

PAPER LYONS

A Novel

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PROLOGUE

December 19, 1997

He got a jump on me. I can't fucking believe it.

I grimace as I struggle to my feet, then limp over to where the big tattooed thug is holding what's left of his hand. He lets out a pretty healthy whimper as I get closer, his glazed eyes flicking back and forth between the .45 clutched in my left hand and my face, which I imagine has looked prettier. I'm not worried about him going for the gun - it looks like he's just about slipped into shock.

I raise the .45, and a searing pain shoots through my right side. Shit. The thug is shivering now, convulsing in terror at the sight of the gun barrel directed at his face. He gurgles something incomprehensible, coughs, tries again:

"Please..." His eyes roll wildly, and a bit of foamy spit drips out the side of his mouth. "Please... Don't... I love her, man... I... I... They killed her..."

We sit there for a long second, me with the gun leveled at his face in the semidark of the Ocean City dockyards, him rolling and foaming and clutching his stump of a hand. Part of me wants to blow this punk away. Another part of me wonders if he has a wife, kids, parents... Plus, I'm a little impressed that he speaks English. Better let him live. Just call me Mr. fucking nice guy.

I kick the guy in the face, hard, and put his lights out. He's lucky I'm wearing my sneakers - still, I can feel his jaw snap, along with a couple of cheekbones. He'll be down for a while. I crouch, tear off a strip from his dirty wifebeater, and use it to bind up his hand, hard and tight, just like they taught us in basic. No point in not shooting

someone if they're just going to bleed to death later on. There. I think that's tight enough. Hopefully losing a hand and most of his teeth will be enough to get this guy out of the killing business.

I stand up and nearly black out. Shit. I must be hurt worse than I thought. I'm dressed in all black, so it's hard to see exactly what's wrong down there, but I can feel the hole in my side, and I know I'm probably losing blood in a hurry. The area around where the slug hit me feels as cold as ice. I bunch up my shirt and use it to plug the wound, then lurch painfully back towards the edge of the dock and grab the camera. It feels heavy. But that's absurd. It's just a little camera. A little... Shit, I feel weird. At the edge of the service road, twenty feet from the camaro, the camera slips from my fingers and falls. Suddenly and inexplicably off balance, I stumble several feet in the opposite direction and almost pitch face-first into the mud. Focus, Pete. With tremendous effort, I stand upright. I take short, shaky steps until, finally, after what feels like years, I'm leaning against the comforting, solid weight of the camaro.

I climb into the car. My hands are shaking. Everything feels wrong. Where the hell are my keys? I feel for my Jabba the Hut keychain, remember that it's gone, then finally withdraw my key ring. Without warning, I'm hit with another wave of nausea, so intense I almost retch. I can taste blood in my mouth. I wonder why that is? That doesn't seem right. I stab at the ignition with my key, miss, try again, miss again. Okay, Pete, focus. I grit my teeth and slowly, laboriously start the car. On my way. Have to hurry.

I'm only vaguely aware of weaving through traffic on interstate five. I'm sweating hard now, sweat dripping into my eyes, making it hard to see. My brain is on

some sort of demented autopilot, projecting random images onto my dirty windshield every few seconds. Flash. Jenny holding a puppy. Flash. Omar in the desert, smiling. Flash. The .45, shiny in its case, brand-new the day I bought it. Flash. The camera. Oh, shit, the camera! I forgot the fucking camera! But it's too late now. Too late. Flash.

I'm almost home. Home? Wait, no... I need to go to the hospital. But I want to see Jenny. I need to see her. Jenny's big blue eyes and pretty smile. I want to see Boomer. Little shit. But I would miss him if I died. My thoughts don't seem to be making a lot of sense, and there's a black mist hovering around the edge of my vision. Jenny.

I coast down Rocky Bluffs road and pull into the driveway of the cliff house. The lights are all on. She's awake. I kill the engine and stumble out of the car, leaning heavily on the door for support. I wasn't wearing a seat belt this whole time. I could've died. I could've... I need to make it to the porch. I need to get inside. It's so cold out here. So fucking cold.

I'm not sure how I make it in the front door, but here I am, standing in the hallway, dripping blood and rainwater onto the nice wood floor. And there she is, beautiful in her pink nightgown, smelling like champagne and lilacs, and looking at me with her mouth open in a perfect O of horror. The motion-activated Santa Claus we keep by the door comes to life as I lurch past it, waving its stiff plastic arms and ho-ho-hoing.

I smile at Jenny, which I'm sure is very disturbing, given that my face is black and blue and I'm dripping blood all over the place. "Hey, Gorgeous," I say.

I'm happy to be home. I finally feel at peace. That cold, numb feeling is spreading from my side down to my feet, into the tips of my toes, and I wobble unsteadily. Cold as ice.

“You... Pete, you’re hurt!” She takes a step forward. She looks like she can’t decide whether to prop me up or run for the phone.

“You...” I cough, and I can feel blood leaking out of the corner of my mouth. “You should’ve seen the other guy,” I manage. I giggle like an idiot, and then a thick velvet curtain drops over my vision and I can feel myself pitching forward onto the floor. Somewhere, off in the distance, Jenny screams and that damn dog starts barking. But it’s so far away, so far from where I am, cartwheeling in the darkness, that it’s difficult for me to think about.

When I wake up two weeks later, I don’t remember anything about that day.

DAY ONE

I

March 12, 2007

There are three good things about being a private eye. One is that you get to work at home. Another is that you don't need to get offended when somebody calls you a dick. And lastly, you get pretty good at noticing things after a while. This particular morning, I couldn't help but notice that Boomer had taken a shit in my shoe.

Boomer is a tiny dog, one of those that resembles a rat more than any actual breed you've ever heard of. He's also not, technically, my dog. Jenny picked him up at the pound ten years ago, when he was just a little baby rat, and brought him home to "keep me company" while she was at the office all day. We introduced each other. I tried to pet him. Boomer bit my hand and I had to go to the hospital for a rabies vaccination. The little guy has warmed to me only slightly since then.

Since Jenny left, the rat and I have formed kind of a shaky truce. I feed him (kibble and water six days a week, with steak and beer on Sundays) and he doesn't bite me. He still, however, takes the occasional shit in my shoe.

That's the case today. My Mickey Mouse alarm clock goes off at nine o' clock, just like usual, and I lean over to turn it off and see Boomer sitting expectantly by the side of my bed. This is never a good sign. The little bastard likes to wait around and see if I'll fall into his little trap.

"I'm not going to fall into your little trap," I say.

Boomer sticks out his tongue and opens his eyes real wide. Trying to play the "cute and innocent puppy dog" approach.

“It’s not gonna work, Boomer. I’m on to you.” I roll out of bed and pull on yesterday’s jeans, which spent the night under the bed and have dust bunnies clinging to one leg. I stroll to the closet and examine my running shoes. Sure enough, the left one has a Boomer-sized pile of dog shit in it. Fucking mutt. I look the rat sternly in the eye, and he (disappointed at my perceptiveness, no doubt) goes off to sulk, or maybe to pee in the guest bed. Who knows.

I dump the shit into the kitchen wastebasket and toss the shoe into the washer. I usually like to run before breakfast, but it looks like I’ll have to wait; at least through a wash cycle. I can’t say I’m too disappointed. The weather outside is cold and rainy, and a gray March mist has clouded up the kitchen windows. I put on a Notre Dame sweatshirt that’s draped conveniently over the kitchen table, microwave a cup of yesterday’s coffee, and head into the office.

