm done running," she said, laughing and splashing water at me with hands and her feet.

My paranoia didn't die until we laid down in the cool sand and Etta spoon fed me stories about her travels from Poland to California. She had taken the long way, traveling east through India and Asia and then across the Pacific. She told me about her adventures hiking with orangutans in Sumatra and swimming with dolphins in Thailand. Her voice had the soothing effect of a lullaby on my fears and I finally found a "happy place" and began to settle down. After a while we both fell into silence and laid there staring up at the sky covered in a thousand stars, half of which you could never see in the city.

"Only in the West," I said, "are the stars so bright." And I meant it.

"You see that big star?"

"I see a million big stars."

"That one! Right there! Just above the North Star," she said pointing. "Do you see it? The bright one?"

"Yes, I see it," I said to appease her but I couldn't focus on anything so specific as one particular star that was a million light years away and most likely had flamed out before the pyramids were built.

"I'm from a planet that orbits that star."

"Really, is that near Poland?" I asked, playing along, knowing it was only trippy talk.

“Poland, eh, Poland is soooo boring. It’s still lost in its past. It’s babushkas, crosses and vodka,” she said with an anger that seemed to come out of nowhere. “I’m never going back. It’s cold and muddy and the men are the shits.” When I looked over at her, her eyes were watering.

“Alright forget Poland, although it can’t be much worse than Jersey,” I said, taking one of her hands and examining it in the moonlight like a jeweler examining a diamond necklace. Her fingers were slender and unpainted and at least three of them had rings - one in particular caught my eye. It was a silver dragon holding a small green stone. Dragons seemed to be popping up everywhere. Maybe that meant something – maybe it was a harbinger - maybe it meant nothing at all. I was so turned around and inside out that I didn’t know what to believe anymore.

“You have great hands,” I said. “In fact, I think they might be the most beautiful hands I have ever seen.”

“Yes, they’re perfect for exorcism,” she said or I thought she said. Either way it was the last thing I remember until the next day when I woke up in the yurt.

CHAPTER 10 – EATING REFRIED BEANS FROM A CUP

I awoke naked lying on a pull out sofa with Etta moving her hands around my chest in a circular motion while taking in long asthmatic-like breaths. Her long hair was untied and flowed over her shoulders and down her breasts. She was naked, too. The morning sun glowed above her and lit up the yurt like a lantern. When she saw I was awake, she stopped.

“You’re carrying around a lot of negative energy,” she said, patting me on the chest.

“Well, I try to shower daily,” I replied but she didn’t laugh. I knew I was lugging more baggage than a bellboy checking Elton John into the Ritz. I could feel it like a lead boa around my neck.

“You were talking in your sleep, too.”

“I know. I’ve been doing that since I was a kid. I hope I didn’t give away my password.”

“Is your password ‘black wolf?’” she asked, rolling over on to her side.

“Black wolf? Is that what I said?”

“Over and over.”

“That’s weird. I don’t remember dreaming about a black wolf.” I actually didn’t remember dreaming at all. “Do you have any water?” I asked, looking around the yurt for the first time. It was crammed along the edges with stuff - a dresser, a small wood table and chairs, a bicycle, stacks of boxes, etc. In the center of the tent was a small space left for moving around. It had the look and feel of an attic with a tarp thrown over it. I don’t know what Bryce was charging her for rent but whatever it was it was too much.

“Sure,” she said, standing up without bothering to cover herself. She seemed to have lost her shyness with me.

I watched as she walked over to a mini-fridge. She was very pale in the daylight but in a healthy way and her curves were in all the right places. I tried racking my brain to remember what had happened between us last night. I vaguely recall looking at her fingers and kissing her down by the river but I’m not sure what else after that. Yet, there I was naked as a sailor on shore leave. I felt as stupid as one too, for blacking out. I badly wanted to know if we had consummated our friendship but it obviously would have been insulting to ask. It’s true that I have had my share of black outs before but they were always blacking out things I’m sure I didn’t want to remember, like waking up in the middle of the night thinking my sister’s dresser was a toilet. This was the first time I had actually wanted to remember what I had blacked out.

“So, how do you know Russian?” she asked, twisting the cap off a bottle of water and handing it to me as she climbed back in the bed slowly like a cat.

“What are you talking about? I don’t know Russian. I did take three years of Spanish though.”

I guzzled half the bottle in one gulp. My mouth was dryer than Bakersfield on Labor Day.

“Cherny volk. You kept screaming cherny volk.”

“I thought you said I said black wolf?”

“Yes, cherny volk is Russian for black wolf,” she said, stretching her legs the entire length of the bed.

“I thought you were Polish?”

“I am but I know Russian and German, too. In Poland there is a saying, ‘It’s important to know what your enemies are saying.’”

I then asked her to spell it for me, which she did “C-H-E-R-N-Y V-O-L-K.”

“Cherny volk? Cherny volk?” I repeated it several times but it took a second for it to penetrate the shower curtain that was shrouding my brain. “Are you sure I wasn’t saying chimney folk?” I asked her as I sat up and propped myself against the back cushion of the sofa.

“Yes, cherny volk.” It sounded exactly the same coming from her mouth.

“Wait - cherny volk means the black wolf? Who is the black wolf? It sounds like something out a fairy tale. Does that mean anything to you?”

“No, but it must mean something to you – you dreamt it,” she said shrugging her shoulders and then leaning over to give me a kiss. Whatever chimney folk or cherny volk or black wolf was, it would have to wait until later. Soon hands were beginning to roam everywhere, over hills and into valleys, and it appeared we were about to get reacquainted when suddenly Bryce busted into the yurt like an FBI agent waving a search warrant. His two dogs trailed close behind him.

“Knock, knock! Well, how are our little lovebirds doing this fine morning?” Bryce said in his Southern accent, which he turned on and off like a faucet. “I trust we all enjoyed ourselves last night. Everyone is happy. Shiny happy people holding hands.”

Etta pulled the blanket over both of us.

“Aw, don’t be bashful on my account. We’re all God’s children.”

“Isn’t there a lock on the door?” I asked.

“There is no door,” he said laughing. “Get dressed, Big Breakfast. I want to show you something,” he said, picking up my jeans from the plywood floor and tossing them on the bed.

“Can’t it wait? We’re kinda in the middle of a language lesson right now.”

“Not if you want what you came here for. I’m leaving for Auburn in half an hour to see a man about a horse,” he said, turning his fist into a microphone and busting into song. “It’s a beautiful day – don’t let it slip away! It’s a beautiful day!”

I apologized to Etta for having to leave and told her I’d be right back. “Stay exactly where you are. Do not move.” She looked confused but not upset. I put on my jeans and met Bryce outside. We walked over to my truck with his dogs still tagging behind. Along the way Bryce prodded me on specific details about last night. He was specifically interested in the positions that were used and any “naughty talk” that was said. I told him I couldn’t tell him anything, which actually was true.

“What the hell? Don’t clam up on me. I set you two up, Big Breakfast. That’s downright ungrateful.” He clearly was disappointed. I’m guessing he had been looking forward to sleeping with Etta vicariously for some time.

“Don’t get all bent out of shape. I’ll tell you when the paint dries. I promise.”

“That’s more like it. She does have lovely feet though doesn’t she?”

“Yes, I suppose she does,” I said.

“Nice arches, no abnormalities in the toes and their well-manicured.”

“I did tell her she has beautiful fingers.”

“Fingers? Now, that’s a little weird,” he said with no irony in his voice. “Well, I do hope you enjoyed yourself – when you showed up yesterday you seemed as tightly wound as a yo-yo with corn cob up its ass.”

I didn’t say anything because I knew he was right, well at least the part about the yo-yo.

When we got to my truck, he reached into the glove box and pulled out a small pistol that fit almost entirely in the palm of his hand.

“It’s an old .38 from the 80’s but it still works. I picked it up on a fishing trip down in Baja. Unfortunately, I only have two bullets for it. You’ll have to make them count,” he said laughing and winking.

“Don’t you have anything bigger – like a Glock?”

“Sure I do but I’m not giving it to you. Look, this gun is fine if it’s only for show and scare so it should do the trick. Of course, it goes without saying that you never got it from me.”

“I don’t even know who you are.”

“Exactly. We’ve never met. Oh, and one more thing, Big Breakfast - I might need you to do *me* a favor in return...not now but sometime in the future.”

I should have known that was coming.

“What kind of favor?”

“A tiny one. Un poquito.”

“Aren’t we *even* now?” I asked, grabbing the gun from his hand to look it over.

“I don’t think so.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, I think this favor outweighs the favor you did for me.”

“Really? You got to be kidding. You’d still be eating refried beans from a cup if it weren’t for me.”

“That’s debatable. I would have been out in a week – two tops.”

“You wouldn’t have lasted a week.”

“Maybe, but let’s not forget you also have me to thank for waking up with a beautiful woman from Warsaw with amazing feet.”

I couldn’t argue with him there.

“Alright I’ll owe you one. After all what are friends for, right?” I said, giving him a wink.

I put the gun in the glove box and went back to the yurt with a skip in my walk anticipating finding Etta still naked on the bed and ready to resume things horizontally. Instead I found a note scribbled in a red ink taped to the center tent pole.

“Dear Big Breakfast, sorry, I had to rush off. I forgot I had my Primordial Sound Meditation class. Look me up the next time you’re back in the middle of nowhere. My yurt is always open. Love, Fresh Mint aka Etta.”

What the hell! I had only been gone for ten - fifteen minutes. My *lucky* second had definitely let me down this time. I blamed it all on Bryce. Disappointed, I looked around the yurt for my t-shirt and found it lying on the floor next to Etta's orange dress. I picked up the dress and sniffed it. It had the faint hint of mint and rosemary.

CHAPTER 11 – IT’S ALL BLACK AND BLUE NOW

From the outside, 1638 Horseshoe Way looked like all the other cedar wood vacation homes built outside the old railroad town of Truckee, perhaps a little further from the road and more hidden by pine trees. I did a drive by and then turned around to get a second look. There was no movement in the windows and no cars parked in the drive. It looked vacant as did the rest of the houses on the street that were probably used more in the winter for skiing. Deserted or not, I thought it best to wait until dark before attempting to check out the inside. This gave me almost all day to kill, which usually was not a good thing for me.

I went back into town and had a super carne asada burrito for lunch at a Mexican restaurant and washed it down with two Coronas. I was finally starting to get my appetite back. After lunch, I walked the touristy main drag of Truckee and bought Margo a small stuffed elephant with a cowboy hat from a souvenir shop across the street from the train station. Elephants were Margo’s favorite animal ever since I took her to the zoo when she was three. Her bedroom was now full of stuffed elephants of all colors and sizes. Every night she would sing them a lullaby, or at least she did the last time I had put her to bed, which was almost five months ago.

A few doors down from the toy store I nearly fell into a hole in the wall called the Past Time Club but I fought the urge with the fortitude of a boxer who was two rounds down with his back against the ropes. Instead of drinking in a bar, I bought a fifth of bourbon from a liquor store down the street. I wanted to get distracted, good and distracted, just not around other people. With bourbon in the bag I got back in my truck and drove down I-80 towards Donner Lake where I remembered seeing a motel right off the highway on the drive up from Salvation Springs. It was a half way decent looking place just across from a Shell station with a good view of the lake and the mountain pass above where the freight trains hugged and churned along the narrow ridge all day and night. Judging from the number of cars in the parking lot the motel was half full at best. I paid in cash and gave my go-to fake name, Steven Tyler, the singer from Aerosmith. I went up to the room, closed the curtains, turned on the t.v. and watched a steady stream of ESPN baseball highlights, while finishing the rest of my sugar and putting a respectable dent into the bottle of bourbon. I pulled out Bryce’s gun and examined it more closely. From what I knew of guns, I could tell it was a piece of crap, but beggars can’t be choosers. I opened the chamber and looked at the two bullets. One thing was for damn sure, if I needed to use it and I hoped I didn’t, I better be within spitting distance.

I still don’t know how what happened next happened, maybe it happens to a lot of people inside motel rooms who are drunk and amped up and alone with a gun, or maybe it only happens to rock stars and washed up B movie actors. Anyway, one thing led to another and I found myself pointing the barrel at my head. I thought about Enrico’s and how close I had come to biting it and how close everyone comes to biting it every day. It was a fine line we all walked and no one knows when their time is up. I thought about all the disappointments in my life. There were so many things I could have done differently or better. Like Annie, I never did her right. She was no saint to be sure. I haven’t even touched on her control issues or her O.C.D. or how she played sheriff with

everything I said. Still, she had deserved better. We had only known each other a few months when I convinced her to move out to California with me when I got a job offer with an ad agency. Now, ten years later, we were both still here but apart. I knew I wasn't a failure, at least not in the business sense. But even that was a bit of a half-truth. I wasn't a graphic designer at heart any more than I was a neurosurgeon or paleontologist. I played the game and was good at it and made good dough but I loved it as much as I loved doing my laundry. Perhaps I was empty, as empty as the four chambers of Bryce's gun. But I still had Margo, at least on every other Sunday. Yes, I still had her. She was the one shining star in my life. I was never going to pull a disappearing act on her. She still needed me for a long time to come. I was her father. I put the gun on the night stand. I was being fucking silly – playing Keith Richards. I knew it was only the cocktail of coke and bourbon mixed with motel room boredom talking. The mere thought of seeing Etta's naked body again was reason enough to keep breathing. I needed to sleep – last night's black out was more of a collapse. I needed to dream and exercise my subconscious muscles. I remembered the valium Julia had given me. I checked the pockets of my jeans thoroughly and was surprised when I found the pill still there wrapped in a small ball of lint. I popped it in my mouth and washed it down with the last of the bourbon. Twenty minutes later it was Goodnight Irene....

I awoke to the sound of the television. ESPN was showing a poker tournament from Vegas. I turned it off and looked out the curtains. It was dark but the Shell station was shining brighter than a nuclear power plant. The clock on the side stand read 12:35 a.m. I had slept for nearly ten hours. I checked my phone. There were still no messages from Julia but there was one from Margo. "Hi Daddy, I miss you. Can we go out for yogurt soon? Bye, love you." The message was like a lifeline to my heart.

I took a shower and felt reasonably better or at least I didn't feel like I was coming out of anesthesia anymore. Staring at my face in the mirror, I saw where age, gravity, stress and excess had all ganged up on me like I was the neighborhood bully who for years had taken their lunch money. I stood and looked deep into my eyes, the eyes I knew I got from my father, trying to find some grain of wisdom buried beneath all the years of everything they have ever seen. But the only truth I heard was, "You ain't no superhero, Motherfucker" in a mocking tone. To which, I responded defiantly, "Not yet, Asshole. Not yet." I did a quick set of thirty push-ups on the floor, got dressed and put on my black hoody sweatshirt. I made sure I had the key to the house and then took everything I had brought with me, including the empty bottle of bourbon, and left the room.

There was a porch light on at Horseshoe Way but still no car in the drive. As I drove past I saw a light on in the back of the house but I figured it was most likely just on a security timer. I continued on and parked two streets away, grabbed a pair of my work gloves from the cab and then walked back over to the house. I crept around the side and peeked in the window with the light. There wasn't any movement inside. I waited a good long minute and then went to the back door and pulled out the four leaf clover key from the Butler's suitcase. I could see lights of the back porch of the house next door some thirty yards away and those from the nearest house to the rear through a line of pine trees, twice as far as that. I put the key in the lock and turned the knob with my gloved left hand while pulling out Bryce's gun from my back pocket with my right....and then I entered.