Jenny and I bought this house together. Before I met her, I lived alone in a one-room apartment that was comfortably filthy - kind of like a cockroach in his hole. It was a good life. The apartment didn’t have any insulation to speak of, but it had character in the form of centerfold girls and Beatles album covers taped on every open inch of wall and ceiling. Now that Jenny’s gone, I’ve reverted somewhat to the apartment mentality, dividing my time between the bedroom, the kitchen and the office. I hardly ever venture into the other parts of the house. If Boomer ever actually did pee on the guest bed, I probably wouldn’t find out about it for a couple months. It’s kind of a waste, and kind of a strain on my pocketbook to keep making the mortgage payments every month. I really need to start looking for a smaller place.

In the office, I do 200 sit-ups and 100 push-ups, my morning routine since desert

storm. My back aches. I can't tell whether it's from sit-ups or middle age. Then I plop into my super-plush, \$200 office chair, put my feet on the desk, and wait for the phone to ring. This is how I spend most mornings. Sometimes, if I'm feeling ambitious, I'll do a jigsaw puzzle. I'm really good at Jigsaw puzzles.

My "office" is called the office on the sole grounds that it contains a phone and a desk. I think the place was probably intended, originally, to be a walk-in pantry or something like that, since it's about as big as the inside of a Volkswagon, but it's cozy and I've done my best to give it atmosphere. There's a TV on the desk, so I can watch Notre Dame play and answer the phone at the same time. There's a stack of unpaid mortgage bills, which I try not to look at. There's a clock that averages two hours fast. There's a mini-fridge. There's a big inflatable grinch suspended from the ceiling – I had a reason for that at one point, but I've forgotten what it is. On my desk, I have a framed 8x5 portrait of me and Jenny, except over Jenny's face, I've taped a picture of Cindy Crawford. I think that's what wise people refer to as "letting bygones be bygones." Also on the desk is a half-completed 5,000 piece jigsaw which, when properly assembled, will form a blank white square. I think that's what wise people refer to as "a really hard jigsaw puzzle."

Boomer strolls into the office and gives me a smug look, as if to say, "I just peed on the guest bed and there's nothing you can do about it."

"I don't doubt it, you furry piece of crap." I pick a dust ball off my pants and flick it at him, and then chuckle loud enough for him to hear when he flees and takes cover behind the file cabinet.

Business has been slow lately, partially because I didn't proof read my last yellow

pages ad, and it gives potential clients the wrong phone number. That phone number actually belongs to Thousand Wok Chinese Restaurant, whose proprietor is a Mr. Jeff Wang. Wang sometimes chooses to transfer calls to me, but more often he chooses to hang up and save himself the trouble. So most of my business, at least until the end of the year, will be garnered through word of mouth. Paying the mortgage every month is really getting to be a bitch. Two months ago, I sold the Z-28 I've loved for twenty years and bought a used Geo Metro, just so I would have a couple months' overhead in the bank.

I should've sold Boomer.

I'm a little more than half asleep when the phone rings and I nearly jump out of my skin. Boomer goes nuts and starts yipping his tiny butt off, so I usher him outside and close the door before answering on the sixth ring.

"Lyons Private Investigation Services, this is Peter Lyons speaking."

"Cut the bullshit, Pete! I know it's just you and that dog over there!" The voice on the other end of the line practically blows out my eardrum, it's so loud.

"Jesus, Omar! Can you quiet down a little? You're killing me here!"

"I'm what?"

Omar is a friend of mine from the service. He wandered a little too close to a mortar demonstration in basic training and lost most of his hearing, along with his right pinkie. He's gotten pretty good at reading lips over the years – the only obvious signs that he's practically deaf are the hearing aids plugged perpetually into his ears. And, of course, it's not hard to tell when you're talking to him on the phone.

"I said, you're killing me here! Quiet down!" I shout into the phone. On the

other side of the door, I hear Boomer quit barking. Little shit assumes I'm talking to him.

"Sorry, man," says Omar with a chuckle. He doesn't sound sorry at all. "Look, you want to do lunch today?"

I glance at the clock and subtract two. It's almost eleven. "Yeah, sure. Where?"

"What?"

"I said, where do you want to eat?" I love Omar like a brother. A brother I would not talk to via telephone any more than I had to.

"Oh. The North Side?"

"Okay! I'll meet you there at noon!" I yell, then hang up the phone before there's time for any confusion. Jesus. Never a dull moment in the investigation business. I open the door to let Shithead the Wonder Dog back in, and he shoots me a look of pure hate before disappearing behind the file cabinet again.

"Don't look at me. You're the one who's terrified of the telephone," I tell him. No response. Well, fine. Two can play at this game. For three or four minutes, there's silence as the rat and I pointedly ignore each other. Then, just as I think I'm gaining the upper hand, the phone rings again and Boomer emerges, yapping to high heaven. I have to push him outside again before I can answer.

"Lyons Private Investigation Services, Peter Lyons speaking."

"Oh, good. Mr. Lyons, I need your help." A middle-aged woman's voice, low and husky.

"May I have your name, please?" I like to know *who* I'm dealing with before I get into *what* I'm dealing with. Where the hell did my pen and paper go?

"My name? My name is Rachel Peterson."

Rachel Peterson. Why did that sound familiar? I finally locate a pad of sticky notes and a pen that works. “All right, Miss Peterson, what seems to be the problem?”

“Oh, it’s Mrs. Not miss. And the problem is that my dog has gone missing. I’m quite upset. We’ve searched everywhere, my daughter and I, and...”

Great. “Ma’am...” I’m trying to be tactful, here. “My rates are a little stiff for missing pets. Have you tried calling the humane society, or the pound?”

“Oh yes,” replies the husky voiced woman. “I’ve contacted them both, and they haven’t seen hide nor hair of Peaches. And believe me, Mr. Lyons, money is no object when it comes to finding our baby. We’re prepared to pay whatever’s necessary.”

That catches my attention. Tromping through a neighborhood in search of some pampered pooch is not my idea of a good time, but mortgage check is due next Friday and this seems like any easy way to make a few hundred bucks. “All right, Mrs. Peterson, I’ll come take a look around.”

“Oh, fabulous! Will you hurry, please? Peaches is probably getting more lost and scared with every passing minute!”

I think this is probably giving Peaches a little more credit than she deserves, but I keep that to myself. The clock (minus two hours) says it’s 11:15. Hopefully I can have a poke around and still make it to lunch with Omar on time. “Uh... Yes, ma’am, I’ll come right over. You’re familiar with my rates?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve done my homework. Six hundred a day, plus expenses. That’s fine. Tom can afford it.” Tom. Tom. Tom Peterson... Of course! Now I know why this lady’s name sounds familiar! Her husband is in the state senate, and one of the candidates for governor in next year’s election. No wonder they’re able to pony up so

much cash to find a missing pet.

“Okay, then, Mrs. Peterson,” I say, feeling much more optimistic about the afternoon now that I know my client is loaded. “What’s your address?”

She gives me an address in the north part of town, which I jot down and double-check before thanking her and hanging up. I’m pulling on my jacket and dumping kibble into Boomer’s dish when the phone rings again. The rat, thankfully, is too busy eating to lapse into his usual barking frenzy.

“Lyons Private Investigation Services, Peter Lyons speaking.”

Nothing. Dead silence on the other end of the line.

“Hello?” I keep the phone to my ear for a few more seconds. Maybe someone’s gotten me with their fax line... But no. There’s no beeps. No sounds. Nothing. I hang up the phone and dial *69.

One ring... Two rings... Three rings, and then, “Hello?”

It’s Mrs. Peterson. “Mrs. Peterson, this is Peter Lyons again. Did you just try to call me?”

“Why, no. Only the once. Why?” Her surprise sounds genuine.

“No reason, ma’am. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Oh... Okay then, Mr. Lyons. Please hurry.”