My first impression of the house was it could have used a maid but I didn't have a lot of time

to critique it much further because there on the kitchen floor, only three feet from the back door, was a man lying on his back with a rope wrapped tightly around his neck. He was snow white and appeared dead as Salt Lake City on a Sunday night. I froze, listening for any movement in the house, but all I heard was silence. I bent over the man, keeping my gun at the ready. He was young, thirty tops, thin, with receding black hair. His eyes were shut on both sides of his long, bony nose. He was wearing red sweat pants and a white t-shirt with the Golden State Warriors emblem on it. His feet were bare. I felt his forehead like a caring mother would a feverish child and found he was still warm. I checked his pants pockets and was surprised to find his wallet. His California Driver License read Thomas Peterkofsky, 5622 Geary Boulevard, San Francisco. DOB 9/18/1979. He was smiling in the photo – obviously a much happier occasion than his present disposition. There were some credit cards and a lot of cash, mostly twenties. I pocketed the cash. He wouldn't need it anymore. I looked around the room closely for the first time. It looked comfortable like an old shoe, with a worn out sofa, a Lazy Boy leather recliner, and a coffee table covered with magazines. The kitchen was a clutter mess of pots and pans and knick-knacks and the sink was full of dishes. There was a stack of newspaper on the circular wood dining table along with a conspicuously unzipped black gym bag that seemed to call out to me like a siren. It was my instincts once again leading the way – begging me to look inside, so I did. At first it appeared only to be gym clothes, t-shirts, sweat socks and a pair of shorts, but just underneath the thin layer of clothing were green bills, lots of them, Ulysses S. Grants, Benjamin Franklins and another face I didn't recognize. They were all nice and neat and rubber-banded together.

I was about to search the rest of the house when headlights ran across the kitchen ceiling and down the far wall. The lights were followed immediately by the sound of a car door closing. That should have been my cue to take the money and run out the back door and not look back until my feet were soaking in the Pacific Ocean...but I didn't. That would have made too much sense. Instead, I hid behind the sofa as the front porch creaked. Staying in the house was either the bravest or dumbest thing I had ever done – maybe both and that's saying a lot in a life time filled with doing dumb things. From where I was crouched, I had an unobstructed view of the front door all the way to the kitchen. My pulse was racing but my gun was out and I was confident I would use it if I had to. The door seemed to take forever to unlock and it squeaked when it did. The man that entered was wearing a cowboy hat, which threw me for a moment, until I saw his face and his unmistakable icy eyes.

The Iceman walked across the living room floor looking as casual as a man returning from a day at the office. He actually wore the cowboy hat well. He was still wearing the same color coordinated uniform as the day before - black sweater, black pants, black boots. The guy could have used a little spring colors in his wardrobe. Peeking over the sofa, I watched as he moved towards the kitchen and stood over the dead man as though he was admiring his handy work before taking off his hat and placing it by the gym bag on the table. He then knelt down and started unfolding a large sheet of black plastic on the floor next to the body. Flipping the dead man over onto the plastic, he started rolling him up in it like he was making a giant burrito. He hummed as he went about his work. It sounded a little like "Let It Be" by the Beatles but I wasn't sure. I knew that then was my best chance, if not my only chance, to make a move. The advantage was all mine – he was kneeling with his back turned and his hands busy. I didn't hesitate. If I had, this story would have ended here.

"Get your hands up and don't turn around!" I said, springing up from behind the sofa and pointing the gun straight at his head. I almost let out a nervous laugh it sounded so cliché to say. "Get them up where I can see them!" I said again aping every cop show I had ever seen.

I could tell I had caught him completely off guard by the way his head jerked to the side.

When he started turning, I shouted, "Keep facing forward, motherfucker! I've got a gun pointing at your fucking head! Now get your hands up!"

He slowly lifted his hands in the air and then wiggled his fingers.

"Who's the guy on the floor that's not moving?"

There was a long pause before he spoke and the thought occurred to me that maybe he didn't speak English well or at all...but that wasn't the case.

"Hell if I know," he said in a high pitched voice that I wasn't expecting.

"Why'd you kill him?" I asked. I was amazed how calm I felt. It's like I was there but wasn't there.

"Because he didn't laugh at my jokes," The Iceman said deadpan.

"Maybe you need to work on your timing. Who owns this place?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Who owns this street? Who owns the sky? Who knows? Someone. No one," he said letting out a sound that almost sounded like a laugh.

"Why did Fish Boy kill the Japanese?" I asked, cocking the gun and moving a step closer. My finger rested loosely on the trigger. I was probably eight to ten feet from him now. "Keep looking forward." I didn't want him seeing my face or how shaky I was holding the gun or how small the gun was.

"Fish Boy? Fish Boy ain't that messy, bro," he said.

"Who is that messy then?"

I kept an eye on every muscle in his body. So far he was playing it smart but I knew he must have a gun and that he'd make a move sooner or later. It was his only option. There weren't too many other ways I could see it playing out.

"What, are you a cop?"

"Yeah, I'm a fuckin' cop. I'm a fuckin' bad ass cop. Now who shot up the place in Oakland? Was it the Cherny Volk? The Black Wolf?"

"Yes, the Big Bad Wolf," he laughed.

"Was it? The Black Wolf?" This time I yelled it at him.

"If you're a cop figure it out yourself, bro."

He sighed like he was already bored with the conversation.

"What about the money in the bag? Where's that from?"

He didn't respond so I tried another question. I had a list of them.

"What did you want at the Japanese' hotel room?"

It took him a moment before it dawned on him that we had met before.

"Are you the pussy that kicked me?"

"This pussy has a gun pointed at your head."

"Not cool. I have a bruise on my leg. It's all black and blue now." He laughed.

"Bad things happen to bad people."

"That's cruel. I'm just doing my job, bro."

"Why were the Japanese killed?"

"The Japanese were too greedy. The Japanese are always too greedy – needy - seedy. They take and take and then blow your house down just like the Big Bad Wolf." He laughed good and hard this time. It sounded almost like he was trying to imitate Woody Wood Pecker.

"What do you mean? What did they have?"

"Who knows? Fairy Dust. Angel Dust. Dust in the wind. It's just a game and everyone is playing it."

Either he was fucking with me or there was something seriously mentally wrong with the guy – besides the fact that he killed people for a living.

"And what did the Fish Boy get out of it?"

"Fish Boy gets what Fish Boy wants. That's why he's the Dragonhead."

"What's a Dragonhead?"

“Man, you don’t know shit for being a cop, bro,” he said right before reaching for the gun tucked in the back of his belt, while simultaneously spinning around to face me.

Unfortunately for him it wasn’t a smooth fluid movement. His gun appeared to get caught on his sweater for a fraction of a second and that was all the time I needed. I didn’t blink. I shot him right in the center of the chest, somewhere close to the heart, if he had one. The gun had a small pop but a surprisingly big kick. The Iceman had an incredulous “what the fuck” look on his face when he realized I beat him to the draw. I’m sure I had a similar expression. He tried to raise his arm up to fire his gun but his arm didn’t want to cooperate. Surprisingly though, he somehow managed to lunge his body towards me and wrap his left arm around my legs before I could get off a second shot. I began hitting him with the butt of the gun as hard as I could on top of his greasy head as he pulled me down with him to the floor and right on top of the wrapped body of the dead guy. I kept right on pounding him like a tent peg until he finally released his grip and slumped motionless. I got to my feet and stood there with my gun ready to fire again but it wasn’t necessary. I was pretty sure he was dead and I should have made sure with a swift kick to his side...but I didn’t - my practical thought process had already flown the window. All I could think of was to get the hell out of there and fast. I grabbed the gym bag full of dead presidents from the table and ran out the back door and through the neighbors’ backyards, until I was on the street where my truck was parked. I heard dogs barking but didn’t see any lights flip on in any of the neighboring houses. I got in and drove away slowly and without headlights until I was back on the main road leading towards the highway.

At the intersection of I-80 and Highway 89, I decided to turn south towards Lake Tahoe instead of west towards home. It was a pure-adrenaline fueled mental coin flip and there was no logic to it. My hands were shaking on the steering wheel and my shirt was soaked with sweat. I had just killed a man, a bad dude to be sure, but still a man, and even though it was kill or be killed, I couldn’t help feeling sick about it. I was pretty sure it’s one of the most important of the Ten Commandments, much more important than Thou Shall Not Sleep With Your Business Partner or Thou Shall Not Steal From a Dead Man’s Wallet. There are some things you never believe you’re going to do in your life and murder is one of them. Dying is another. Now there was no turning back. I was in this thing up to my neck.

I pulled into Tahoe City about two in the morning. The town was quiet as a monastery. I parked in the parking lot of a waterfront hotel and walked aimlessly along the shore until I came to a boat pier that extended some 30-50 feet or so into the lake. The wooden pier creaked under my weight. I went down all the way to the end and stood over the water. Under the bright moonlight I could just make out the outline of the mountains on the Nevada side of the lake. I thought about tossing the gun as far as I could into the watery darkness but the voice in my head advised me against it. “You might need that last bullet,” it said. I smoked a cigarette. It helped settle my nerves some. I could have used a drink, too, but that would have to wait. I got down on my stomach, leaned over the pier and dunked my head into the cold black water and then let out a scream as loud as I could under the surface where only the fish could hear. With my head dripping wet, I replaced the cigarette back in my mouth and headed to my truck to start the long drive back to Oakland.

CHAPTER 12 – YOU’VE SEEN WHAT THEY CAN DO

It took me just over three hours to drive down from the mountains and through the Central Valley. The entire way I listened to nothing but Nirvana’s *Nevermind* “*And I swear that I don’t have a gun – no I don’t have a gun*” and the Rolling Stones *Some Girls* “*When the shit hits the fan I’ll be sitting on the can – When the Whip Comes Down!*” Every song seemed to be speaking directly to me. I stopped only once outside of Auburn to get gas, a large styrofoam cup of gas station coffee, and a Hostess apple pie. I paid for it with the dead man’s cash. While I drove through the night, the showdown with The Iceman kept replaying in my head. I couldn’t believe I had shot him and that it happened so quickly, and even though I knew he was dead, every time I saw headlights gaining in my rear view mirror, I got a shiver down my spine and floored the gas. There was something alien about the guy – something supernatural to his aura that seemed indestructible although I knew that was bullshit. He was just a pale, skinny dude who liked to dress in all black and was now dead as dead can be. I was grateful he had been kind enough to clue me in that it wasn’t Fish Boy who was behind Enrico’s and that the Japanese had been too greedy regarding some sort of deal. It didn’t take a mathematician to connect the dots back to the thumb drive now sitting next to a jar of salmon eggs in my tackle box. The Iceman also didn’t seem surprised when I mentioned Cherny Volk or the Black Wolf. That meant something but I didn’t know what.

Upstairs in my apartment, I hid the gym bag full of cash in the oven. I figured it was as good as place as any considering I hadn’t turned it on once since moving in back in March and I didn’t plan on baking a lasagna anytime soon. I was curious to know how much money there was, but counting it would have to wait for a slow night when I didn’t have anything to do such as solve a mass shooting. It turns out there was an awful lot more than I thought could ever fit in a gym bag. I sat at the computer and ran a search for “Black Wolf San Francisco” but came up with only a male escort service in Santa Rosa. I then typed out the following brief letter in a large font: “YOUR COWBOY IN BLACK UP IN TRUCKEE NEEDS A RIDE HOME. P.S. BRING LOTS OF ICE. LOVE THE BLACK WOLF.” I stuck the letter in an envelope and placed a typed label on it, “FOR FISH BOY’S EYES ONLY.” After that I went through the process of contacting Clifford and while waiting for his confirmation email, I texted Julia, “Out again today – thanks for holding down the fort.” I hadn’t heard from her in two days, which was unusual, even when she was really pissed at me. I also took a moment to respond to some of the most pressing business emails in my In-Box that were piling up like dirty dishes. I needed to keep the “real world” at bay, at least for another day, or a week, or however long it took.

I changed my shirt, the shirt I had shot The Iceman in, and raced out my building and down to Telegraph Ave. to get a shot of caffeine at my favorite coffee shop, a local place that didn’t sell Frappuccino or iced decaf mocha or sliced apples in a plastic container. Besides it not being part of a corporate chain, I also frequented the place because of one of the baristas who worked there - a short brunette with librarian glasses, who was just a little north of chubby but very cute and bubbly as a morning bath. She was always smiling even at rush hours. When she wasn’t busy I would

stand at the counter and flirt with her, mostly food talk – she liked to talk about food. Sometimes I would get bold enough to ask her what she did over the weekend and I seesawed about asking her out but never did because I didn't want to jeopardize having to find a new coffee shop if she turned me down or if it didn't work out, and a good coffee shop is much harder to find than a good date. Christ, I was getting old. Three years ago I would have already had her walking around my kitchen naked, except for one of my flannel shirts, making coffee just for the two of us to be drank between the sheets.

I purposely avoided walking past Enrico's along my way. I didn't need another reminder. There were enough already twirling around in my head. I had no idea who owned the building but if I did, I would suggest they burn the place to the ground (I'd even donate the matches and lighter fluid), collect the insurance money and set all the ghosts trapped inside free to join up with the universal ether. What happened instead of arson was probably the worse memorial imaginable for E-Man and Anthony and the other men who died that night. In a little less than three months after the shooting, Enrico's was converted almost overnight into a Starbucks.

Anyway... the coffee shop was so busy that my barista didn't have time to chit chat but she did give me a big hello that was gift wrapped with a smile that stayed with me for a whole of two minutes, which is when, while waiting for my name to be called for my double macchiato, I got a call from Lt. Walker. My pulse shot to the moon thinking for sure he was going to tell me about two dead bodies found in a house outside of Truckee, but that wasn't the case. He was calling to let me know they had discovered the identity of the Butler or Third Man.

"His name is Haruki Yatsuma. He's an ex-Toyota engineer who was fired a year ago for embezzlement but ended up making a deal with the Japanese Feds in exchange for no prison time. It turns out he has a brother who is high-up in the Yakuza, which might be how our guy with the missing finger fits in. We're still trying to get a fix on him. It appears he had a bogus passport. Most likely he was sent over either for protection or to make sure this Mr. Yatsuma guy followed through with whatever he was sent over here to do."

"How did they end up at Enrico's?" I asked. It was still the million dollar question that had been nagging me like a lap dog ever since the three men walked through the bar door.

"As a matter of fact a taxi driver came forward and told us he drove them from the Oakland airport at around eight that night to a Chinese restaurant over on Telegraph called the...the Double Dragon. Do you know it?"

"I'm actually getting coffee across the street from it right now," I said, looking out the window at the popular Chinese restaurant with its red awning and two pitbull looking dragon statues guarding the front door. I had eaten there twice. It was alright. The Szechuan noodles were passable but the rest of the dishes were drowned in gravy sauces. It didn't hold a candle to E-Man's cooking.

"It appears they may have had dinner there but none of the staff now seems to remember seeing them. Maybe someone has advised them to keep quiet. Anyway, for whatever the reason

they ended up four blocks down the street at Enrico's. And we know how the story goes from there."

I could hear him take a slurp of coffee.

"Where did they fly in from?" I asked, obviously already knowing the answer but hoping to milk some more info from him since he was being so generous with it.

"Reno. They flew in and out the same day."

"That's about how long anyone needs to be in Reno," I said, but my joke seemed to fall on deaf ears. "Maybe they had a meeting up there? They were dressed in suits and they didn't have any luggage."

There was a long pause and I could almost see the Lieutenant making a pained expression on the other end of the line. I glanced over at the barista. Some skinny bald headed guy with heavy framed glasses and a guitar strapped to his back was chatting her up, and whatever he was selling her she appeared to be buying. I was beginning to turn two shades of green. How could I compete with some asshole with a guitar?

"Uh-huh, that's possible. Anyway, what they were doing up there is someone else's concern. The F.B.I. is taking over the case now that it turns out our Third Man, this Yatsuma, is a high profile Japanese national."

The Lieutenant didn't try to hide his disdain when he said "F.B.I."

"I imagine they'll want to ask you a few questions, too. And I would suggest you refrain from sharing your theories with them."

"I'll keep that in mind. By the way I'm a little worried that my name keeps being passed around like some appetizer plate. Does anyone besides the police know I was at Enrico's that night?"

"They shouldn't. That information was never released."

"But someone could find out my name if they wanted to?"

There was another long pause.

"We do everything we can to keep witness information private, Mr. Donovan" he said with all the assurance of a shipping clerk promising safe delivery. "Oh, one more thing, we got word that they're having the funeral service today for the cook, Emmanuel Rodriguez. It's being held at the Cypress Lawn Cemetery over at Colma...starts...at 1:00 p.m." It sounded like he was reading the information. "Thought you'd like to know since you said you knew the guy."

"Thanks, I appreciate you telling me."

“Yep, O.K. be careful. You’ve seen what they can do,” he said and then hung up before I had a chance to reply.

At first I thought I must have misheard him. Did he actually warn me to “be careful – you’ve seen what they can do?” Was he telling me he knew what I had been up to? I couldn’t see how that was possible. If he did suspect I was playing detective, he would have said more than “be careful.” He was an odd bird to be sure, maybe even on some psychiatric spectrum, but it didn’t matter now. He was probably at that moment on his way to another crime scene to stand over another body full of holes, and now the F.B.I. was taking over...and, well, it didn’t take a scholar of 20th Century American History to know the F.B.I. weren’t going to solve diddlyquat. My inner voice had been right from the very beginning. It was all down to me.

I looked over at the barista. She was working the espresso machine. Steam was blowing upward. She blew a strand of hair from off her face. When she saw me looking her way, she smiled. I waved and then walked out.

CHAPTER 13 – THINK OF IT AS AN INFECTION

While I was on the phone I got an email from Clifford to stop by in half an hour. It was such a nice day I decided to walk the mile and a half to his house. I also figured walking would help me digest some of the new facts the Lieutenant had so graciously passed on to me. The Japanese flying in from Reno and getting a taxi from the Oakland airport to a Chinese restaurant on Telegraph all smelled like Fish Boy. Something obviously had gone south in Truckee and the Japanese needed to meet with him urgently, even before they went back to their hotel in San Francisco but then Enrico's happened and that changed everything – Cherny Volk? The Black Wolf? It all made sense somehow but there were still pieces missing from the puzzle and I was hoping Clifford would be able to fill in the blanks.

Clifford was all smiles at the door. He was wearing navy blue sweat pants and a Northwestern t-shirt. In his hand was a large Rock Star energy drink.

"Back so soon, ay Donovan? What, did you have a party?"

"Something like that," I said. "Except I was the only one invited."

Clifford laughed. The t.v. in the living room was playing another black and white movie. It looked like some Jane Austin period romp with all the actors in Victorian costumes talking in British accents. It was the kind of movie Annie loved and I loathed. Clifford paused it with the remote as he waved for me to follow him into the kitchen. The house smelled like freshly brewed coffee. I was hoping I'd be offered a cup but considering the purpose of my visit, I wasn't counting on it.

"Sir Lawrence Olivier," he said referring to the movie. "He's one of the all-time heavyweights. Brando couldn't even hold his jock strap – all that method acting crap. Even when he got older he was still great, maybe better. Did you ever see *The Marathon Man*?"

"No. I don't think so. I'm not a big fan of sports movies."

"Sports movies?" He almost spit out the words. "It's about a Nazi dentist. What about *Sleuth*?"

"No – never heard of it."

"Well, you've got to check that out. That's just him and Michael fucking Caine going mano y mano."

"OK, I'll put it on my list."

“You should. You should put it on top of your list. Believe me you’ll thank me. Anyway, have a seat,” he said, directing me to the kitchen table, “What do you need, the usual?”

“Actually, I didn’t come for that.”

“Oh. What’d you want then, pills?”

“No.”

“Well lay it on me. I know you didn’t come over for a lecture on film and some coffee, or did you? I might have to start charging you,” he said laughing. He seemed to be in a great mood, which was good for me. “Comon’ sit down – have a seat,” he said, pointing to the kitchen table. Outside the window the sun was shining down on the gravestones on the hill. “So, if it’s not something you can swallow or snort then what is it that you want?” he asked vigorously rubbing his right ear lobe between his thumb and index finger.

“I need some information?”

“Information? What kind of information”

“The kind you learn from sitting around the kitchen table.”

“What does this look like, the help desk at your local library?” he said, sounding more amused than upset. I actually had never seen Clifford get upset that is until a second later when I asked him the following question.

“I need to know if Fish Boy owns the Double Dragon, the Chinese restaurant over on Telegraph.”

“Again with Fish Boy?” He said throwing his hand in the air. “I already told you he has his tentacles everywhere. He’s like his own social media. He’s connected to everything.”

“Does he own it or not?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if he owned it or at least extorted money from that place, which is pretty much the same thing. He probably doesn’t officially own anything. Guys like Fish Boy don’t write their names down on paper.”

“I also need you to tell me everything you know about the Black Wolf.”

I could tell he was surprised by that question by the volume of the sigh he exhaled, which was strong enough to blow Mick Jagger’s birthday candles.

“What kind of shit have you gotten in to? First Fish Boy and then asking about a gun and now this Black Wolf shit?”

“You do know who is he? Tell me.”

Clifford studied my face. I could tell he was unsure whether to respond but it was obvious he knew the answer. Fortunately for me, he was a man who liked to share his knowledge with others. It was the Irish auntie side of him. He couldn't help himself.

“I have to say I'm a little disappointed with you.”

“Well, I can live with that. I'm disappointed with myself from time to time, especially recently, but I need to know who he is.”

“I hope you know that you're severing our business relationship.” It was meant as a statement not as a warning.

“I can live with that, too. I'm through,” I replied waving my hand in the air. I actually couldn't believe what I was saying. I hadn't planned on tit for tat and now I was about to trade away Clifford, who was the best dealer this side of Brooklyn.

Clifford laughed.

“You're through? Right. And I'm through with watching movies.”

“I'm serious. I'm done. I'm finished.”

“Cold turkey is it? I've heard that a million times before. Okay, as long as you know what's what. Our business arrangement that I would say has served us both well is now officially over. I don't like cops or lawyers or whatever it is you are...although quite a few of my most loyal client are members of those professions.”

“I'm none of those things. I'm a graphic designer.”

“Yeah, sure you are. You design labels for ketchup bottles during the day and inquire about nefarious characters on your free time,” he said, rubbing his chin and neck while tilting his head back. He then stared at me for a second, like he was gauging my hat size, before continuing. “Well, I admit you have me at a bit of a disadvantage as my pain meds have just kicked in and I'm feeling in the giving mood. Hell, I'm feeling so good I just might call the DEA right now and donate some money to the cause,” he said, pausing to laugh. “Plus, I always liked you. As you might imagine, a lot of my customers don't know the difference between a Bunsen burner and crack pipe. In fact, most of them quite frankly aren't worth talking to.”

Christ, it was like pulling teeth trying to get an answer from him.

“Well, I'm flattered I stand out amongst your less educated salt of the earth clientele,” I jumped in to cut him short.

Clifford got a laugh out of that, which lightened the mood from dark blue to magenta.

"What about the Black Wolf?"

"The Black Wolf is a Russian cargo ship." He blurted it out quickly as though he didn't want the dead lying in the ground on the other side of back fence to hear.

"A ship? Who owns it?"

"I don't know who owns it. Putin owns. Aristotle Onassis owns. What I do know is that it's docked in the Port of Oakland."

"How do you know that?"

"It behooves me to know how merchandize is transported in my business."

"So, the Black Wolf is used to smuggle drugs into the country?"

"In and out – to and from, there and back, but it's much more than powder and weed. It's art, jewelry, guns, precious metals, ivory, prostitutes, criminals you name it," he said, letting out a little "I'm bored" sigh when he had finished. "Alright, I'll grant you one more question – please don't make it a stupid one."

"So, the Japanese, Chinese and Russians are all in bed together?" I said out loud just to see if he knew anything about the big picture.

"Now you're talking shit and I believe we're done here," he declared, slapping the table with both his hands.

"Wait! What? That wasn't even question!"

"You asked me about the Black Wolf and I told you," he said, raising his voice a little but not much.

"Yes but I need to know who runs it!"

"Look, you don't get it do you? It's not a *who*. It's not a Fish Boy, or a Black Wolf. It's a *them*."

"So, where do I find them? Them must have a name."

"Them doesn't have a name. Think of it as an infection. There's no center – there're no ends. And now, good-bye and good luck with your cold turkey," he said, standing up and waiting for me to do the same.

I slowly stood and faced him across the table. He was a big guy and had at least 30 pounds and a few inches on me, but he was someone I could never imagine getting in a physical altercation. He was all cerebral. If it did however come to blows I'm sure I could have easily taken him with one or two good shots to the stomach, especially after he had just popped a few of his happy pills.

We stood there awkwardly for a few seconds staring at each other, with neither of us saying a word.

"I trust you remember where the door is, don't you?" he finally said but with just a hint of rudeness.

"You know you really need to get out more, Clifford. You're looking very pale lately," I said. I'm not sure why I said it. It just came out.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'm right as rain. You're the one that's not alright...coming around here asking questions I shouldn't be answering. Now if you excuse me I have a movie to finish. Good-bye and good luck keeping your nose clean."

He was clearly agitated and I almost apologized to him, but then I remembered what he did for a living and all the money I had given him over the last several months and I left out the front door without saying another word. I had got what I came for but it came at a high price and now it was a long and hot walk back to Telegraph, and the sugar itch inside my brain was just out of reach.

CHAPTER 14 – I DON'T WANT NO TROUBLE

I went back to my apartment and checked the oven to make sure the gym bag was still nice and cozy. I took a quick shower, shaved my face, all of it, including the mustache and goatee I've been growing since Obama became president. I put on the only suit I owned, a charcoal grey Italian number that I wore for all occasions, weddings, graduations, bar mitzvahs, business meetings, and funerals. It was a little tighter around the middle since the last time I wore it, which was a year ago at my Uncle Stan's funeral outside Philly. (It was the only funeral I've ever attended where there *wasn't* a wet eye in the house.) I polished my dress shoes with spit and a dirty sock, straightened my tie in the mirror, did a quick thirty pushups, and then raced out the door and down the stairs. I had a to-do list as long as my arm and the day was nearly half gone.

Before heading across the Bridge I made a detour to the Alameda Naval Base to the exact spot where they had fished out the Butler's body. There was no longer police tape and the grassy slope leading down to the water was now occupied by half dozen squawking geese. I chased them away with a few hand claps and a shout. Across the estuary, about a football field away, were the same two container ships as the day before. Written across their hulls in big white letters several feet high were the names of their shipping company. It was the much smaller lettering on their bows that I knew were actually their ship names. Unfortunately, neither of them read "Cherny Volk" or "Black Wolf" or anything with a "wolf." Maybe the ship had already left port or maybe Clifford's information was wrong or out of date. I'd love to be the first one to tell him so and then watch as he fell off his high horse. There's nothing worse than an arrogant drug dealer.

Discouraged my hunch hadn't materialized, I got back in my truck to leave when I remembered what Lt. Walker had said about the Butler's body most likely drifting out with the tide towards the Bay. I quickly did a 180 and followed the road a half mile or so along the estuary south towards downtown Oakland where two more cargo ships were docked. The first one was painted avocado green and had the company name EVERGREEN on its hull and "Gemini Fin" on its bow. The other, the smaller of the two, was all black, except for a red stripe near the deck line. It had the name REDSTAR painted across its side but the lettering on its bow was too small for me to read, so I took a photo of it with my phone and then zoomed in, and there clear as a glass of vodka on a Moscow morning were the words "CHERNYY VOLK" with two Y's. I was expecting it to somehow look more sinister than the other ships but it didn't. In fact, there was nothing evil looking about it, except it appeared to be completely deserted. I spent the next half hour studying it like it was a centerfold of Ms. October 2014, and like Ms. October, I was racking my brain to figure out how the hell I could board it. One thing was for sure - it wasn't going to be easy. The port side I assumed was gated or guarded and all the other options appeared to involve getting wet...very wet.

....Thirty minutes later I was in the City and lucking into a parking spot right outside Vesuvio's on Columbus Ave., a bar made famous by the Beatniks way back in the day when writers, musicians and artists could afford to live in San Francisco. Now you needed a Masters in Computer Science just to get a pantry size flop above a liquor store on 6th Street. Not one to look a gift horse

parking space in the mouth, I stepped inside Vesuvio's for a quick pop. Vesuvio's had been one of the places Annie and I went to on our first night in San Francisco. We had just driven into town after visiting Annie's sister in Seattle on our way out from the East Coast, a ten day 4,000 mile road trip, and proceeded to barhop until closing time. I think we ended up sleeping out at beach that night. Those were good days for us. Days when the city was brand new and we were young and I was making more money than I knew what to do with. That's not to say it was all rosy, it's just that we were more forgiving then, and when I say *we*, I really mean Annie. Back then she seemed to look the other way at all my many short comings. But all that changed when Margo was born. Margo had instantly made me accountable. The best thing to ever happen to both of us also tore us apart, or at least expedited it. Sorry Margo.

Anyway, life goes on...Vesuvio's had just opened and I was the first customer. The bartender was an older guy dressed in a red flannel shirt. He was the type of guy whose life seemed written on his face and it wasn't a happily ever after story. He said hello but he was obviously not interested in chewing it up with me. It made me think of Anthony and the last thing I remember him saying, "They'll drive you all the way to the fuckin' Las Vegas airport if you show them the money." I ordered a pint of Sierra Nevada and a shot of Jameson and then texted my friend CW a quick message, "need to borrow s-thing from ur garage." I purposely kept it short and cryptic. The less said the better. I also tried calling Julia again, but she didn't pick up. Something was up - normally the phone was attached like a refrigerator magnet to her ear. I was starting to worry about her. The urge to have a line of sugar was hitting me hard, too. I kept punching it down but it kept trying to surface like a lobster in a boiling pot. "Fuck you, Clifford!" I pictured him at his kitchen table drinking his black coffee with his eyes closed, laughing and saying "Cold turkey, is it?" over and over. I downed my whisky but left my beer alone and unfinished, waved goodbye to the bartender, who didn't wave back, and went outside and lit a smoke in the alleyway around the corner to try and combat the waves of cravings crashing through my insides. The nicotine seemed to help somewhat but it was like putting a Band-Aid on a shark bite. The Sugar Blues were hitting me hard. I had felt them the summer before when I tried to quit and it wasn't fun. It felt like there was a pit in my gut the size of a Dutch oven that I needed to fill. I finished my smoke and then continued on through the alley that connected North Beach to Chinatown. It must have been market day because the sidewalk was so crowded that it took me nearly ten minutes just to walk the four blocks to visit my old friend at The Laughing Buddha's Garden Therapeutic Massage.

Ms. Puckered Face was there sitting at the counter playing a game on her phone. There was an air of boredom to her like someone sitting through Sunday school class. When she saw me enter she put down her phone and gave me a look that let me know I was about as welcome as an ex-husband to the second wedding.

"We're closed," she spat out.

"That's not what your sign says."

"The sign is wrong."

"Well, that's confusing," I said, turning the sign around. "There, now you're officially closed."

"I don't want no trouble," she said, putting a hand on the cash register.

"I don't want any trouble either. Nobody wants any trouble. I just need you to do a little favor for me."

"I'm working. No favors."

"I thought you were closed?" I said pulling out three twenties from my pocket. It was another donation from the dead man's wallet. I could see her eyes light up like I had just lit the candles on her birthday cake.