She hangs up, but I stand motionless for a few moments, thinking. The truth of the matter is that there are only a few reasons I’m aware of for a silent phone call. One is a telephone malfunction – the user accidentally hits the redial button and leaves the phone off the hook. But if that were the case, I should have been able to hear some ambient noise on the other end of the line, and when I called back, the line would have been busy.

Doesn't seem likely.

Another possibility is that someone in the house *was* trying to reach me, and that Mrs. Peterson was merely unaware of it. Unsettling, but not overly so.

A third possibility is that the line is tapped, and the tap malfunctioned and bounced an incoming call back to the sender. In the house of a prominent politician, this doesn't seem unlikely. In any case, I like it better than option four.

Option four is that the call was a threat.

II

When I first saw the house Jenny wanted us to buy, the house that would one day become a home for myself and a cranky pooch named Boomer, I was amazed. It seemed huge and intimidating, three floors perched on the side of a cliff, with a big, rolling yard and a pond on the property. I distinctly remember saying, under my breath, “What could two people and a dog possibly want all this space for?”

Well, now, standing in front of the Peterson home in Black Forest, I am forced to admit that my house is not nearly as consequential as I imagined. This house is huge, perhaps a hundred yards wide and at least as deep. Four stories, with a huge lawn dotted with flowerbeds and statues, all carefully maintained. The senator’s family could live here with a hundred of their closest friends and still hardly ever run into anyone.

I walk up the steps to the front door, which is sandwiched between two massive Corinthian pillars, ring the bell and hold my card up to the peephole. A resounding *dong!* echoes inside the building, and after a few moments, several locks scrape and the door swings open.

“Ah, Mr. Lyons. Come in, please, come in.”

I assume this lady is a housekeeper. She takes my coat and hat, glances nervously at the military-issue .45 I keep in my hip holster, and then beckons me to follow her. I do. The housekeeper is elderly and walks with an arthritic limp, so I have plenty of time to take in the surroundings as we make our way through a series of living rooms, sitting rooms and libraries.

The house is as gorgeous on the inside as it was on the outside. The décor

changes from room to room, but constant themes seem to be pianos and cupids, of which I count three apiece in a two-minute walk. Everything is neat and tidy. I have yet to see any phones.

Finally, we arrive at a small room done in red velvet. A pair of plush armchairs flank a coffee table, and all three are angled towards a large marble fireplace. I've gotta say, I like this kind of style. The housekeeper steps in front of me and announces, in a quavery alto, "Mr. Peter Lyons." I can't believe they still do that.

Mrs. Peterson, previously hidden in one of the chairs, peers around the side of it and waves at me. "Oh, Mr. Lyons, thank goodness you've come. Please, come, have a seat. Oh my, but you look different than I imagined! When I think 'private eye,' I think trench coat and fedora and the works!..." She trails off.

I take a seat in the opposite armchair and size up my client. She's about five foot eight, maybe fifty years old, with graying blonde hair and a slim build. Tasteful blue dress (cut below the knee), pearls, and kind of a vacant look in her eyes. Attractive, but not all there.

"Okay, Mrs. Peterson. I'm going to ask a few questions." I take out a pen and a steno pad from my back pocket, though I doubt I'm going to need them.

"Oh yes, anything you want to know. Just please hurry, Mr. Lyons. Time is of the essence." She takes a sip from the coffee cup in her lap, and I notice her hand is shaking. Either she's in the early stages of Parkinson's, or else she's really upset about poor Peaches.

"First off... What kind of dog is Peaches?"

The answer comes without hesitation. "Cocker Spaniel. Golden fur. Thirty

inches from tail to tip. We just had him measured, you know.”

She beams nervously at me, as if expecting this news to make my day. I can’t imagine why anyone would want to measure their dog. I avoid eye contact and write down the information.

“Do you have picture?”

“Oh...” Mrs. Peterson looks crestfallen. “No. Not a photograph, anyhow. Peaches hates having her photograph taken. She doesn’t think they do her justice.”

I nod and try not to laugh.

“But she did sit for several portraits. That’s a fairly good likeness, there.” She gestures towards the wall behind me, where a four-foot tall oil portrait depicts an ordinary-looking Spaniel perched atop some sort of doggy throne. This is really getting ridiculous.

“Okay.” I purse my brow to appear serious. “Mrs. Peterson...”

“Oh please,” she interrupts. “Call me Rachel.”

“Okay then. Rachel. Does Peaches have any favorite hangouts? Where have you found her when she’s run away in the past?”

Rachel sucks in her breath with disapproval. “Oh, no,” she says, “Peaches never leaves the house. She was born here and hasn’t been outside since. I really haven’t a clue how she got out this time. All the doors and windows are secure, and...”

I interrupt her. “Have you searched the house?”

She nods vigorously. “Oh, yes. The staff has been searching since this morning, when she first turned up missing.”

“She went missing this morning? Or did she go missing during the night, and you

didn't notice until this morning?"

"No, it was this morning between eight and nine o'clock. I saw Peaches at eight for breakfast – we always eat together, you know – and at nine o'clock I whistled for her and she didn't come." Rachel drains the last of her coffee and, shaking, places her saucer on the table in between us.

I wonder if it's near time for lunch yet. I've never met this dog, and I'm already starting to dislike it (mostly because it's wealthier than I am). "Just a few more questions, Mrs. – er, Rachel. Thank you for your cooperation. I know this is hard. Was Peaches valuable?"

"I'm offended." Rachel glares at me. "Peaches was priceless. My best friend."

I do my best to choke back an exasperated sigh. "What I mean is, would it be worth someone's time to, uh, 'dognap' peaches?"

"Oh." Her face softens. "No, not really. She's not even purebred. She's still priceless to me, though. Poor Peaches. Where are you, precious?" She sniffs and I can see the corner of her eyes getting wet.

"You haven't received any threats? No one's contacted you about ransom money?"

I don't really believe Peaches has been kidnapped, but Rachel turns suddenly to look at me. "You know... There *was* something. But... But I didn't pay it any attention at the time. Oh, dear. I'd hate to think this could have been stopped... Would you like to see it?"

I nod, and Rachel reaches a hand into a small leather purse by her right foot. "It was a note – on the floor of my daughter's room. I was inspecting after the housekeeper,

and there it was, right by her bed. I assumed it was from one of her friends, and I wouldn't usually hang on to such a thing, but... Well, it *was* very odd. Here." She produces a carefully folded piece of notebook paper and hands it across the table to me. "You don't think... It can't have anything to do with Peaches, can it?"

I unfold the paper. Three sentences and a signature, in pencil. Strong block letters, all caps:

I haven't forgotten about you. Give me a call sometime, or come see me. No one need know about it but us.

- Mad Max

I look up to find Rachel staring at me intently. "Did you know there's a dust bunny in your hair?" she asks.

"Uh... no." I shake my head and watch the bunny float to the floor. "Mrs. – Rachel, this may be more important than you think it is. I think I should speak to your daughter. What's her name and age?"

"Who, Claire?" Rachel seems taken aback. "Well, her name is - well, Claire. She's..." A short pause. "Seventeen. Yes, I'm fairly sure that's how old she is. She's hardly ever here, though, and I'm sure she went out this morning. You don't think she has anything to do with this, do you?"

I fold the note and tuck into the steno notebook. "I'm not sure. It *was* in her room, though, correct?"

“I don’t see why that makes a difference. If this note really is from some deranged dognapper... Why, Claire may have just found it and decided to hold on to it. ‘Peterson’ probably refers to my husband.”

I glance at her. “Why would you assume that?”

She flushes. “Because my husband is a very important man who knows a lot of important people, that’s why.”

“Do these very important people often leave notes on loose leaf paper in your child’s room?”

“Well, no. That’s the first I’ve ever... Look, Mr. Lyons, are you going to find my dog or not?” There’s an air of challenge in Rachel’s voice, now, as if she’s daring me to continue the conversation about her daughter.