"I need you to take this to your friend who lives behind the red door across the street," I said winking at her and showing her the envelope containing the note I had typed to Fish Boy.

She seemed surprised when I mentioned the red door but I knew she knew what I was talking about.

"Tell the Fish Boy it's from The Black Wolf," I handed her the envelope. "O.K.?"

"I don't know a Fish Boy," she said, refusing the envelope.

"Don't bullshit me!" I said raising my voice. "Everyone knows Fish Boy. He's the Dragonhead."

"You the police?"

"No, I'm worse. I'm from The Black Wolf. You can tell him that."

"The Black Wolf?"

"Yes, now go and don't get lost crossing the street. I'll be watching." I warned her, pointing two fingers at my eyes and then at her.

She took the \$60 first and then the envelope and then gave me a look like I had just flushed her gold fish down the toilet before walking out with the door slamming behind her. I looked up at the Buddha statue on the shelf laughing down at me. This time I laughed along with him. I was starting to see the humor in all the absurdity and chaos that I was swimming in. Hell, I think I was actually starting to enjoy myself.

Stepping outside, I watched to make sure Ms. Puckered Face went straight to the red door. She looked back at me once and I waved to let her know I was still watching her. If things played out the way I had hoped, Fish Boy would get the letter, realize The Iceman wasn't coming home for dinner and send someone up to Truckee with a frozen food truck to dispose not only of his body but also the body of the man without socks and shoes and a rope around his neck. That is of course if a neighbor hadn't called the police last night to investigate, but I was guessing they hadn't. There had

been only one shot fired and it wasn't much louder than the popping of a champagne cork. Even if someone heard it, they probably rolled over and went back to bed. At least that's what people do in Oakland. I waited until Ms. Puckered Face got buzzed in the red door and then I left to pay my respects to the dead.

CHAPTER 15 – I'M GOING TO GET THE BASTARDS

The town of Colma sits like a bed pan directly below San Francisco. The joke is that Colma is a place everyone is dying to move to. It consists entirely of a half dozen cemeteries with a Chevron Station and a Taco Bell thrown in for those folks still with a pulse. I asked the man sitting in the guard booth at the Cypress Lawn Cemetery's entrance gate, who was long in the tooth and didn't look like he had long before he would be taking up permanent residence, where I could find the funeral service for Emanuel Ramirez. He looked at a clipboard, double checked it and pointed me up to the Cemetery's main road that was lined with giant palm trees. "It's the chapel on the right at the top of the hill. Have a nice day," he said; which I thought was a funny thing to say considering the surroundings. I told him to do the same.

The small group of smokers gathered in front of the chapel doors moved aside to allow me to enter. One of them whispered something in Spanish as I passed but I didn't catch it. Inside it was cramped and hot. The bottom panes of the stained glass windows were propped open and a stand-up fan was blowing in the rear near the vestibule, but neither seemed to help much. I could feel the weight of a dozen eyes fall on me as soon as I walked in. Perhaps it was because I was one of the only non-Filipinos or non-Mexicans in attendance or maybe they thought I was a cop. I wouldn't be surprised if they did think I was a cop - everyone else seemed to think so lately. I must confess I didn't really mind. I found it a great way to avoid unwanted small talk.

Piano music was playing from a stereo. It was similar to the sad kind Annie used to play on the upright in our living room. I was always trying to get her to play something more upbeat. Christ, I would have preferred Bill Joel over the maudlin Schumann and Chopin pieces she always played. Anyway...a group of older weeping women were sitting together in folding chairs set against the far wall. Some children were walking about looking bored and a baby was crying somewhere in the room. It would have been an unpleasant experience even if it wasn't a funeral. I assumed the tiny Filipino woman dressed in black and sitting in a chair near the closed casket was E-Man's mother; and the short, barrel chested man with a thick black mustache and Hispanic face that looked like it had seen years of labor under the sun, was his father. He was standing behind his wife with a comforting hand placed on her shoulder. A group of mourners were lined up to pay their respects. I got in line and waited my turn to shake the father's calloused hand. His face was an intersection of creases and his eyes were as dark as black olives. I told him I was a friend of his son but didn't explain how I knew him and was glad when he didn't ask. I didn't want to mention Enrico's and I definitely didn't want to lie, not at a funeral. E-Man's mother was busy staring blankly at her hands which were clutching a rosary. It broke my heart to look at her, so I didn't.

"I'm sorry for your loss. Your son was a good man," I said to the father but loud enough for the mother to hear, too. "He was a good cook... and he knew a lot about baseball."

"Yes, thank you. Thank you for coming. God Bless," was all he said in return, while gripping my hand tightly and looking straight into my eyes. He wore a very stoic mask but I'm sure he was all

mash potatoes inside. No one foresees one of their children dying before them, although every parent loses sleep dreading it might happen. There can't be anything worse in the world. It made me think of Margo. I wouldn't want to live if something happened to her. I quickly chased the thought from my head.

I stood over E-Man's casket and stared at the framed photo of him sitting on top. It looked like it was his high school graduation photo. His hair was down to his shoulders and parted in the middle. He was smiling and he looked happy and innocent and full of promise the way all graduation photos do. Closing my eyes I mouthed a vow I somehow hoped would travel across to the other side, even though I was no longer a believer, "I'm going to get the bastards. All of them. I promise, E-Man - I won't stop until I do." Then without thinking, I made the sign of the cross. Old Catholic habits are hard to break.

I stayed a little longer and watched as more people arrived. I couldn't help but eavesdrop on a small circle of people talking about the Enrico's shooting and the investigation. They hushed when I moved closer but not before I heard one of them, a fortyish looking Hispanic woman in a purple dress, say, "They ain't going to do nothing – they never do nothing, especially if it's one of us." Besides her use of double negatives, I couldn't have agreed more.

Walking away from the group, I noticed one young woman who I hadn't seen before, probably because she was sitting amongst the flower arrangements just to the right of the casket. She was a dark skinned woman with a round, baby face highlighted by long jet black hair that matched the color of her dress. She was getting special attention from the other mourners. I deduced she was E-Man's fiancée. I found her cute and sexy at the same time even in her sadness and I felt a little ashamed thinking that way. I don't remember him talking much about her but then all we really talked about was baseball - stupid fucking baseball - of all the things in the world two people can talk about...When she caught me staring at her, I turned away.

A short while later, a priest in a white robe walked to the front of the chapel clutching a bible close to his chest like it was a life preserver. He was a small framed Filipino with grey, receding hair and thick frame glasses. He shook hands with the father and awkwardly hugged the mother and then went over to the pretty crying young woman dressed in black. When she stood up to accept his embrace, I saw that she was pregnant, quite a few months from the size of her bump. I became instantly enraged, my face reddened and the anger surged up from my gut to my brain. I wanted to hit something or someone - nothing in the world seemed fair or right. I looked at the photo on the casket and immediately repeated my vow of vengeance to E-Man. "I don't know how or when but I will get them. All of them. I promise."

The priest moved in front of the casket and stood with his hands out as if embracing the entire room. He waited for everyone to quiet and then made the sign of the cross. "Peace be with you," he said. To which the crowd responded sheepishly, "And also with you." When he started talking and the word "forgiveness" spooled like taffy from his mouth, I turned to leave. I found no comfort in hearing a priest talk, especially on the subject of forgiveness. "Father forgive me for I have sinned. It's been two months since my last confession." Forget forgiveness. Let the meek forgive. Let the priests and the Buddha forgive. I was interested only in revenge.

CHAPTER 16 – ARE YOU WRITING A RESEARCH PAPER?

I took the Great Highway back up to San Francisco and parked along Ocean Beach where Fulton Street ends. Annie and I used to take Margo to the same part of the Beach on weekends when the weather was sunny, to build sand castles and collect shells in her Dora the Explorer pail. One time we found a jelly fish, which Margo accidentally squished into the sand with her sandals. Thinking she had hurt it, she started crying. It took me a long time to convince her that you can't hurt a jelly fish because they don't have any bones and they don't have any feelings. I don't know why that stuck in my head. It seemed like a life time ago. Everything seemed like a life time ago since the separation. I followed the seawall up the hill towards the Cliff House Restaurant. From there I had a great view of the entrance to the Golden Gate where a cargo ship was slowly heading out to sea. I stood looking out at the waves that roll endlessly back and forth between here and Japan and wondered if the Fish Boy had read my note and if so, had he already sent a "cleaner" up to Truckee with a mop and stain remover. If the Fish Boy wasn't the one to call the hit on Enrico's, he at least was up to his tattooed neck in whatever shit the Japanese were involved in. Maybe he had only been a go-between for the Japanese and the Black Wolf, and when things went south he sent The Iceman up to Truckee to grab the money while no one was looking. I had no doubt that he also sent him to the hotel room thinking the Japanese had left behind a copy of whatever what was on the thumb drive. I was starting to gain an admiration for the Fish Boy. He was one shrewd, opportunistic motherfucker – perhaps I'll add that to his Wikipedia page.

Since I was already in the neighborhood I decided just for the hell of it to drive down Geary Blvd. to take a look at the address on the driver's license of the dead guy up in Truckee, who by now was probably as stiff as a Presbyterian preacher in a Texas strip club. I didn't expect to find anything interesting and so was surprised when it turned out that 5622 Geary Blvd. was the address of a small jewelry store that was tucked between a dry cleaners and a Thai Restaurant. It was not only an odd location for a jewelry store, smack in the middle of a working class neighborhood of mostly first and second generation Russians and Chinese, but an even stranger address to have on one's driver's license. The sign on the blue awning above the door was in Russian letters but stenciled on the glass window in English was "Odessa Jewelers." I found parking further up Geary and walked back down to give the store a closer look. On the surface, it looked like any other jewelry store with glass cases full of watches, necklaces, and rings, but right beyond the back display case sat four men sitting around a table playing cards. A layer of smoke floated like a rain cloud above them. I could smell it from the sidewalk. It smelled as sweet as a reggae beach party. All four of the men were built like they'd be more suited moving pianos or laying sewer pipes than helping young lovers pick out engagement rings. I thought about going inside but I got the sense customers were as welcome as a pimple on prom night. I took one more walk by and then continued on, not wanting to draw any attention.

Back at my truck I phoned my friend Edward Tre Woodson "Woody" to see if he was free to meet for a drink at Tommy's just down the street near 25th Ave. Woody (he hated to be called Edward or Eddy or any deviation thereof) had lived in the neighborhood for years and I knew he would have the skinny on the jewelry store. I knew there was a good chance he'd be home since his

day job was working nights at a bar over on Union Street where he mixed lemon drops and mango mojitos for pretty young people with too much money. When he answered, he sounded like he had just woken up and seemed hesitant to meet, until I told him I was buying. Then he said he'd see me in twenty minutes.

Tommy's was a Mexican restaurant that had been around since the beginning of time. There was a real Tommy once and there's a smiling photo of him hanging in the entrance to prove it. The place is famous for its margaritas – arguably the best in town. They're tasty and strong and sneak up on you like a thief in the night. They don't use a mix either. They squeeze their own limes right in front of you. It's a real labor of love. Like Enrico's, it is a dark and windowless place, but in a pleasant way, and is decorated year round with Christmas lights.

I took a stool at the bar. Mariachi music was playing at a low level from a stereo near the cash register. You didn't need to know Spanish to know it was another heartbreak song. They all were. On the back wall was a mural of a Mexican village scene with women weaving baskets and men sitting under palm trees playing guitars with a backdrop of green mountains rising into a purple sky. It was an idyllic setting that I would have loved to crawl into and take a margarita induced siesta...if I only had tiempo para dormir. The one and only problem with the bar was there were only seven stools. Fortunately, it was early and it was just me and a middle age couple down at the end who looked quite content drinking the afternoon away.

I ordered a pitcher of margaritas from the barrel shaped bartender, who was sporting a Moe from the Three Stooges haircut, but waited for Woody to arrive before pouring. Woody was a bit of an enigma to me, as I'm sure he was to all his friends. On the surface he seemed to have it all together. He's built like a Tight End and has an All American chiseled face and Election Day smile that can charm the pants off everyone he meets, both men and women. He is always clean shaven and always well dressed, albeit in a preppy way. Even at three in the afternoon he arrived in a yellow J. Crew shirt, Armani jeans and black loafers. He was the guy who looked like he had dated the homecoming queen and been voted most likely to succeed - that is until you got to know him and realize he's a Grade-A underachiever, braggart and bullshitter, who could sell snow shovels in Florida if he wanted but luckily, he didn't have to. His family was blue blood from Boston. I think his grandfather had been a Senator or Governor of one the smaller states. Yet, for some reason, that's always baffled me, he was living in a studio apartment surviving on minimum wage and tips. Through the years I surmised he was silently rebelling against his parents. Why? Who knows? Maybe he didn't even know himself anymore. All that aside, Woody was a good, loyal friend and I loved the guy. Hell, everyone is fucked up in their own way and if you read this story up to this point you'll know that yours truly is no exception.

"What's with the suit, Dono? Somebody die?" was the first thing out of his mouth as he straddled the stool next to me and gave me a pat on the back that nearly knocked me off of mine. He called me Dono, which I hated but I never told him that.

"Yeah," I said, surprised I didn't feed him a story.

"Really? Sorry, I guess that joke backfired. Kaboom! I hope it's no one I know – unless it's your friend Kurt. That guy's a total dick. Don't ever invite me to anything if he's around."

“Nah, it was someone I know through work.”

“Hmm. How’d it happen?”

“A heart attack,” I replied, hoping that would put the kabosh on any further inquiry. There isn’t much to say about a heart attack, unless like my Uncle Stan, the deceased is found by the neighbor across the hall naked in front of the television while an S&M video is playing.

“Well, that really sucks. Here’s to him or her,” Woody said, lifting up his margarita.

We chatted about a few things but mostly about Woody’s latest conquest, a brunette attorney from Vegas. I listened politely, mildly interested in the details of her sexual preferences. She enjoyed hot wax and ice cubes and farm animal noises. “She’s even taught me a few things. I know crazy, right?” He also told me about a woman he met at the bar he worked at, who enjoyed doing it in public places: changing rooms, broom closets, elevators, and the like. “She’s like a reverse claustrophobic.” He had photos on his phone that he proudly shared with me.

“You need to get a hobby,” I told him half joking, half not.

“What are you talking about? That is my hobby,” he said and I think he was serious. “I’m a collector.”

“Well, I guess it does beat stamps.”

“What about you, Dono? Anything new on that end?”

“I met a Polish girl recently,” I said knowing I had to give him something to gnaw on. He immediately sit up on his stool and pump me for details, to which I told him a bunch of lies. I wasn’t going to fess up to having blacked out, even now that I was finding the humor in it. He then told me about two Polish girls he met back in Boston. “Actually, they were from Pittsburgh but they were Polish or no wait...maybe Czech now that I think about it. You know it wouldn’t be a bad thing to learn a Slavic language. Think about it – if you spoke Czech or Ukrainian, you’d have them eating out of your hand like deer at a petting zoo.”

With the sexual updates out of the way, I refilled his glass and then jumped right into asking him the question I had woke him up to ask.

“What do you know about the jewelry store over on 22nd and Geary, Odessa Jewelry?”

Woody laughed. “What about it?”

“Well, I just walked by the place and saw four guys in the back playing cards like they were at an Indian casino. Is the place legit?”

“Yeah sure, it’s as legit as Pamela Anderson’s tits. Maybe even more, if that’s possible,” he said grabbing some of the free chips from the bowl on the bar. “Speaking of fake tits, which I’m personally a big fan of, I met this girl from Phoenix last month...”

“Who owns the place? The mob?” I asked, trying to keep him on point.

“Is the Pope celibate?”

“And the cops or feds don’t bust them?”

“What are they going to do - arrest them for playing Crazy Eights in their own store? Plus, I’m sure all the hands that need to be greased have been greased. People always seem surprised when they hear that that the mob still exists but it’s bigger now than it ever was. It’s everywhere, too - not just in Jersey.”

“So, who *runs* it – I mean here in San Francisco?”

Woody looked down at the couple at the end of the bar and then over at the bartender, who was busy slicing limes, before answering my question in a whisper that made me feel like we were in a church confessional. “From what my Russian neighbor tells me there are two families here in the Richmond District. One is the Balaknov family and the other is the Loseveskys Brothers, two brothers with ties to the East Coast, and they’re the ones that own the jewelry store. It’s their Ba-Da-Bing Club, minus the strippers, unfortunately – this neighborhood could use a good strip joint .”

“Which one’s more powerful?” I asked, lowering my voice, too, even though the couple at the end of the bar appeared three sheets to the wind and were now fondling each other like two Eskimos on a winter’s night, and I’m pretty certain the bartender didn’t speak much English beyond dollars and cents.

“They’re both into the same shit though – but the Losevesky Brothers by far. They Loseveskys came over here after the Wall fell and have been living the dream ever since, although the older one is currently on a permanent vacation in Folsom for tax evasion. So, it’s the younger brother, Yeggy Losevesky, who’s now calling all the shots. And supposedly he’s a real piece of work. Imagine if Joe Pesci and Al Pacino had a love child. That’s Yeggy Losevesky.”

“What about selling trade secrets?” I continued to feed Woody questions like candy.

“Trade secrets? Yeah, of course, especially here. Silicon Valley is full of spies. Chinese, Indians, Russians. They are so far behind us techwise that stealing is the only way they can catch up.” Woody paused to finish the remainder of his drink. “Look, these guys will squeeze an egg from a dead hen.”

“Have you ever heard of the Chernyy Volk?”

“No, what’s that? Here fill me up,” he said, moving his glass towards me.

“What about the Black Wolf?” I asked emptying the rest of the picture into his glass.

“Nope. It sounds like a vodka drink – I probably should know it.”

“It’s nothing. Just a name I heard,” I said, shrugging it off.

“So what’s with all this fascination with the Russians? Are you writing a research paper?”

“No, it’s like I said – the place looks shadier than an elm tree – I mean it was almost comical – that’s all.”

“Well, believe me these guys are about as funny as an Adam Sandler movie.”

I ordered another round of margaritas and changed the subject. Woody asked me about Annie and Margo and then about Julia. Somehow he had the impression Julia had given him “positive vibes” the last time he met her at my birthday party back in August at a bar South of Market. I played dumb, especially when he said he thought she looked like she’d be a “jaguar” in bed. I knew first hand that she wasn’t a jaguar or any other jungle animal, although, she was quite the acrobat when the mood came over her.

“Is she available?” he asked, continuing to push.

“Available for what?” I toyed.

“You know what I’m talking about. She’s not wearing a ring, is she?”

“She always has someone on the hook but she usually throws them back before they get too attached. I do know she prefers them on the young side.”

“Well, I’m young,” Woody said, almost sounding offended.

“If you can remember going to a record store than you’re too old to make the cut.”

“What about you? I can’t believe you’re not tapping into that,” he said, elbowing me.

It was now my turn to sound offended. “Comon’ she’s my business partner for Christ sake. That would be like sleeping with my ex-wife.” (“Ex-wife” – I was starting to like the sound of it – it sounded almost regal.)

“That shouldn’t stop *you*. A man with your moral compass?”

“Stop. You’re going to make me blush. Look, I’d tell you if I was.”

“Well, if you’re not in there then how about setting something up for your ol’ pal?”

“Why do you want to hook-up with Julia so badly when you’ve got women willing to do fifty Shades of Gray in gym lockers with popsicles and whips?”

“Like I said – it’s my hobby,” he said, throwing me one of his blue ribbon smiles.

“Okay, I’ll see what I can do.” But I wasn’t going to do anything of the kind. I knew for a fact that Julia couldn’t stand Woody. She told me so herself. Plus, I didn’t much like the idea of her being another notch on Woody’s futon post and then having to listen to him telling me everything she likes and dislikes. Shit, I already knew. At least he didn’t ask me to set him up with Annie. Although, I’m sure he would consider it if I had given him the green light. That would have been quite a feather in his cap – perhaps the prize of his collection – a good friend’s ex-wife.

I paid for the margaritas with the rest of the cash I took from the dead man’s wallet. It was a gift that kept on giving. Woody and I said our good-byes on the corner of 21st Ave. in front of a Russian deli packed with afternoon customers, mostly old ladies. By now the fog had rolled in and blanketed the entire neighborhood. In about an hour it would cross over Van Ness, then float up Nob Hill and down through the Tenderloin and Financial District, until finally working its way over to devour Berkeley and Oakland. It’s no wonder the Russians live out near the ocean. They had years of Russian winters built into their psyche to allow them to combat the Pacific fog. All I had was a few margaritas sitting in my gut.

CHAPTER 17 – JUST STUPID LUCK

Instead of heading to my truck, I walked back towards the jewelry store. I didn't know what I was expecting to see there but I had a gut feeling it was somehow tied into everything, so I decided to scope it out from the donut shop directly across the street. After ordering a cup of joe and a glazed donut from the smiley faced teenage boy with a pimple on his neck the size of a campaign button, I took a seat in the window counter overlooking Geary Blvd., which was busy now with late afternoon traffic. I sat and waited and then waited some more but within two minutes I was already growing restless – stamping my foot and scratching my chin. I knew I wasn't cut out for stake out work or any work at all that required waiting. In fact, I'm pretty certain I've always suffered from a mild case of A.D.D. Perhaps that's why I took to the sugar so much - it seemed to help me focus. Unfortunately, I had none and the donut shop coffee was as weak as Canadian chili.

I had actually stood up to leave when a white delivery van abruptly doubled parked in front of the jewelry store and a young Asian guy dressed in a white t-shirt and baggy jeans that were somehow defying gravity, hopped out of the driver's side with a glass vase full of red roses. When he attempted to enter the store, one of the card players stopped him with an outstretched hand. They had a brief conversation which ended with Mr. Baggypants handing the card player a note or a card. While the card player read it, Mr. Baggypants delicately placed the vase on the sidewalk and then darted back to the van. He had just pulled away when another of the card players came racing out the door looking like someone had just taken the slice of last night's pizza sitting in the fridge. The van did a quick u-turn on 21st Ave. and then proceeded right past me in the donut shop window. Painted on the side of the van was "Lucky's Flowers 2400 Grant Ave., San Francisco, CA." I stuffed the rest of my donut in my mouth and quickly googled the address on my phone. It was no surprise when I found Lucky's Flowers was only three blocks from the Red Dragon Restaurant and the mysterious red door of Ming's Sunrise Tours. It smelled like Fish Boy all over again and I wondered if it was a direct response to my letter that I had given Ms. Puckered Face to deliver. I could only hope.

Intrigued by the flower delivery, I got a refill on my coffee and bought another donut, a chocolate éclair this time, and sat a while longer. My patience was rewarded in spades in about ten minutes or so when a silver Mercedes sedan came to a screeching halt in front of the store and a short, stocky man with black shoe polish hair and an expensive looking beige overcoat stepped out from the front passenger door. I watched as all the card players ran to the entrance and stood to attention like army privates and then parted like the Red Sea to allow the man to enter. But no sooner than you can say "Joseph Stalin murdered 10 million of his own people" three times, then the man with the shoe polish hair came busting out of the store with the vase of roses in his hand and hell on his face. Without hesitating, he flung the vase into the middle of the street, nearly hitting a passing bus. The vase exploded on the pavement, sending glass shattering everywhere and roses scattered like little dead red birds. People on the sidewalk looked startled but no one said a word; maybe they knew who he was and knew better. Looking satisfied, the man rubbed his hands together and then went back into the store waving and barking something at the card players that

I'm sure was not complimentary. There was little doubt in my mind I had just witnessed Yeggy Losevesky in action, and Woody was right - he was a real sweetheart.

I stuck around a bit longer until I was pretty sure I had squeezed all the entertainment I was going to get out of the jewelry store and then drove through Golden Gate Park to the Haight Ashbury where my friend CW lived with his wife in their Victorian house, which I had helped remodel the previous summer. Along the way, I wrestled with whether to drive by my "old house" (the house I had completely gutted and practically rebuilt all by myself before Margo was born) on the slim chance of seeing Margo playing on the porch, but even with the two pitchers of margaritas still lingering between my ears like last night's Cinco De Mayo party, I was still sober enough to know I couldn't risk being seen driving by on my unassigned "every other" Sunday. I no longer felt Annie was out to get me but I have no doubt if she saw me driving past the house she'd be on the phone to her lawyer in less time than it took to fry an egg in hell.

I found the key to the side door of CW's garage where he always kept it, underneath the frog statue in his tiny backyard garden. I was, as were most of his friends, quite familiar with the garage. CW had turned it into a man cave, complete with bar, sofa, big screen t.v. and a stereo system. He called it The Feelings Club and it was the scene of many drunken nights that often required an inflatable inner tube to survive. It took a bit of rummaging before I found what I was looking for because it was hidden on the wall behind two bicycles. I had borrowed it twice before for abalone diving trips up in Mendocino, so I knew it fit. Looking around, I helped myself to a few more things. One in particular was a wood pole about 7-9 ft. long and 2 in. in diameter that was lying across the rafters amongst the shovels and rakes. It looked like it may have been used once as an old closet rod. With a little adjustment it might be exactly what I needed for I what I had planned for later that night.

Before I left the garage, I grabbed the cigar box I knew CW kept in the red cabinet above his tool bench. Inside the box was his stash and pipe. I packed and lit the pipe, took one giant hit and then went out to the back garden to sit on the wood bench under the shade of a brown Japanese maple tree. The garden was a nice little sanctuary away from the noise of the city. I saw a squirrel running on the telephone line above me, and I could see birds flying around in the neighbor's trees on the other side of the back fence. I closed my eyes as the hit washed over me like a spring shower falling on a field of dandelions...unfortunately, the shower quickly turned into a storm. Soon images from Enrico's were repeating in my head like the coming attractions to next week's CSI episode - the dead body of Anthony, the man who hated baseball behind the bar with his hand still grasping the baseball bat he intended to use as weapon. And then there was E-Man, who must have heard the commotion and came rushing out of the kitchen to investigate before turning around to try and escape out the back. His body was found face down three feet from the back door with several bullets in his back. The coroner said it appeared he crawled the length of the kitchen floor before expiring. How the hell did I survive? Why did I survive? If Brandon Belt had gotten a hit or drew a walk the Giants would have been still batting, and I would have still been sitting at the bar watching the game when the shit went down. There must be a reason I lived, other than Brandon Belt not being able to hit a breaking ball from a left handed pitcher. But I knew there wasn't a reason any more than there was a reason I was born. There was no reason to any of it. The odds against being born or against dying on any given day were astronomically high. It was all stupid luck - just stupid luck - like the shuffling of a deck of cards. Sometimes you were dealt a

full house and other times you were dealt bullshit and you had no choice but to bluff your way through. I gave it some thought and figured I was born with a two pair - Jacks high - a win some/lose some hand if there ever was one.

CHAPTER 18 - WHERE'S YOUR BOY SCOUT?

I called Julia again and when she didn't answer I texted her. I was actually starting to worry, which was not my nature, but then lots of paranoid shit was flowing like a sewer through my brain. Maybe my name had been leaked out and someone had come looking for me at the design office and found her instead. Maybe they broke her fingers or worse trying to get her to tell them where I was or where the thumb drive was. I told myself that didn't happen but the seed was already planted and spreading like poison ivy thanks in part to CW's killer weed. I really needed some sugarto set things straight – to right the ship. My entire body wanted to get high. The Sugar Blues had returned in full force and the craving was gnawing at me like an itch underneath a cast. I lit a cigarette, one habit for another, and drove down to the Mission in search of Julia. When Pearl Jam's "I'm still Alive" came on the radio I cranked it up and took it as some sort of sign that what I had been doing, why I had survived, must be for some purpose. At least that's what Eddie Vedder had me believing.

I knew there were two bars Julia liked to frequent on Fridays for Happy Hours, the Latin American Club on 22nd Street and the Dalva Bar over on 16th. Both were old Mexican dives turned hangouts for the young, hip and rich. I tried the Dalva Bar first since I lucked into a parking space just around the corner in front of the old Irish funeral parlor on Valencia. There was a sign on a post that read "Funeral Parking Only" but I didn't give a shit - the dead needed parking spots as much as they needed flowers.

The Dalva Bar was a skinny, rectangle of a place with steel furniture and golden faux marbled walls covered with a series of giant abstract paintings that looked like two or more pregnant women embracing. I felt old as soon as I walked in, like the once star quarterback returning to town for Homecoming weekend only to discover no one knew or cared who he was. There was a D.J. spinning some techno trash (call me old fashion but I liked guitars in my music) from a booth set up near the front and only window. The place was crowded for it being so early and it took me some time to elbow and bump my way through. I heard one woman in my wake, who I accidentally nudged, causing her to spill her drink, say "What the hell, buddy. Watch where you're going." I think she also added something about my lack of manners. I didn't bother turning to apologize. I was on a mission and had been through too much in the last couple of days to give two shits about some princess's split Moscow Mule.

It took a while, but I finally made it through to the end of the bar where lo and behold Julia sat comfortably on a sofa against the back wall with some guy I had never seen before. The two of them looked quite cozy together and I almost felt bad I was going to interrupt them...but not really.

"Well, well, look what the cat dragged in," she said when she saw me. There was no surprise in her voice. "Hello, Donovan. Why you all dressed up for? Got a date?"

She looked and sounded like she had had an earlier start on things. Usually she handles her liquor like a champ, which I always admired about her, unlike Annie, who I had to carry home over my shoulder like a sailor's duffle bag after just two glasses of Chardonnay. I looked down at the guy. He was young, good looking, with a short on the sides, wavy on top haircut. He wore a tight white button-down shirt and even tighter burgundy colored jeans. I'm guessing he had money, too, because Julia was not the type to give any time to a starving artist or some singer/songwriter with a notebook full of love songs. She was as independent as the Independent State of Samoa but she liked money as much as the next girl and seemed to have a good nose for it.

"Why don't you tell your friend to go walk his labradoodle? You and I need to talk." I had lost my p's and q's a few days ago and had no idea where I had misplaced them - I'm guessing on the bathroom floor of Enrico's.

"My friend does whatever my friend wants. It's a free country," she said, putting a hand on her friend's chest.

"Sure it is. He can grow up to be an astronaut or president someday."

"Who the hell are you?" the guy asked, a little slow on the uptake.

"Go get yourself another mojito, Friend. This doesn't concern you."

"Now you're playing tough guy," Julia chimed in. Her hair was brushed out and hung to the side, which is the way I liked it the most. She was wearing a gold short sleeve shirt that was more unbuttoned than buttoned, black pants that she probably needed a can opener to get out of, and a long silver necklace with a turquoise butterfly dangling at the end against her bare skin. I had seen the outfit before. It was her hunting outfit and was usually as effective on her prey as a poison arrow through the heart.

"Is this guy your boyfriend or something?" the guy asked Julia. I could tell he was starting to get upset because his face was turning the color of his jeans.

"I'm not sure what he is. He wears so many hats but lately he's been playing super sleuth-solving crime and keeping our city streets safe," she said, waving her hand in the air like an orchestra conductor.

"Go on, be a good scout. I'm only borrowing her for a minute," I said, keeping my eyes on Julia.

"You want to talk with this jerk?" he asked, thumbing his finger at me.

"No but I guess I have to so maybe he'll go away," she said. "If I talk with you will you promise to go poof?"