“Yes, Rachel, that I am.” I stand and tuck the steno notebook back into my pocket. “I’ve got a good friend on the police force, and I’m sure he can put me in contact with a handwriting expert. I’m actually supposed to meet him for lunch in a half an hour, so I’ll show him the note and see what he thinks. Then I’ll spend the afternoon interviewing neighbors and combing the neighborhood.”

“All... All right, then. Don’t go wasting your time with Claire.” Rachel lowers her voice and glances around nervously before continuing in a whisper. “That child is an embarrassment to her father. No respect for him, or for me, or for anything. Don’t waste your time.”

“Okay, ma’am, I won’t.” Rachel’s attitude towards her daughter intrigues me, but I’m not getting paid to be intrigued. “One last question, before I go,” I say, though this is really the question I’ve wanted to ask all along. “Which phone did you use to call me?”

Rachel points to an old-fashioned rotary phone on the table (the only one I've seen so far). It's securely in the cradle. And it doesn't have a redial button.

"How many other phones do you have in the house?"

"Er..." Rachel looks confused. "Well, there's the mobile in the basement, but it's been missing for months. I'm sure the batteries are completely dead by now. I spend most of my day here, and so there's really no need for any others."

"What about your husband, and the staff?"

"The staff all have cell phones – they're not permitted to tie up the house line. And Tom... Is often away. On business, you know. Why do you need to know?" She looks confused, so I choose to ignore her question and move on.

"No reason, ma'am."

I remain standing. Rachel remains sitting. Finally, she breaks the silence.

"Is there something more I can do for you, Mr. Lyons?"

"I usually ask for the first day's fee in advance, Mrs. Peterson. I'm sure you're good for it, but it's just my usual policy." I give what I'm pretty sure is a polite cough.

"Oh, of course. Do forgive me." Rachel reaches once more into the purse and withdraws a thick wad of \$100 bills. She peels off six and hands them to me. "Just like a detective movie." She laughs a vague, silvery laugh.

"Uh... yeah." I'm a little intimidated by the sight of so much cash. I briefly consider mugging the lady.

"Anything else?"

"No, thank you. I hope I can bring you Peaches by sundown."

"Would you like me to ring for a housekeeper to show you out?"

“That’s all right. I think I can handle it.” I pocket the \$600.

“Good luck, Mr Lyons. Peaches is counting on you.”

I leave Rachel there in her armchair, stroll out through the sitting rooms and the libraries, and exit the building through the massive front door, held open by a different elderly housekeeper than the one who showed me in. As I continue down the steps, I can hear multiple heavy locks being slid back into place behind me. The morning fog has burned off by now, and the sun is warm on the back of my neck as I stroll down the sloping lawn to the circular drive, then onwards to the metro. The back of my mind is still nibbling on the “Mad Max” problem – odd, since it’s probably just a high schoolers’ game. There’s just something about it that intrigues me.

I’m so involved in my own thoughts as I bend over to open the Metro’s driver door, in fact, that I don’t notice anyone behind me until a slender hand clutches my shoulder and yanks me backwards.

III

Well, they do teach you a thing or two in the rangers, and, after discharge, I worked at a gym that offered classes in jiu jitsu and tai kwon do. To put it the short way, I'm quick on my feet. So when I feel myself being pulled backwards by some unknown assailant, my instincts take over almost before my mind registers what's happened. I plant my back foot, grab the hand on my shoulder and pivot hard to the left, pinning the arm of my attacker behind his back. No, wait. *Her* back. At the same time, I snake my left arm across my body, unholster the .45 and touch it to the temple of whoever this is.

"Don't move."

"Jesus! Calm down! Are you always this fucking paranoid?" comes the response.

Teenage girl. Blonde hair in a short ponytail, strong wiry build. This has to be Claire Peterson. I let go of her arm and she stumbles forwards a few steps. Thank God I've walked down a big hill and the Peterson house is out of sight. It's bad for business when clients see you pull a gun on their daughters.

"Claire?" I lower the .45 but keep it in hand, just in case.

"Ouch. Yeah, that's me. And you're the detective, right? I knew that bitch would call you. She lives for that goddamn dog. Look, come over here, I can't be seen talking to you." Claire retreats behind a nearby bush and then turns to face me.

Her face is... Well, it's certainly striking. Originally, I can tell she was pretty, with high cheekbones and piercing blue eyes. But it looks like she hasn't slept in weeks. Her forehead is scarred by acne in a way that makeup can't quite cover up, and her nose is crooked. It looks like it's been broken and never got set the right way. I should know.

Mine's the same way. I glance around and then walk over to join her by the bush.

“Okay, Claire, I'm Pete Lyons. What do you want? And who are you afraid is going to see you?”

Claire sits on the ground and scoots back even further under the bush before withdrawing a pack of Marlboro Reds and lighting one up. Finally, she answers.

“I'm the reason you're here.”

I raise my eyebrow. “Oh? And how's that? Talk fast, I have a date for lunch.”

She drags deep on the cigarette and shoots me a resentful look. “First off,” she says, “everything my mother told you is bullshit. She's losing her mind. I think she's getting alzheimer's or something. I took the dog and left your number sitting by the phone.”

I feel comfortable enough now to slide my gun back into its holster. “So where's the dog?”

“Look, man. I have a problem. I been trying to figure it out for too long on my own, and I need your help. I can't call you. All our lines are bugged. So I took the dog and put pressure on Rachel to call you instead.” She shoots a quick look backwards, around the bush and relaxes just a little bit. “So are you gonna help me or not?”

“How did you get my phone number?”

“I eat at 2000 wok three times a week. The owner has a sign up with your number on it. It seemed kind of weird, but it was lucky for me. I just memorized it.”

“Ah.” Good old Wang.

There's something a little unsettling about how nervous this girl is. At first, I assumed she was afraid of being seen by her mother, but her body language is telling me

that whatever she fears is outside the estate. This might be the kind of trouble I don't need. I decide to go out on a limb.

“Does this have anything to do with Mad Max?”

She jumps and nearly inhales her cigarette. “How do you...”

“Your mother found a note taped to your car a few days ago.”

“Wha – What did it say?” The kid is really scared.

“Something like, ‘I haven't forgotten about you. Give me a call sometime, or come see me. No one need know about it but us.’ Actually, that's exactly what it said. Who is this guy, Claire, and what does he want?”

“That... That's not important,” says Claire, chewing her lower lip. “It's just a guy from school fucking around with me.”

“Mmm,” I say, trying to let her know that I don't buy it but that I'm not going to press the point. “So what do you need me for, then?”

She looks up, a little more confident. “I need you to find someone for me. One of my friends. She's disappeared.”

“A missing person is a far cry from a missing dog, Claire.”

“But your rate is the same!” she cries, eyes wide. “Right? That's why I took the dog! Just hang on to it while you work on what's really important. Rachel's an idiot, she'll believe anything you tell her, and she'll pay you anything you ask for.”

“What about your dad?”

“Dad?” She smirks. “Don't make me laugh. He's hardly ever here. Says he's away on business, but he's really at hotels here in town, or in Sacramento, just to get away from Rachel. He'd get a divorce if it wasn't for the election next year. He sends

her whatever money she needs and thinks it's cash well fucking spent if he never has to deal with her in person."

I've got a bad feeling about this. There are things this girl isn't telling me about, the most worrisome of which is this Mad Max. On the other hand, I haven't had work for a long time, and the prospect of an extended investigation (and a client for whom money is no object) is tempting. This seems like a good opportunity to have a little fun, and pay the mortgage to boot.

"All right, I'm listening." I pull out the steno notebook. "Get me the dog first."