"Tell him to go skip some rope before I lose my patience. Now!"

"And you're always such a patient man," Julia shot back.

"Tell him."

"Very well...it seems our friend is being persistent," she said motherly patting the guy on the knee to let him know it was okay. The guy slowly stood up. He was a good half a head taller than me and definitely looked like he went to 24HR Fitness ever morning before getting his nonfat latte and low-fat cranberry ginger scone. He had an "I'll kick your ass" look on his face but all he did was mumble "Asshole" at me while bumping his chest against mine like a rooster, before continuing towards the bar. It was almost comical but I didn't feel like laughing. He obviously was more of a paper tiger than a fighter and it's a good thing too, because I would have messed up his hair nice and good.

"You're in a fine mood," she said and then casually took a sip of her drink.

"And you're half way to Singapore," I tossed back, taking her friend's seat on the sofa.

"Isn't that what alcohol is for? To help you see the world. I plan on visiting Buenos Aires next. And please don't lecture me on excess. I know what you've been vacuuming up your nose – I'm not blind...sneaking off to the bathroom every other minute and running around with the sniffles in the middle of the summer."

"I have allergies."

"Ha, you're not fooling anyone, Donovan."

I let that remark go. I actually did think I was fooling everyone.

"I think I know who was behind the other night," I said, grabbing her drink and taking a sip. It was a Greyhound - grapefruit and vodka, her usual go-to drink. I took another sip and then downed the rest.

"Good for you. Bravo, Sherlock. Where's it going to get you? And where's it going to get the guys that got shot? They're still dead – the bartender and your friend the cook. It's too bad but they are and you're not. And that's a big difference. Anyway, why tell me?"

"Because I thought you'd like to know?"

"Well, you thought wrong. Go to the police like you should have in the first place with the thumb drive," she said, lifting her drink to her mouth not realizing I had just finished it off.

"Why do you have such a bug up your ass?"

"Hmm, gee, I don't know maybe because you disappeared for a few days chasing killers around town and leaving me in a parking garage guessing what happened to you and then having to

lie to our clients because you went AWOL.”

I looked her straight in the eyes. I should have apologized but I didn't. The conversation was sounding eerily familiar to ones I used to have with Annie.

"Let me drive you home," I said, grabbing her by the arm.

"What for? I don't want to go home. I'm quite happy here. All my friends are here," she said, raising her voice with each sentence. I could feel people looking at us but I didn't care – let them look. What do they know? None of them have seen what I've seen.

"Alright, if that's how you want to play - suit yourself," I said letting go her arm.

"That is how I want to play."

"O.K. I'll send your boy scout back over on my way out." I stood up. "Call me when you come down off your cloud."

"Yes sir, boss," she said, giving me a mock salute before falling backward into the sofa.

That last zinger hurt the most. I never felt like I was her boss, even though I did own 75% of the business. It was still a partnership.

On my way out, I saw Julia's friend, the prince in purple pants, standing at the bar working his masculine charms on two blondes. I didn't waste my breath telling him his seat was free again.

Outside, I lit a smoke. The sun was setting somewhere above the fog. All around me the weekend revelry was starting. Soon all the bars and restaurants up and down 16th Street, and around the corner on Valencia, would be crowded, but those days were behind me now. I had been there and done that and then done it some more. Most people know when it's time to hang up the party hat and then some people like good ol' Woody never do. Standing in a crowded bar had as much allure to me now as standing in a subway car during rush hour. That's why I needed a place like Enrico's – a place where I could sit and drink and think and eat...alone.

I finished the rest of my cigarette thinking about what Julie had just thrown at me. I knew I deserved it all. I was selfish as a shellfish. Annie definitely thought so and never missed an opportunity to remind me. It probably destroyed our relationship more than my extracurricular activities had, which I'm sure any marriage shrink would tell me was just a manifestation of my selfishness. Every New Year's for the past five years I've made a resolution to be less selfish but every December 31st I find myself making the same promise. The self-realization was there. I just couldn't make it real.

"Hey Sherlock, where'd you park the beast?"

I turned around to find Julia standing at the door. Actually she was more leaning than standing.

“Around the corner. Where’s your boy scout?”

“He’s working on a blonde merit badge at the bar.”

“Sorry I messed things up back there.”

“The hell you are. You know, Donovan, people who don’t know you may mistake you for an asshole.”

“Well, there’s always the risk that I’ll be misunderstood.”

“Comon’ let’s go before I change my mind,” she said, taking me by the arm for balance and not affection.

We went back to Julia’s place and over a few vodka tonics at her kitchen table I told her everything that had happened over the past few days, minus the part about Etta and the yurt, finding the bag full of money, and, of course, shooting The Iceman. The weight of it all had grown too heavy for me to carry around on my own anymore and it felt good to be spilling my guts to her, even though I knew she didn’t have the power to absolve me of any of my sins, including the ones I still intended to commit.

“I think we need to dissolve this relationship,” she said when I was finished. She sounded surprisingly sober when she said it.

“Which one?” I asked. I really didn’t know.

“All of them. It’s crazy what happened to you the other night, but whatever you’ve done or are doing, this Clint Eastwood vigilante cowboy shit, is beyond crazy and is going to come back and bite you and then bite me.”

“Believe me that’s not going to happen. No one is getting bitten. Everything I have done has been the *right* thing to do. And I’d do it again. Look, I didn’t start any of this. I was slurping noodles, having a beer – just watching the fucking Giants on t.v.! I came this close to getting it too! This close!” I emphasized my point by putting my thumb and index finger an inch apart.

“I get that, and I’m glad it didn’t happen to you probably more than your thick head can comprehend but you’re too reckless...even for me. Withholding evidence from the police, breaking into hotel rooms and houses, storming into the bar like a bull in a china shop looking to throw a punch and whatever else you’ve done that you’re not even telling me. It’s all out of control.”

I wanted to tell her it was all about justice and about doing what other people would never do to make a difference in this fucked up world but I knew that would only feed the fire. Instead, I did something I rarely do. I said nothing.

“Why did you come looking for me tonight?”

"I hadn't heard from you and I was worried."

"Is that right? Spare me the bullshit. You know you only worry about yourself."

"That's not true. Look, I'm sorry. I'm really fucking sorry."

"What are you *really* fucking sorry about?"

"Everything. I haven't been thinking right since this thing happened but I do know I don't want to dissolve anything between us."

"I know why you came looking for me. I know what you want. You're no different than any of them."

"Maybe, but that's only half of it."

"Yeah and what's the other half?"

"I need you – we're partners."

She sat there staring at me, chewing on what I said, and trying to read the sincerity on my face.

"Okay If you want to get what you came for then let's go," she said, standing up, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me out of the chair and into the bedroom which was only a few steps from the kitchen.

She sat down on her unmade bed and started unbuttoning her shirt, but her arm got stuck when she tried to get out of it and she fell backward letting out an "oomph." She tried sitting up but fell back for again. This time she stayed down for the count. "Oh, what's the use?" I bent over and helped her get untangled from her shirt, and then removed her boots and covered her with the blanket. I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about it for a good long moment.

"Hey, where are you going?" she shouted as I started to leave the room. "Here I am, Partner! Comon' Donovan get what you came for! Take me!"

"Shhh."

"Don't shhh me. Don't shush me. You're reckless!" she yelled. "Reckless!" The second time it sounded like she said "breakfast." Then she was silent.

I went and made myself another vodka tonic and sat on the sofa, looking out at the red blinking lights of the giant radio antenna on Twin Peaks. I imagined it was sending a message in Morse code only to me and no one else, but hell if I knew what that message was. Even if it was a

warning sign, I would have ignored it. Julia was right. I was reckless but I could live with that. What I couldn't live with was sitting with my thumb up my ass and not doing what needed to be done.

CHAPTER 19 – YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE A KILLER

It was well past midnight when I parked my truck behind one of the abandoned warehouses along the Alameda side of the estuary. Through the fog I could just make out the lights on the Chernyy Volk's pilot house. I looked up and down the waterway. All was quiet and peaceful as a pleasant dream right before a nightmare. I took off my clothes, threw them inside the truck, and then wiggled my way into the wet suit I borrowed from CW's garage. It was tighter than I remembered. (I needed to lose five pounds, maybe ten, but that was a post-it note to stick on the fridge.) I put my wallet under the driver's seat and my keys on top of one of the back tires and then pulled out the gun from the glove box. I quickly checked the chamber for the one remaining bullet before putting it in the dry bag I found hanging with the wet suit. The last thing I grabbed was the wood pole, also from the garage, to which I had since screwed a 5 inch hook in one end. Julia's words "you're reckless" kept playing over in my head like a bad country song as I took a deep breath and slowly waded up to my waist in the oily black water. It was cold despite the wet suit, and the bottom of the estuary was a foot of muck. I started swimming, nice and easy on my side, taking short but steady strokes. It was slow going, made even slower by the pole. When I was about half way across, I stopped and rested on my back. The fog was moving fast above me. It looked like ghosts flying in the wind. I heard a truck engine off in the distance and the sound of an airplane up above, but nothing but silence came from the Black Wolf.

It took another ten minutes before I was directly underneath the ship and looking up at the deck some fifty feet above. Now came the tricky part - the part I wasn't sure was going to work, although it had worked like a charm in the Steven Seagal movie I saw when I was a kid. I needed to reach up with the pole and hook onto the bottom rung of the rope ladder that had been left hanging over the side of the ship for the purpose of boarding to or from a smaller boat. It took me four tries of propelling myself out of the water to reach it, but finally I was hooked. Worried my splashing had attracted attention from above, I waited a minute and then began pulling myself up the pole, hand over and hand, until I was able to grab the bottom rung. This too wasn't as easy as Mr. Seagal made it seem. Not only did the wet pole keep slipping through my hands but it took all my strength to pull my wet body out from the water.

Flipping over the deck railing, I crouched down in the ninja stance that I've been practicing since I was 8 years old and assessed the situation. Considering the hour, I assumed the deck would be deserted except perhaps for a security guard. But even if there was a guard on duty I figured they wouldn't be expecting a visitor climbing from the water. Not seeing or hearing anything, I began working my way towards the pilot's house through the narrow maze created between the stacked shipping containers. At one point, I came to a dead end with no way past but to climb up and over two containers. It was not a difficult climb except for when my bare foot slipped and I nearly fell backwards fifteen feet to the deck.

Once up and over and safely on the other side, I found myself face to face with the pilot house standing four stories high, the top two rising above the highest of the stacked containers. There were lights on in every level but the first. To the far right side was a metal door that was

conveniently left propped wide open. I took out my gun from the dry bag and waited to make sure no one was coming or going and then made my move. I had no idea what I was looking for or what I would find. I was blindly following my instincts...even if they were leading me straight off a cliff.

There was music playing from a speaker system inside. I recognized it right away as an Eagles song but couldn't place the name until I heard the refrain, "*Everybody's talking about the New Kid in Town.*" I remember Annie telling me once that she liked them when one of their songs came on the radio, which surprised me. She usually had a pretty decent taste in music, except of course for her infatuation with Sting. Anyway, the wetsuit squeaked like a dog's toy as I climbed the stairs with my gun leading the way. The door to the second deck passageway was locked shut, so I continued up to try the third floor where I found the main door into the passageway held open by a folding chair. As soon as I entered, I heard voices. It wasn't English...Russian I'm guessing (not a particularly pretty sounding language). I immediately ducked into the shadows of the doorway just as a man walked out of one room and crossed the hall into another. I recognized him by his linebacker physic and his lumberjack beard as one of the card players from the jewelry store. I crept to the door he had left from and poked my head inside. It was a fairly small room maybe about the size of billionaire's bathroom, with nothing in it except for a leather sofa, a stand up lamp, and a wood desk, behind which sat a man with his back to the door. Smoke blew from his mouth like the exhaust from my father's '67 Chevy. It bounced off the ceiling and spread toward the walls like it was trying to escape the room. He quickly swiveled around in his chair when I closed the door behind me but even before he turned I had known who he was by the shine of his hair. He looked more confused than alarmed by the sudden appearance of a man in a wet suit pointing a gun at his head, but then who knows, maybe it wasn't the first time it had happened to him.

"Who the fuck are you?" he asked or at least that's what I think he asked, since it wasn't in English.

It didn't dawn on me until much later of how fortunate I had been to catch both him and The Iceman with their backs turned. The odds of that were probably slimmer than Angelina Jolie and although I didn't believe in divine intervention or providence there was no denying something or someone had been smiling on me.

"It doesn't matter who I am. Are you the Black Wolf?"

He didn't respond. He just sat there staring at me with his cigarette dangling from his lips. He was not a handsome man, except for his thick black hair, which sat like a miniature poodle atop his head. His face pinched outward at the lips and was asymmetrical but I couldn't say specifically how. It was just lopsided. Even as a young man he was probably not good looking, which maybe played a factor in him choosing a life of crime, but that's just a guess. He had very deep set eyes and a thick brow that protruded above a bulb of a nose that looked like it had stopped a few hockey pucks in its day. He was also as pale as Dracula but with a dark 5 o'clock shadow. I'm guessing he was a man that needed to shave twice a day, three on date nights.

"Spreken zie English?"

“Of course I speak fucking English. Who the fuck are you? I’m guessing you’re not fucking the pizza boy.” It was perfect English but with a heavy borsch accent. I had heard it a lot growing up so close to New York. It was very harsh and cold and covered with sauerkraut.

Without taking my eyes off him, I locked the deadbolt on the door and then moved towards the desk. I wished I could have turned the music off, too. It was another Eagles song playing – *“You can’t hide your lying eyes and your smile is a grand disguise.”*

“That is quite an antique you have. How old is it?” he said, pointing to my gun. I could tell right away he was a man who was used to talking his way out of jams.

“Not as old as you. Put your hands on your head. And toss the smoke.”

“But I’m not done.”

“Yes you are - toss it!” I was cool and in the moment - not at all shaky like I was with The Iceman up in Truckee.

He tossed the cigarette on the floor and slowly raised his hands. I moved closer, so close I could smell his cologne. It smelled like he had taken a bath in it. He was wearing a blue track suit and around his neck was a plain gold chain. On the desk in front of him was an open bottle of Jameson whiskey. At least he had some taste, I thought. I grabbed it and took a giant swig.

“Help yourself,” he said sarcastically.

“Are you The Black Wolf?” I asked again, wiping my mouth and placing the bottle back on the table.

He laughed and then smiled. “Black Wolf? That’s the name of the ship. My name is Yegor but my friends call me Yeggy.”

“You mean the pinheads back at the jewelry shop?”

He didn’t respond. Perhaps he wasn’t familiar with the urban dictionary definition of pinhead.

“Why’d you kill the Japanese?” I asked tired of beating around the bush.

At first he seemed surprised and then he laughed again. It took me a while to realize he laughed every time he needed to stall. When he did talk he spoke very calmly and his eyes remained completely indifferent like we were just two Englishmen enjoying afternoon tea.

“Everyone talks about the Japanese and their honor but that’s just samurai bullshit. Look at Pearl Harbor. And Nanking and Korea, or the Bataan Death March, where is the honor there? And

where is the honor in the Kamikazes? You see – more Samurai bullshit. It’s amazing how easily Americans forgive their enemies – we Russians on the other hand still hate the fucking Germans and they still hate us – probably even more. Although though they did start it. You know both of my grandfathers fought in the war...”

“Why did you kill the Japanese?” I asked, cutting him off from his lecture on World War II.

“I’m a businessman,” he replied not missing a beat.

“Is that what you tell your mother?”

“Me and my friends from Tokyo had a deal. They gave me their word and then they broke it. Where I’m from your word is all you have.”

“What was the deal? And by the way you can stuff your criminal code.”

He laughed again. I was really cracking him up.

“OK, I’ll tell you because you’re going to die anyway.”

“No, I’m not.”

“O.K. if you say so.”

“I do say so.”

“Alright maybe you live – maybe you’ll leave here only a bit broken.”

“What was the deal?” Christ, this guy was as bad as Clifford getting an answer from.

“Do you know anything about hydrogen fuel cell car engines?”

I didn’t reply.

“Well, neither do I nor do I fucking care to, but my friends back home would like to know a lot about them and were willing to pay a lot of money to find out. We agreed on a price with the Japanese and then they unfortunately had a change of heart. This was not acceptable to my friends who don’t like to be disappointed. And it of course was a slap in the face to me. So you see they forced me into taking action.”

“Did you know that four other people were killed in the bar over in Oakland?” I asked, moving around to the side of the desk. “They had nothing to do with anything.”

“Shit happens, no?” he answered, looking up at me. “People die every day and nobody cares. Bombs go off here and bombs blow up there – rebellions, revolutions, assassinations. The world keeps spinning – fish keep swimming – kangaroos keep hopping - people keep fucking and every day there are more and more people and still nobody cares.”

“Well, call me sentimental but I care and I also have the plans for the engine.”

I could tell by the slight raise of his eyebrows that sat like canopies over his eyes that this interested him very much.

“So, this is what this is all about – money? I guess it always is. You know you didn’t have to get all wet to ask me about money. We could have arranged a less dramatic and more civil meeting...Can I put my hands down now that we’re speaking the same language?”

“No, keep them up. I’ve seen how civil you can be –slashing throats, breaking fingers, plucking out eyes.”

A smile broke across his face like a rain cloud. He was a real charmer.

“If you’re trying to make me feel bad you are wasting your time. I’ve seen things in Russia that will make your nightmares seem like Disney.”

“Well, this isn’t Russia.”

“Yes, thank your God for that. Russia is a horrible place. It’s cold and smells like cabbage. Russia is a dying old man and Putin is just a peacock with nothing under his feathers, except some Cold War nukes that he uses to get what he wants. I actually met him once, Putin. Did you know he wears lifts on his shoes to make himself taller? It’s true. The guy’s a midget.” He turned his head to look straight at me. “How much do you want?”

“Oh, I already have money. In fact, I have lots of it. Found it in a gym bag up in Truckee. It appears your man Peterkofsky was sleeping on the job. I hope he wasn’t a friend of yours, but then people die every day and nobody cares.”

I could tell that penetrated his thick veneer. It showed in his eyes.

“He was my nephew – my sister’s son – not very smart and lazy, too - always playing those video games. I don’t think she even liked him much. Of course, she has four other boys but I don’t think she will be happy when I tell her.”

“Sorry I don’t have any roses for you to throw at her.”

That last remark completely cracked through his shell and produced a snarl that showed me the *real* Yeggy Losevesky for the first time. It was a look that could melt ice.

“Shit happens,” I continued. “But I didn’t do it. You have your friend Fish Boy to thank for that.” The Black Wolf spat on the floor at the mention of Fish Boy. “He sent his man up there, The Iceman, to go and get the money – you know the tall, skinny guy, dresses like the Black Death. I’m guessing he found your man asleep on the job and then tied a rope around his neck to make sure he kept on sleeping. It’s a little less barbaric than your methods but the same results. Anyway, I happened to stumble on The Iceman while he was making a pirogi out of your nephew and I killed him and then I took the money.”

I thought it was a great speech on my part but he just simply shrugged like I had told him it was raining outside.

“Who do you work for? Not the fucking Japanese?”

“I don’t work for anyone.”

It was the first time he looked at a loss for what to say.

“So why are you here? Why are we having this friendly talk?”

“Because I wanted you to know why I’m going to kill you.”

Even at this point, I still think he thought he was going to talk his way out of the situation.

“You don’t look like a killer,” he said calmly. “And I’ve seen a lot of killers.”

“And you don’t look like a jewelry store owner. I just told you I killed The Iceman. He worked for your friend, Fish Boy.”

“I don’t know any Iceman or Snowman or Fish Boy or any other cartoon characters.”

“Sure you do. The Fish Boy is the one who told you where to find the Japanese after they came back from Reno.”

He just sat there staring up at me. “How much do you want?” he asked again.

I ignored him. “One of the guys that you killed in the bar in Oakland was a friend of mine. His name was Emanuel Ramirez. Everyone called him E-Man. He was one of the good guys. He was buried yesterday. And was going to be a father!”

“Too fucking bad,” he snarled looking sideways up at me and then he mumbled something in Russian that I translated as “go fuck yourself, asshole.”

“No, too fucking bad for you. This is for E-Man! This is his revenge,” I said putting the gun barrel against his shoe polished head. And then without even thinking about the severity of what I was doing, I slowly squeezed the trigger while bracing myself for the carnage to follow...but nothing happened. I tried again. There was only a click. When he realized the gun had failed, he laughed and then turned towards me and said, “You stupid fuck. You’re a dead man.”

He yelled something at the door in Russian and then tried to stand up but I quickly grabbed the bottle of whisky on the desk and hit him as hard as I could across the side of the head. I was surprised when the bottle didn’t break like it did in the old Westerns, but it still did the trick - Yeggy Losevesky’s ugly mug fell to the desk with a thud. I thought I may have killed him but I wasn’t sure. If it wasn’t for someone trying to pound down the door behind me, I would have checked for a pulse. The Eagles were still playing. Christ, it must have been the Greatest Hits album. *“I’ve got a peaceful easy feeling and I know I won’t let you down...”* I looked around for an escape. Besides the one door there were two square windows but they were quite small, barely the size of an extra-large pizza carton. *“...because I’m already standing...”* I didn’t know if I could fit through one but I wasn’t excited about the alternative, the angry Russian gorilla on the other side of the door. *“Yes, I’m already standing...”* I shoved the Black Wolf out of his chair. He thumped to the floor with a moan. He was still with the living. That was most unfortunate. I thought about hitting him again but I couldn’t get myself to do it. He didn’t seem half as evil lying unconscious. Instead I kicked him in the ribs – twice...real hard. *“...on the ground.”*

I quickly wheeled the chair underneath one of the windows and looked out. Below was a narrow ledge, maybe a foot and a half wide at most, and below that it was another twenty foot drop to the main deck. There was more pounding and screaming from the other side of the door “Yeggy! Yeggy!” Then I heard what sounded like someone hitting the door with a sledge hammer. It was made of metal but I didn’t know if it would hold. To make matters worse the music had changed and *Hotel California* was now playing from the speakers. *“On a dark desert highway – cool wind in my hair...”* I quickly started working my arms and then my upper body out the window. It was a tight fit made even tighter by the wet suit, and for a moment I panicked thinking I was stuck, but I kept my cool and continued sucking and squeezing. *“There she stood in the doorway, I heard the mission bells...”* Right about the time I was half way through the window, I heard gunfire. It was sparse at first but within seconds the deck below me erupted into a full-on action movie, except there was no Liam Neeson or Tom Cruise or Bruce Willis or even the second rate B-stars like Steven Seagal or Chuck Norris to save the day. There were tracers everywhere and the sound was as deafening as a video arcade. I saw a dozen or so men running around below me shooting, some were hiding behind the containers and others were running for cover inside the pilot’s house. Out of all the chaos, one of the men caught my eye. He was moving backwards while firing a gun in each hand. He was tall and skinny and wearing a cowboy hat. If it wasn’t the Iceman then it was his twin brother. But how could that have been? I had seen him lying on the floor dead as a can of tuna. Maybe the bullet hadn’t penetrated his lizard skin and only knocked him out. But whether it was The Iceman or not was a question that would have to wait for when I didn’t have half my body sticking out a ship window with bullets flying all around me like bees around a hive.

With a renewed sense of urgency, I continued pulling my legs out one at a time, until I was precariously standing on the ledge. Then carefully bending down, I peered back into the room to

see Yeggy Losevesky crawling along the linoleum floor towards the door like a wounded opossum trying to reach the side of the highway. Clifford's words came back to me, "It's not a *who*. It's a *them*."

I skirted along the ledge to the corner of the pilot's house to where the deck stood over the water some 50-70 feet below through the darkness and the fog. I took some comfort, but not a lot, knowing it must be deep enough to dock a container ship. When I was a teenager I had spent a lot of time jumping off cliffs into the local quarry but that was back when I thought I was indestructible. The stakes were higher now...much higher. Yet, I saw no other way off the ship without collecting an assful of bullets, so without a seconds thought, less I backed down, I took in a lungful of fog, apologized to Margo and to my mother, and jumped off the ledge as far as I could while screaming one long f-bomb. At first I felt like I was falling in slow motion but right before I hit everything switched to fast-forward. Completely submerged, the cold water was paralyzing, and for a moment it felt as though someone sucker punched me in the gut. I had to tell my brain to tell my legs to kick as I swam upward with my eyes closed. When I finally surfaced, I was gasping for air like a new born baby.

I patted down my body as thoroughly as a night club bouncer to make sure everything was still in tack and then began swimming back across the estuary. I was almost half way when I heard the first explosion. A nanosecond later I was flying ten feet forward. Looking back, I saw a burst of flames shooting high into the air from the center of the ship, and that's when the second explosion hit. It was even louder than the first. I turned and frantically started swimming again, lifting my head out of the water only when I needed to take a breath. By the time I reached the opposite shore the shooting had subsided, but most of the ship was now on fire. Amazing as it sounds, through it all I had not let go of Bryce's broken gun. It was glued to my hand. I cursed at it and then flung it as far as could into the black water. Maybe someday, a hundred years from now, someone would dredge it up and wonder about the one bullet left in the chamber.

I made my way back to my truck and changed out of the wetsuit and back into my clothes. I pulled the last smoke from the blue suit guy's pack and lit it as the firetrucks and Coast Guard boats arrived on the scene. It was a beautiful sight of orange and red flames against a black and blue backdrop. It reminded me of a Turner seascape I once saw at the museum.

CHAPTER 20 – I'M READY, MOTHERFUCKER

Sometime during the night I awoke to see a silhouette of a man standing in the doorway. He appeared dressed in a hooded sweatshirt. I had been sound asleep and that even before my brain could register what was happening, the ceiling light flooded the room and the man had moved across the floor and was standing at the side of my bed. I tried to turn to sit up but my arms were stiff and useless as two two by fours. I attempted to shout, but my tongue was just as useless. I was completely frozen rigid as a fish stick from head to toe. The man just stood there looking down at me – he didn't say a word - his face shrouded beneath his hood. "Comon' get on with it!" I yelled inside my head. "What are you waiting for? I'm ready, Motherfucker! I've lived a good long life." As if reading my mind, the man bent forward and began pulling the blanket from my back and as he did so I slowly began to levitate. At first it was only a few inches, like some cheap magician's trick, but then I continued to rise further. My heart was pounding like a canary wanting to escape its cage and my ears were filled with a loud hammering noise as I continued drifting upward until my back was brushing against the ceiling, which is where I stayed, hovering like an angel in a school play.

The man had one arm raised and pointing up towards me as if he was holding me in place and although I still could not see his face, I now felt an overwhelming sadness emanating from him. A sadness you feel when something good has come and gone. I realized then what I should have known from the beginning. Maybe it had happened out in the estuary while I was jumping from the ship or maybe it had happened when I was in the room with the Black Wolf, Yeggy Losevesky - either way in the morning Lt. Walker would find my waterlogged body along the rocks, with the seagulls circling above, and he would scratch the back of his head and scribble on his notepad and wonder how the hell I fit into all the madness. But even in my floating state, I knew that couldn't be possible. I clearly remember driving back from the Navy Base, stopping off at the Safeway on Broadway to pick-up some Ambien and a bottle of tequila and then going home to my apartment to lay in bed while Neil Young's *After the Gold Rush* sang me off to sleep. So, if I hadn't died out in the estuary, I reasoned I must still be alive and only stuck in some sleeping pill and tequila cocktail induced dream state, and that's exactly the moment when I came crashing down from the ceiling like a sack of potatoes and back into my sleeping body.

I quickly shot up. The room was dark and I was completely alone. I was sweating through my t-shirt and my pulse was racing faster than a hummingbird hopped up on a can of Mountain Dew. I reached for the half empty bottle of tequila on the side stand and took a swig and then another. I stood and went over to close the window, only to find it was already closed. I looked through my reflection in the glass and down to the street below to where the street lights shined off the hoods of the parked cars. All was quiet and still, except for the wind blowing through the tops of the trees. "It's not real. It's not real." I took a few deep breaths to settle my nerves and tried to make sense of what had just happened? Had it been just a dream

or was it some kind of a warning? Perhaps it was a celestial mistake or a cosmic mix-up? Whatever the hell it was it had scared shook me to my core.

I grabbed my laptop from my dresser and the bottle of tequila and went to double check the locks on the front door. I popped another Ambien and then went into the living room to lie on the sofa and proceeded to surf porn until I fell back to sleep.

CHAPTER 21 – ENJOY THE REST OF YOUR MEAL

I slept until two in the afternoon and would have slept longer if it hadn't been for some asshole down the street with a leaf blower. I looked out my window. The sky was blue and filled with clouds so big and puffy it nearly brought a smile to my face. I showered and dressed, putting on my favorite denim shirt, and then hurried down the street for a doze of caffeine. Along the way I borrowed a *Chronicle* lying in the neighbor's driveway. One would think a gun battle onboard a container ship docked in the San Francisco Bay followed by two explosions and a massive fire would surely qualify as newsworthy, but still I was surprised when there on the Front Page was a full color photo of the Chernyy Volk in flames with its bow tilting like a torpedoed battleship from World War II. The main headline read, "EXPLOSION ROCKS THE PORT OF OAKLAND!" with a smaller headline, "HEARD AS FAR AWAY AS SAN JOSE."

At the coffee shop, I ordered my double macchiato from a guy with red ear plugs and a nose ring the size of a half dollar. My favorite barista was not working, which was probably for the best – I didn't have time for chit-chat. When my drink came up, I took a seat at a table in the back, underneath an autographed photo of Tony Bennett, and devoured the newspaper like Robison Crusoe eating his first post-island dinner.

The lead article stated the explosion occurred when gun fire struck a hydrogen tank on board the ship. Quoting Oakland's Police Chief, "...the shootout was between known members of a Russian crime family and an unknown group of Japanese nationals. However, at this point in time we do not know the cause of the altercation." "Altercation?" It sounded like he was talking about a fight between friends down at the pool hall. The article continued: six people were killed in the shooting and/or explosion and fire; five others were in critical condition with severe burns or gunshot wounds; and seven others were pulled from the water, cold and wet but otherwise uninjured. Amongst the dead was Yegor "Yeggy" Losevesky, one half of the infamous Losevesky Brothers, West Coast "representatives" of the Russian/U.S. Crime Syndicate." The Alameda Coroner stated Losevesky's died from apparent smoke inhalation. There was a small photo of Yeggy in a suit and tie looking as smarmy as a game show host. At first I was ecstatic to read of his demise but within minutes it strangely felt as meaningful to me as learning the St. Louis Cardinals had won the World Series. My revenge had lasted the amount of time it took to drink my double macchiato, and afterwards I was left feeling as hollow as tuba. In regards to the Japanese, there was little to no information, besides the fact none of them were in possession of any identification. I'm guessing once the police take a closer look they'll find most of them were also not in possession of one of their little fingers.

After reading everything there was on the Chernyy Volk, I decided to take the BART train into the City to straighten things out with Julia. I wasn't quite sure where we had left things the night before. She had been drunk as a college professor's wife but I had no doubt she would remember everything. She always did. I thought about buying her some flowers but she wasn't the

type of woman you bought flowers for. She'd most likely end up tossing them into the street like the dearly departed Yeggy Losevesky.