"Just a sec." Claire gets to her feet and peeks around the bush again, then jogs down a little hill and out of sight. Three or four minutes later, she returns, bearing a cardboard box with holes punched in it. "Here, take the little shit machine. You can keep her." She tosses the box to the ground at my feet, and the dog inside (presumably Peaches) gives a little whimper.

"Okay. So who am I looking for? Tell me everything you can about them."

"Her name's Sheri Pao. She's 22. Same height as me – maybe five five or so – black hair, really pretty green eyes. She can't weigh more than a hundred pounds, she's really skinny."

"Sheri Pao. Is that with two R's?"

"One."

I write all this down in my notebook. "Why is it you telling me all this instead of her family? Or if there's no family, an employer or a co-worker?"

Claire blushes fiercely. "Sheri's a prostitute," she says with a hard edge in her voice, like she's daring me to say anything bad about her friend. "She got shipped over

here from Thailand four years ago. She doesn't know how to speak English real well, and she's got no people here except pimps and hos."

"And you."

Her cheeks are positively flaming now, and her blue eyes sparking with intensity.

"And me."

I sigh. "All right then. When'd she go missing?"

"Two weeks ago. I spend most days downtown, and she's always working the same corner. She and I have gotten pretty close, and when I didn't see her for like three days running, I figured I had to do something 'cause no one else was going to. It's been a long time since the fact, I know, but I had to figure out a way to contact you safely. If the media gets a hold of the fact that Tom Peterson's daughter is on the hunt for a hooker, it could be big trouble for my dad." Her coloring is returning to normal, now. She reaches into her back pocket and withdraws a second cigarette, which she lights with the stub of the first one.

"So that's what you're scared of? The media?"

"I'm not scared of anything, man." She isn't convincing me. "I just don't wanna sabotage my dad."

"Fine. Which beat did Sheri work?"

"32nd and Broadway, start work about one in the afternoon."

"You're sure she didn't just change shifts?"

"No way, man. I get around town. I... Well, I'd know."

My guess is that it's almost 12:30. The North Side Diner is nearby, but not that nearby. I hope this girl appreciates the sacrifices I'm making in the name of her dad's

money.

“Has someone else replaced Sheri?” I ask, trying to sum up.

“Yeah. Some bitch named Naomi.” Claire purses her eyebrows, as if Naomi is not one of her favorite hookers.

I write all this down. I figure I have enough to at least make a start on an investigation. It’s not hard to find out what happened a missing prostitute, if you know the right people, but it’s awfully tricky not to step on anyone’s toes along the way.

Before I go meet Omar for lunch, I need to get a few things level with the kid. I squat, so my face is even with hers, and look straight into her eyes. She stares back at me, defiant, cigarette clutched a little too tight between her lips. “Claire,” I say, “I’m not a dumb guy. Your case sounds interesting, and frankly, I can use the money. But searching for a hooker is a good way to meet a lot of dangerous people. I need you to tell me, right now, that you’re being honest with me. Completely honest. You’ve told me everything you know. Otherwise, you might be dooming me and your friend to a real nasty fate.”

She quivers a little, but keeps her eyes on mine. “I told you everything I know, man. You should fucking thank me for still giving you the case when you tried to shoot me ten seconds after we met.”

I cock my head. “You should quit smoking. Those cigarettes’ll kill you faster than I will.” Then I stand up and return the steno notebook to its home in my back pocket. “All right, Claire, I’ll start looking for Sheri this afternoon. You should know that she might’ve skipped town, or maybe worse” - I glance at the girl on the ground, and she nods grimly to indicate that she understands what I’m saying – “but I’ll do my best.

Do you have a cell phone?"

She shakes her head. "Grounded. Since I was about ten years old."

"Then when can I see you again?"

Claire chews her lip before answering. "Wednesday. Come here at six A.M.

Rachel won't be up yet. Just meet me here, behind these bushes."

"Fine." Today's Monday. Six is a little early for me, but I can handle it. "Give me the dog. What do I need to know about precious Peaches?"

"She sucks." Claire scowls at the cardboard box as she hands it up to me. "Little piece of shit never really grasped the whole housebreaking thing."

"She'll fit in fine at my place, then." I load the box into the back seat of the metro and climb in to the driver's side. "Anything else you need to tell me?"

Claire pauses, then slowly shakes her head.

"Okay, then. Wednesday at six. Be careful." I close the door, start the car, and putter in reverse off the estate, on my way to the North Side Diner and a late lunch with Omar.

IV

“Well... Look who decided to show up!”

I slide into a chair opposite Omar, who’s already working on some sort of salad. Omar’s a big, muscular black guy with a shaved head, probably 6 foot three and 220, the last man on Earth you would ever expect to become a vegetarian. But there you go. The world is strange sometimes. Occasionally people ask him why he doesn’t eat meat. He usually answers that he saw enough butchering in the army to turn him off meat forever. They don’t ask him many questions after that.

“Sorry. Got a call at the last second. Could I get the clam chowder and a cheeseburger with the works, except no onions? And a Pepsi. Thanks,” I say to our waitress, handing the menu to her, unopened. When you eat at a place as often as I eat here, you don’t need to read the menu. And when a diner is as small and grungy as the North Side, the menu isn’t much in the way of literature.

Omar takes a bite of rabbit food. “At least you can afford your end of the check today,” he chuckles.

Omar’s been trying to convince me to join the force for... oh, about eight years now. He says I’d make a “good cop,” whatever that means. I think he just wants company. Poor guy works in the arson department under three of the least agreeable people it’s ever been my displeasure to meet. Too bad for Omar, I don’t like getting up early or wearing collared shirts.

“So how are the three amigos?”

He rolls his eyes. “I think Cindy’s hit her period about two weeks early.

Woman's crazy, man. No calls over the weekend, so she has us all cleaning the place up. I spent the morning washing the fucking bathroom floor. Like, hands and knees, sponge in hand, scrubbing the floor. I did three years ranger recon, man! That ain't what I signed up for. Don't we have people to do that?"

I murmur sympathetically, and shoot a glance towards the kitchen.

"Coulda been worse, I guess. She had Calvin scrubbing toilets." Omar shudders. "How 'bout you, man? You finally get the right phone number in your ad?"

"Nah. But I guess Jeff Wang has a sign up with my real number, so maybe a little more business will start to trickle my way. Times have been tough."

Omar nods. "How about this new shit? Anything interesting? Murder? Bank robbery?" He spears a crouton and pops it in his mouth. "Corrupt CEO's?"

"Try a dognapping that's turned into a search for a missing hooker."

He gives a low whistle. "What kind of client we talkin' about here?"

"The best kind."

"The best kind?"

"The rich kind."

"Huh," says Omar. "And what kind of dog?"

"The quiet kind, I hope."

Omar chuckles, and there's a short pause in the conversation as our waitress appears to hand me my order. Tiny iridescent pools of grease have formed on the plate beneath the cheeseburger. Just the way I like it. I take a bite as Omar watches with a nauseated expression on his face.

"I don't know how you stay so small, Pete."

“I don’t know how you stay so big.” I take another huge bite and spill a pickle on my shirt.

Omar shudders. “Shit, man. You’re gonna get a heart attack or something.” He takes a sip of water and waits until our waitress slips out of eavesdropping range. “So does your rich client understand that a missing hooker’s a dead hooker most of the time?”

“I think so. But she isn’t telling me everything. What do you think about this?” I wipe my greasy hands and face, then pull Mad Max’s note out of my pocket and hand it across the table. Omar reads it silently and then hands it back and shrugs.

“Client’s a kid,” I say. “My first thought was that this was some sort of high school prank or something. But she jumped a mile high when I mentioned the note, and then tried a little too hard to convince me it was nothing. Seems kind of sinister for a prank. What do you think?”

“I’m with you.” Omar motions for the note back, and I hand it to him. “Whoever wrote this really doesn’t want his handwriting to be recognized. See how every letter goes straight up and down? Can’t tell whether the author’s left or right-handed. And he used lined paper. Makes it easier to keep everything straight. It’s too late for prints now, but probably never was any.”

“Were.”

“What?”

“Probably never *were* any.”

Omar raises an eyebrow. “I ain’t the fucking grammar police, man.”

“Hmm. ‘Ain’t’ isn’t a word. Any idea who ‘Mad Max’ is?” I pop the last of the cheeseburger in my mouth and take a sip of Pepsi.

“Not a clue.”

“Any pimps by that name in town?”

Omar sighs. “Best as I can recall, ‘Mad Max’ was the name of a crappy sci-fi movie with Mel Gibson in it. Back in the eighties sometime.”

“Kind of enigmatic for a reply to fan mail.”

“Mel probably ain’t a suspect,” Omar agrees. He pauses. “Look, man. One of the ladies in handwriting analysis is a friend of mine. If you want, I could ask her to take a look at it for you. Can’t guarantee anything, but she might be able to tell us something about whoever wrote this shit.”

“Yeah. That would be great. Something about this note just freaks me out.”

Omar re-folds the note and tucks it into his wallet. Then he throws a ten-dollar bill on the table and stands up to go. “Time for me to get back to work.”

“Give Cindy my regards.”

He grimaces. “That woman... Goddamn. Just cause I can’t hear, she acts like I can’t think. Oh, before I forget, I got us a tee time for Saturday. Ten fifteen. That work for you?”

I nod. “You know you and Jeanine are welcome back at my place for dinner afterwards, right?” Jeanine is Omar’s wife. She’s never liked me, for some reason. Perhaps because I keep nearly getting her husband killed. Omar has helped out in the most intimate way with several of my less palatable adventures.

“Right.” Omar snorts and twiddles one of his hearing aids delicately. “Take care, Pete. I’ll give you a call tonight, tell you what’s up with this ‘Mad Max’ character.”

“Will do. Later.”

Omar heads for the exit. I finish my cheeseburger and turn to the clam chowder. I've never understood why soup is the first course of the meal. I think soup should be the last course of the meal, because it washes out whatever's caught in your teeth. Saves on floss expenses. But that's neither here nor there.

I sit for a while, even after all my food is gone, and start to sketch out a to-do list on my napkin. First, I need to get the dog back home and get it some food and water. Hopefully Peaches and Boomer get along, because I really don't have time to deal with little doggy quarrels. Then, I need to call up Rachel Peterson and tell her some cock and bull story to explain why the investigation's taking so long.

As far as the search for Sheri Pao goes, I'm hesitant to get started until the Mad Max situation has been cleared. I figure I'll spend the afternoon during research – maybe google “Mad Max” and see if I can find anything. And I can always pay Ned a call and see if he's heard anything. Ned is an ex-con acquaintance of mine who works as a bartender in a little shithole bar downtown. He's learned that it's worth his time to keep his eyes and ears open. Nice guy. A real pal. It does get kind of expensive to try and pick his brain, but when someone else is footing the bill, I never hesitate to give him a visit.

I leave fifteen bucks on the table – I'm feeling generous – and walk back out to the metro. Peaches is whimpering in the backseat, so I hum her a few bars of “Penny Lane.” She begins to howl mournfully. Not a music lover.

I start the car, crank the oldies station on the radio, and begin to sing along. And with Bob Dylan wailing through the speakers, me wailing in the driver's seat, and Peaches the unhappy cocker spaniel wailing in the back, I pull out of the North Side parking lot and

begin to head for home.

V

Ocean City is nestled on the coast of central California, flanked by the Pacific on one side and the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas on the other. The place was originally a mining community known as Sluice, and I think I speak for every resident in town when I say I'm glad for the name change. Nowadays, OC has become a summer home community, mostly Hollywood hotshots, politicians, wealthy shipping industrialists, and - as is the case with most cities in California - a healthy helping of the criminal underworld.

The town is essentially a horseshoe, the high ground forming a semicircle with its open edge up against the ocean. In the middle is downtown, which has slowly been going to shit for a couple decades and now has some areas as rough - or rougher - than anywhere in L.A. The remaining, more well-to-do populace lives in the surrounding hills. They tend to classify themselves by which edge side of downtown they're on. You've got your North side, your South side, and your East side. The cliff house is located on the East side, and it's there that I'm headed right now, cruising along State Highway 5 with the windows down and the stereo blasting.

After about ten minutes, I realize I've got a tail. Two cars back and a lane over is a blue Volvo I recognize from the diner parking lot. Now it's tooling along behind me, looking just a bit too conspicuously inconspicuous. I turn off the radio. The car stays with me as I merge onto the interstate, get off at a downtown exit, hop right back on the highway again. Yep, he's sticking like white on rice. Huh.

I slow down to about fifty, and the automobile in question shifts immediately into

my lane. Three cars between us. I slow even more, and one by one those three cars change lanes and go whizzing by. The third driver, who looks like a college girl and is driving a yellow corvette, yells something and gives me the finger. I smile at her and wave.

The blue volvo is right behind me now. Who trails someone in a fucking volvo? A soccer mom with a vendetta? The windows are tinted far past the legal limit, but I can vaguely make out the driver, a big guy with a moustache and sunglasses. Between the glasses and the window tint, it's a wonder he can see the road.

I glance in my side mirror, memorize his license plate, then speed up a bit and take the next exit. The volvo stays right with me.

For the next half an hour or so, I lead the Volvo on a merry jaunt through downtown Ocean City. Mustache is game. He sticks with me as I cruise down Ocean Avenue to the beach, turn off and drive alongside the boardwalk for a couple miles, make an abrupt U-turn, head back West on Marlin Drive and then snake through a couple wiggly one-ways. Sometimes, the Volvo is a few cars back, sometimes a few cars ahead. Occasionally it disappears and I figure Mustache has given up, but no - he always reappears within moments, waiting at the next light or peeking out of a parking lot. The guy is determined, I'll give him that.

But why the hell is he tailing me in the first place? I only have one case going at the moment, and I haven't even started yet. Furthermore, as far as everyone in the world except for Omar and Claire Peterson knows, I'm looking for a missing dog. Omar I trust completely, except for being a vegetarian. That casts the shroud of doubt onto Claire Peterson, but I don't want to be too quick to condemn her. This guy could just be a

monkey hired by the prestigious senator Peterson to keep an eye on his family for all I know. Just have to wait and see.

At about two o' clock, I figure Mustache has had enough of this charade. I know I have. So I begin to make my way towards my destination. The volvo is right behind me. We continue for another couple of blocks on Broadway, take a left on 12th. In this part of town, it's always a grim sort of semidark, the streets bathed perpetually in the shadow of the skyscrapers that loom ominously over the grafittied asphalt and steel. Weird place for a police station. But somehow appropriate. I turn into the parking lot of precinct 4. Mustache slows, as if to follow me in, then thinks better of it and continues on. I'd be a fool, however, to think he was gone for good.

I park the car in visitor parking and stroll into the station. The reception area has always reminded me of a doctor's waiting room. Same crappy artwork. Same uncomfortable chairs. Same out of date magazines that no one's touched in three years. Same thinly veiled sense of panic at all times. Just a few more good reasons not to be a cop. A guy could get depressed working here.

I walk up to the desk, where the receptionist - pardon me, I mean "officer on duty" - is sitting with his feet up, drinking coffee and reading a comic book. Young white guy - doesn't look a day older than twenty. Kid still has acne, for god's sake. I clear my throat, and he glances up.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

I wince a bit. I really hate it when people call me sir. Makes me feel old, although more and more that's an accurate perception.