The train was packed with Giants fans dressed in orange and black heading to the ballpark for an afternoon game. It was a miserable cramped ride that I spent standing and holding onto a pole, while some twenty something kid kept jabbing me in the ribs while thumbing away on his phone. I made the best of it by watching a young couple paw each other as if it was the last day of summer at the lake house. They weren't an attractive couple. In fact, they were quite the opposite. The girl was too skinny and with greasy, sandy hair and a nose too big for her face and the boy had a face like a pin cushion and a \$10 haircut that fell like mop over his head. Yet, I couldn't help from staring at them. There was something appealing to me about how happy they seemed with each other and how oblivious they seemed to everyone around them. They were in their own stratosphere – flying above the clouds. It made me jealous. Would I ever feel that way again? I wanted to go over to them and shout, "Enjoy it while you can. It doesn't last! Tomorrow it may be gone." Nothing lasts – everyone knows that. Annie and I knew that. The Buddha statue in the Chinatown massage parlor taught that. Mariachis everywhere sing it. Barry Edwin and Customer #2 knew that. E-Man's girlfriend knows that. E-Man's unborn child will grow up to know that. So will Margo. And Yeggy Losevesky, now rotting in hell...well, he knows that more than anyone.

I had intended on taking the train to the 24th and Mission and walk the mile or so to Julia's apartment but when the train stopped at the Powell St. Station I hopped off right before the doors closed. Maybe it had something to do with last night's out-of-body experience, which I now told myself as having been just a dream – a very fucked up dream, a dream to dissect for an hour with my shrink to be sure, but only a dream. Still, I couldn't deny something was happening to me, something I couldn't explain. I felt as though I was losing control of my own actions like a mouse in a maze being guided around every corner to stumble upon the chunk of cheese. Of course, I knew that was complete bullshit and I shook it out of my head like a snow globe. Above ground, I dodged through the crowds of tourists and shoppers on Powell Street, crisscrossed over Union Square and then down Grant until I found myself in front of the Chinatown Gate.

The Red Dragon Restaurant was much busier and much noisier than the day before - on whatever day that was – I really didn't know. I was ushered by the same waiter to the same window table, which just happened to be vacant. Who knows, maybe it was the table they always left for anyone who looked like a cop. Within a minute, the waiter brought me a pot of hot tea, a glass of water and a menu. When he came back again with a notepad and pencil, I ordered a beer, veggie egg rolls and plate of Kung Pao Chicken. "Very good," he said, flipping his pad closed and then flying off with a half bow.

Across the street the red door of Ming's Sunset Tours was quite ordinary looking to me now. It was just a door like any other door that you walked in and out of. I knew it wouldn't be easy getting inside but I also knew that it wouldn't require a wetsuit, which was a good thing because I tore C.W.'s in two places including the crouch. Thoughts of last night kept playing over in my head...Yeggy Losevesky crawling on the floor, me jumping off the ship, the explosions, and the Oakland Fire Department and Coast Guard both racing to put out the fire. It was all quite insane but I confess I loved every minute of it. It had been as exhilarating as skiing down a Black Diamond

run and a shitload more exciting than trying to come up with a logo for a company that makes a computer application to keep track of your cat's caloric intake (one of my more recent projects).

When my food arrived my attention switched back to the restaurant. Nearly all the tables including the large circular ones in the rear were filled. One of those tables was the loudest most festive in the entire restaurant. Judging from their laughter and the number of bottles on the table, they looked like they were celebrating something more important than a co-worker's birthday. The four women at the table looked like porcelain dolls with curly hairdos that must have taken hour to do. All of them were wearing colorful, shiny dresses. They all young looking and two of them would probably get carded trying to buy smokes at 7Eleven. There were four men at the table, too, but only one of them was talking. He was holding court. All eyes were on him. He was wearing a button down purple shirt and a navy blue blazer. His hair was long and slicked straight back, and he was sporting a goatee with a long mustache, but other than that, he looked exactly like his photos. I must have held my gaze a little too long because he stopped holding court and returned my stare with a bewildered look on his face as though he had just bitten down on a bad grape. I quickly turned to my plate of Kung Pao, picked up my fork and started eating. I hadn't expected to see him in the restaurant but there he was in the flesh. A few seconds later when a shadow eclipsed my table, I knew it wasn't the waiter coming to refill my water.

"Kung Pao Chicken? It's one of my favorites," Fish Boy said, with just a hint of an accent, as he took a seat across from me at the table. "You are lucky. The chef today - she's the best - she only works here on the weekends. She cooks for me and my family the rest of the week. My son, he loves her cooking but my wife, not so much - I think she is jealous. Not in that way. No, no. She is old and big...the cook not my wife." He paused to let a very soft laugh. "I hired her away from a very popular hotel in Hong Kong. The owner of course was not happy but then he owed me a favor."

When I didn't say anything, he kept talking.

"It's a nice spot to watch people come and go, no?" he said, smiling and nodding toward the busy sidewalk.

"Not as nice as the view from the Oakland estuary," I shot back.

"Oh yes, I heard they have fireworks there at night," he replied, laughing. He then waited to calm down before continuing in a more serious but still quite friendly tone. "Why are you still following me? And where is the other guy? The bald guy with the funny eye? You know I had a hard time figuring out where he was looking - was he looking here or was he looking over there - it was so confusing," he said laughing again.

I didn't know what the hell he was talking about but decided it best to play along.

"Did you know the Russians were going to shoot up the bar in Oakland?" I asked.

"My goodness, you don't waste any time. Usually there's a little more small talk with you guys. You know like 'How's the weather?' or 'Seen any good movies lately?'"

"I've grown allergic to small talk. Tell me about last night?" I asked, finding myself acting surprisingly calm, but then it was daylight and the restaurant was crowded and despite his reputation, the Fish Boy was not at all intimidating. In fact, he was quite the opposite and it was easy to see how people fell under his charm.

"Even if I knew what you were talking about I can't predict the future. It is true I do have a personal psychic but I only believe half of what she tells me. She reads my cards – you know - the tarot. The trick is to be able to guess which half to believe. Fortunately, she provides other services, which never leave me with any doubt. I think she's in the wrong business, no?" he paused to laugh again. "Do you believe in predicting the future?"

"Sure. In fact, lately I've become a bit of a fatalist - just like this meeting between the two of us seems fated somehow."

"Fate? You show up at my restaurant without calling and interrupt my dinner with friends and call it fate? Now that is funny." He then leaned over the table and patted down his moustache with his index finger before continuing. "I thought we had a deal? I did everything that was asked of me. Besides, now our friend, Mr. Wolf, is no longer with us," he said, lifting his eyes upward. "And everyone is happy now. It's better, no?"

He leaned back in his chair and shrugged and then smiled. I glanced quickly over his shoulder to his table. It was much less festive in his absence. In fact, the table seemed more deflated than a Tom Brady football without him. One of the men, the biggest of the three, with spiked, gelled hair and circular glasses was shooting daggers at me like I was a dancing too long with his date.

"Do my friends miss me? I am the life of the party, no," Fish Boy said, nodding his head backwards but continuing to look straight at me. "Sometimes I don't think they know what to do without me. It makes me so tired always entertaining them," he said it like he was almost looking for sympathy. "Do you like the girls?"

"They're alright," I replied. "That is if you like Barbie dolls with face paint. Is it prom night?" Fish Boy didn't smile and he didn't laugh. "I don't see your tall, skinny friend – the Man in Black. Wasn't he invited to the party?" I asked without a hint of sarcasm.

"You must mean Mr. Yee. Mr. Yee is not one for social gatherings. Plus, he had a rather late night last night."

So it was The Iceman I saw on the Chernyy Volk. How had he survived a bullet to the chest? Maybe the guy was from Mars? Who knows? As much as I wished he was dead, I'm glad I didn't kill him. Yeggy Losevesky had been right about that. I wasn't a killer and I could now gladly delete that title from my resume. But all that was contemplation for a lazy Sunday on the sofa with a six pack and a burrito. I needed to stay on point with Fish Boy. The guy was slippery than a bar of soap in the rain.

"When the deal fell through for the engine plans and the Japanese came back from Reno empty handed and asked for your help, you stabbed them in the back by telling the Russians where to find them over in Oakland. You also tried to help yourself to the Russians' money up in Truckee."

His eyes told me he was mildly surprised by what I was saying but he continued to let me talk while playing the end of his mustache with his fingers.

"And then to cover your tracks you let the Yakuza know exactly where to find the Black Wolf."

Fish Boy sat there staring at me for a second that seemed like a minute and then burst out laughing. I could feel the entire restaurant turn our way, especially the three flunkies back at his table. The one with the circular glass actually shot up from his chair, but then sat back down when Fishboy, without looking back, put up his hand to let them him know everything was okay.

"You would have never gotten the Russian. Mr. Wolf...he *was* too clever," he said, taking one of my egg rolls and dipping it in the small bowl of sweet sauce. His small hands were soft looking with long but well-manicured nails. He crunched the eggroll in his mouth in two loud bites before continuing. "Plus, I wish I was that smart to have figured out everything you just said, but as you know I'm just a simple businessman."

"Everyone seems to be a businessman these days. The Black Wolf was just a hardworking jewelry store owner. Does the place across the street get a lot of customers? Ming's Sunset Tours? It looks pretty quiet to me. I bet the Christian Science Reading Room down the block gets more visitors."

Fish Boy laughed. "It's true. Things are not so sunning for the Sunset Tours these days. The Indian Casinos have killed our business. No one seems to want to go all the way to Reno anymore to lose their hard earned money. We used to have two buses going up every weekend. Everyone would leave and come back smiling. But now it's a very sad situation."

"Not as sad as four people sitting in a bar in Oakland that had nothing to do with anything being killed for nothing."

"You know you appear to be very sentimental for this kind of work. It's not good for your digestion to take business so personal," he said, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin. Then in an instant the tone of his voice changed and I realized why he was called the Dragonhead. "I gave you guys what you wanted and now you're supposed to give me a longer leash...long enough to piss all the way on the other side of the street if I want to. If you want me to go shoot my mouth off to whoever will listen, I will - just remember you guys came to me. You asked me. My hands are clean now," he said, standing up from the table. He then took a step forward, leaned over and whispered. He was so close that I could feel his moustache against my ear. "Stay and enjoy the rest of your meal and then I suggest you leave very quickly."

His return to his table immediately brought smiles to the faces of all his friends. It's like he turned on a switch and they all came back to life. I must admit, he was quite a likeable guy and

one clever motherfucker except for the fact that he thought I worked for the F.B.I. or F.D.A. or I.C.E. or whatever acronym that made the deal with him to broker the exchange between the Russians and Japanese all in order to set up and bust Yeggy Losevesky. He had played the Russians to eliminate the Japanese in Oakland and then had the Yakuza eliminate the Russians on the Chernyy Volk. Still it had required a bit of luck. Last night could have easily backfired on him...but it didn't. He now could take over the Losevesky Brothers' business on the West Coast and no one except me knew he had outfoxed everyone. The Buddha was smiling down on Fish Boy. Tomorrow maybe not – tomorrow maybe his luck would change. I planned to do everything in my power to see that it would.

I threw two Andrew Jacksons on the table and walked out the door without even glancing back over at Fish Boy's table. Out in the street, I quickly got swept up in the weekend crowd of tourists and found my way back to Bush St. where I fell straight into the first bar I saw, which was an Irish pub down an alleyway where I proceeded to get good and drunk on whiskey and beer, while some horse jockey of a guy with a guitar crooned sad Irish songs on the small stage in the back. Between drinks I aggressively flirted with the cute black haired bartender who was probably young enough to be Margo's preschool teacher's little sister. I think she told me her name was Karen but I'm not quite sure and it doesn't really matter. I vaguely recall telling her that her blue eyes looked just like two bottles of Bombay Sapphire gin and how I wanted to take her out for Italian food in North Beach. "Have you ever had real homemade gnocchi?" I don't remember much at all after that other than stumbling outside into the alley, where the fog had since rolled in to cover the city like a cold blanket.

Walking a crooked line back to the BART station to catch the last train to Oakland, I thought about the blinking lights of the giant antenna atop Twin Peaks staring down Julia's apartment. I thought about the darkened windows of Noe Valley and the Mission, and I thought about the foghorn blowing like a wounded whale somewhere in the distance. It made me think about a man dressed in a yellow raincoat drinking gallons of black coffee with the revolving lighthouse lights behind him and the crashing of the surf hitting heavy against the rocks below. I wondered what he did when it wasn't foggy. Maybe he read a book or thought deep thoughts or thought about nothing at all. Maybe he jotted his thoughts down in a spiral notebook and read them over and over - trying to make sense of it all.

AFTERMATH

It bugged me not knowing whether Lt. Walker had made the connection between the Chernyy Volk and Enrico's, although he would have to be dumber than a llama not to, and I knew he wasn't. Still, to make sure he had, I mailed him an early Christmas present containing the thumb drive, which now reeked of trout bait, along with a typed note addressed to "The Police Officer in charge of the Enrico shootings." The note briefly explained the entire case, including Fish Boy's involvement, but left out any mention of Truckee and the gym bag full of money, which by the way, I eventually counted twice. The first time I was drunk on a bottle of red wine and it totaled \$552,550 and the second time I counted it I was sober (well, mostly sober) and it totaled \$555,300. Either way it was a shit load of dough. A good chunk of it would go to Margo's college fund and with the rest I figured I would play Robin Hood – giving some anonymously to E-Man's girlfriend and unborn child.

Lt. Walker called me a week later and basically parroted everything I had written in my letter to him. I acted surprised when he told me about the Chernyy Volk and the possible Yakuza connection. He told me that no additional arrests had been made but I already knew everyone else involved was dead, except for Fish Boy and his sidekick The Iceman. "Unfortunately, the case against Fish Boy is weak at best," he said. "There's nothing to tie him to Enrico's or the ship." When I thanked him for updating me on the case, he replied with a simple "yep" but right before he hung up, he left me with another one of his cryptic messages. "Remember, it's hard to get *real* lucky twice." It sounded like he was reading me a fortune cookie.

Two days after the explosion was my Sunday with Margo. Annie was actually cordial at the door and we talked more than we had in the past three months and none of it was about money. She smiled and seemed genuinely appreciative when I gave her the Giant tickets I had planned to use with E-Man, and she even laughed when I made a stupid joke. Perhaps she had a boyfriend. I seriously hoped so – that would help ease my guilt. I wanted to tell her I was sorry for everything and how badly things had worked out but I didn't. I still wasn't there yet and I didn't want her thinking I wanted to come back into the fold. Despite what Clifford thought, I knew some people can change and others cannot – I still didn't know which one I was. Anyway, I was past any reconciliation and so was she. We had known each other too long to bullshit one another. I gave Margo the stuffed elephant with the cowboy hat that I bought in Truckee. She called it "Albert" because it reminded her of the boy down the street. We walked down to the neighborhood playground with the woman from social services in tow. It was a new woman this time, a bubbly brunette with short hair, dark eyes and tight jeans, who was much chattier than her predecessor. I thought for a moment about asking her out but fortunately I came to my senses. I'm pretty sure that wouldn't have looked very good on her report.

On the way home I bought her and Margo a yogurt from a shop on 24th Street. When we got back to the house we sat on the front stairs together and Annie came out and joined us. Margo showed me her new dolls. She had names for them all. She then set them up around a toy table and pretended to pour them tea. When it was time for me to leave, I told her I would see her again soon. She asked me where I lived now and I pointed in the direction of Oakland. "Just over there. Remember? It's not very far at all. You know I look over at you every night and blow you a kiss that travels all the way over the water. It's a magic kiss. It's only for you. Do you feel it?" "Yes, I do, Daddy. I do," she said, touching her cheek.

THE END