"Please. Call me Pete." I hold out my hand and give the kid what I think is a

winning smile.

The kid looks at me like I'm crazy and ignores my hand. "Uh... Okay, Mr. Pete. Whattaya need?" I lower my hand. Can't say I didn't try to be nice.

"Is Zimmerman here?"

The kid marks his place in the comic book and slowly gets to his feet. "I dunno. Let me check." He ambles leisurely around the corner and out of sight, probably glad for the chance to get up and move around.

This isn't Omar's precinct - the arson squad is located mainly at number 18 on the north side. However, fifteen years of sleuthing has made me more than a few acquaintances on the force. Ethan Zimmerman is my connection with the downtown cops, a sleepy-looking homicide detective, stick thin, dark hair, with laid-back approach to the rules and a mind like a steel trap. We've had our ups and downs, but I'm pretty sure he owes me for some thing with a guy in a place a few years back.

With the kid gone, I'm all alone in the uncomfortably sterile lobby. I wander over to the front door of the station, which is all glass, and peer out. There's a grungy patio delicatessen across the street, and I can see Mr. Mustache in one of the chairs, nursing a cup of coffee and doing his best to look like he's reading the paper. I wonder who hired this clown.

"Mr. Lyons." I hear a voice behind me, and turn to see the young cop escorting Zimmerman around the corner. Zimmerman's sallow face is impossible to read.

"Ethan." I return to the counter and lean on it .

He looks at me for a moment before speaking. Zimmerman speaks with an infuriatingly slow drawl. I think he's originally from Louisiana. "Pete, we just got a

double homicide called in from the ridge. Nasty stuff. Husband and wife. Don't really have time to talk right now."

"Don't you owe me one from that thing with the guy in the place?"

"Not for two years now. Come back later and I can talk to you then."

"Oh." So much for obligation. "How about a quick friendly chat?"

"You're not really my friend. In fact, I don't particularly like you."

Zimmerman's face remains calm. "So come back later."

So much for charm. Time try money. "I'm working on a case for Mr. Franklin," I say casually, hoping the kid at the counter isn't a by-the-books kind of guy. But he doesn't even look up from his comic.

Zimmerman raises his eyebrows. Long pause, like he's debating it.

"What is it you need?"

"Just a couple quick questions answered."

He looks at his watch, then back at me, and sighs heavily. "Dispatch says them bodies been there a couple weeks already. I guess a few more minutes won't hurt. Come on back."

I push through the swinging door to the left of the front desk and follow Zimmerman down a narrow hallway lined with file cabinets. His office is in the corner of the station - testament to his relatively high standing within the force - and has two big windows on the outside walls. The other walls are completely bare. Zimmerman's desk is perfectly organized, his papers neatly stacked and his pens and pencils uniformly point-up in their holder. All the pencils are sharp. No pictures of friends or family. This guy is a machine. Or maybe he's just really boring.

Zimmerman closes the door and settles in behind the desk. "Have a seat."

I sit in one of his interview chairs, which is not nearly as comfortable as it looks, and slide one of Rachel Peterson's \$100 bills across the desk to him. He tucks it into his breast pocket.

"Someone's having me followed," I say, toying idly with Zimmerman's stapler. "Dark blue volvo station wagon, Cali plates. License number IPQ-7469."

"Don't play with that." Zimmerman takes the stapler from me and returns it to his desk. I had no idea he was a neurotic freak. "You want to know who owns the car?"

"It'd be nice."

Zimmerman picks up the phone and punches in a number. "Hey there, Sal. This is Ethan. Got a plate number for you." Zimmerman grabs a sticky pad and one of his perfectly sharpened pencils. "Blue volvo, Cali. Number's IPQ-7469. Uh huh."

He waits for a couple minutes, then begins to scribble on the sticky note. "Okay. Uh huh. Okay. All right, Sal. Thanks a bunch. 'Bye." He turned back to me. "Car's registered to a lady named Elly Bentworth. Seventy-three years old, lives in a gated community called Briar Village. Down south somewhere." He paused. "Would it be safe to assume that Miss Bentworth is not the one following you?"

"Not unless she has a mustache and biceps the size of my waist."

"Didn't imagine. Would it be safe to assume that the car is a stolen one?"

"I'd say so."

"Would it be safe to assume that you are going to check on Miss Bentworth?"

"Sure would."

"Okay." Zimmerman removes the sticky note from its pad and hands it to me.

“Here’s her information. Car hasn’t been reported as stolen yet, so make sure she’s okay.”

“Will do,” I say.

Zimmerman begins to stand, but I motion for him to sit back down. He looks vaguely annoyed. “Look, Pete...”

I slide him another hundred. He sighs again, contemplates the money for a moment, then tucks it into his pocket. “What else?”

“I’ve got two names I want the lowdown on.” I like the word ‘lowdown.’ It sounds cool. I use it at every opportunity.

Zimmerman swivels to face the computer and types in a password. “First name?”

“Sheri Pao,” I say. “One R, ends with an I. Last name is P-A-O.”

Zimmerman enters the name and clicks the mouse. “Nothing. No arrests, no rap sheet, no traffic tickets.”

“Any hits with missing persons?”

Zimmerman’s eyes flick in my direction. If his sleepy face ever betrayed emotion, I’m sure he would look insulted by my question. “Our system is inclusive.”

“Okay.” I briefly consider putting my feet up on the desk, then decide Zimmerman’d probably have a heart attack if I did. “Second name is Claire Peterson.”

“S-O-N or S-E-N?”

“S-O-N. If there’s more than one, she’s the one with blonde hair.”

“All right. One second.” Zimmerman types, clicks, types some more. “We got three Claire Petersons here. How old is yours?”

“Seventeen or so.”

“Mmkay.” Zimmerman clicks once more, then says, “Hm.”

“Hm?” I ask. It takes quite a bit to make Ethan Zimmerman say ‘Hm.’

“Girl’s got a sheet a mile long. Shoplifting twice... No, three times. Coupla tickets for loitering, pot bust, underage drinking. Looks like she’s gotten off easy quite a bit. Daddy have money?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” I wonder how it is that none of Claire’s escapades ever made it into the paper?

“Vandalism, driving without a license...” continues Zimmerman. “My goodness. Kids these days. You want a printout of this?”

“Anything for prostitution?”

Zimmerman looks at me, expressionless as ever. “No,” he says slowly. “But loitering tickets are, eh, tough to get under normal circumstances.”

“Kapische. Yeah, I’ll take a copy.” I wait while Zimmerman’s printer spits out Claire Peterson’s record, then take the paper, fold it in fourths, and tuck it into my notebook.

“Anyone asks, didn’t come from me,” says Zimmerman, standing.

“You’re preaching to the choir.”

“Better be. Now get outta here. I’ve got work to do.”

I exit Ethan’s office and head back out to the reception area. The kid is still at the desk, and I say good bye. He acknowledges me with a directionless wave. Still engrossed in the comic book.

When I open the front door and stroll out of the station, Mr. Mustache jumps out of his patio chair, drops his newspaper, and walks quickly around the corner. And when I

pull out of the parking lot, the blue volvo formerly belonging to Miss Elly Bentworth is there, three cars behind me and one lane over.

VI

Peaches is making unhappy dog noises in the backseat, and I'm feeling the need for a beer. Time to find out what this tail is about and then make tracks for home. I check the mirror and make sure mustache is still behind me, then pull into a McDonald's parking lot. My pursuer continues on.

I walk into the McDonald's and order a Dr. Pepper, then sit and sip and watch through the big front windows as Mustache's blue volvo pulls into a K-mart parking lot across the street. I watch. He stays put. Time to make a move.

I walk to the back part of the restaurant, where the bathrooms are, and slip through the "employees only" kitchen door. Hopefully, no one watching with binoculars will be able to tell it's not the men's room. I smile and wave at the sixteen-year-old fry cook who stares, slack-jawed, as I march boldly through her turf, then skip nimbly out the back door of the establishment. The back door opens into an alley, which I follow east for two blocks. I then jog across Camino del Sol and around back of the K-mart, the building shielding me from the parking lot's line of sight. Now, I'm positioned - I hope - to come at mustache from his blind side.

As I enter the far side of the parking lot, I keep my head down and try to remain hidden in the clusters of people exiting the store. I can see the volvo, mustache still sitting in the driver's seat. I draw within a couple rows of where its parked. Mustache's gaze is trained across the street. As I watch, he glances at his watch a little nervously. I guess I have been in the bathroom an awfully long time. I knock on the passenger's side window of the vehicle. When mustache turns his head, my .45 is cocked and pointed at

his face. I shield the weapon with my body so as not to attract undue attention from the hordes of happy shoppers.

Mustache goes white and slowly raises his hands. I motion for him to unlock the door, and he cautiously reaches across the seats to do so. When I hear the “click” of the lock being released, I open the door and settle into the passenger’s seat, never letting the barrel of the gun stray too far from my pursuer’s head. I shut the door, withdraw the keys from the car’s ignition, and pocket them. It’s dead silent in the car.

He stares at the gun.

I let him stare.

After a couple minutes, I decide that someone needs to break the ice. “Did you know these new Volvos have seat warmers?”

“Uh...” Mustache swallows visibly. “No. No, I didn’t know that. Look man, I’m just muscle. I dunno nothing, I don’t do no gun work, so please...”

“I know, I know.” I wave my gun at him. “If you were a higher-up, you wouldn’t be so lousy at tailing people. All I want you to tell me is who told you to tail me and why.”

His lips tighten.

“Oh, come on... Say, what is your name, anyhow?”

“Spider.”

“Really? Man, your parents must’ve been some characters.”

Blank look. Not even a chuckle.

“Okay, Spider.” I reach across the car and gently remove the sunglasses from his face. Nice shades. Oakleys. I lay them on the dashboard. “Now, Spider. Whatever

you're getting paid to follow me, it's not enough to risk getting your brains blown out over. Let's think over this logically."

"You don't understand, man! I rat, I'm dead!" Mustache, or should I say, "Spider," exclaims. The guy looks caucasian, but there's a hint of a latino accent in his speech. Maybe he's just pale with fright.

"It's not looking too good for you if you don't rat." I re-cock the piece to reinforce my point. His eyes are wide and watery. Goddamn, I hate having to scare people. Especially grunts who probably make less an hour than the fry cook I had so recently surprised.

"You... you got a point," says Spider.

"Damn straight I do. Now spill it."

He lets out a shallow breath. "Aiiight, man. Just chill already."

The tinted windows are working to my advantage in this instance. Outside the car, shoppers are passing by in droves, completely unaware that a very terse exchange involving a rather large gun is taking place not four feet away. Spider exhales nervously.

"Okay, look. Here's how it went down. I get a call the other day from this dude named Jose who I know from down at the pool hall. He say he got this other dude, name was Tech, and he's looking for someone to do a job for him. I ask, what kind of job? Jose puts Tech on the phone. Fool tells me to meet him down at the place."

"The place?"

"Yeah man. The pool hall, I mean."

"Which pool hall?"

"Big Cues, Oak Street. Fucking ask if you don't believe me."

I nod. I believe him. “Then what?” I ask.

Poor Spider is sweating bullets. “Uh... Then, I go down to Cues, and me and Tech have a drink at the bar. Tech’s this big-ass *vato* motherfucker, got tattoos on his face and shit. He tells me he wants me to chill by the entry road to this one house for a couple weeks, follow anyone unusual that visits. I’m like, sure. How much you pay? He says ten grand, which is fucking fine with me. Then he gives me a thousand in cash and tells me to write down everyone I see and where they go.”

“And who’ve you seen?”

“So far, just you.”

This seems a mite implausible, so I push the gun a little further towards Spider’s head. He squirms.

“I’m serious, man! I mean, the mom and the daughter and the butlers and maids and shit are in and out, but that’s it!”

I believe him. It’d be pretty ballsy to lie in this situation. I don’t think someone like Spider could pull it off. I ease off with the .45 a little bit and cast a glance back at the K-mart crowd. Business as usual.

“So when were you supposed to meet with Tech?”

“I...” He glances wildly around with his eyes. “I don’t know, man. I don’t remember.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Spider. I can hurt you pretty bad, even within the confines of a shitty Volvo.”

His eyebrows shoot up in alarm. Made of steel this guy is not. “Tomorrow night at Cues, man! I swear! Shit!” A tear rolls down his cheek. “Fuck!”

“What?”

“He said...” Spider sniffs. “He said if I told anyone about this deal he’d fucking hunt me down. And, like, this fucker was big, and he was packing. I could see it in the back of his shirt, something big. Maybe automatic. You show up tomorrow, he’s gonna know I fucking talked.”

“Maybe, maybe not. For God’s sake, calm down.” Nothing worse than a crybaby muscle man. “You ever heard of Mad Max?”

“Mad what?” Puzzlement. Nothing there.

“Nothing,” I say, switching the .45 to my off hand. “Now, hold still. I’m gonna go through your pockets.”

Spider sits and whimpers as I confiscate a switchblade and a pay-as-you-go phone. I stick both items in my pocket.

“Where’d you get this car?” I ask.

“I... I hotwired it in front of the grocery store.”

I glare at him. “You sure about that?”

“Yeah man! I swear to God!”

“All right Spider, listen to me. In just a second, I want you to get out of the car and walk East on Del Sol until it runs into Paradise Avenue. That’s a mile from here. I’ll be watching, and if you don’t walk the whole way it’s gonna be bad for you. Got it?”

He nods.

“Good. After that, you can do whatever you want. But if I were you, I’d get the hell out of town before this Tech guy gets a hold of you. Don’t talk to your buddy Jose. Don’t go to the pool hall. Just leave. It doesn’t sound like this is a person you want to

fuck with.”

He nods, wild-eyed.

“Good. Get out of here. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

Spider exits the car even more eagerly than most people do when exiting a Volvo, and strides quickly in the direction I had indicated. I trail him with the binoculars for a couple blocks. When it’s evident that he’s taken my directions to heart, I wipe down everything I’ve touched in the car, lock the keys inside and walk back across the street to the metro. Once the car’s been in the lot for a couple days, someone will notice and call the cops. I figure it’ll get back to miss Elly Whatsherface within the week.

It’s been a very strange afternoon.

VII

It's 4:30 when I get home. By casual reckoning, Peaches has been confined to her cardboard prison for close to seven hours, and she is definitely not enjoying it. Every step up the walk to the front door, she whimpers and howls and generally makes a racket.

"Shut up," I say. Peaches refuses.

I open the door and step into the entryway, where Boomer is waiting with an unhappy expression on his little rat face. He's been an only dog his entire life, and I feel a brief twang of guilt for springing this on him without warning. Not that it was really my fault.

"Short term guest," I tell Boomer, although I think he can sense that even I don't know for sure.

I step over the rat and walk down the short hallway into the kitchen. I feel certain that Peaches will have felt the need to relieve herself whilst in confinement. So I lay down a few sheets of newspaper on the floor before turning the cardboard box over and dumping the oh-so-precious spaniel unceremoniously out.

Peaches tumbles to Earth, along with (I called it) several good-sized dog turds. She's completely ordinary looking. This make sense, of course, but to hear Rachel Peterson describe it, you would've thought she was made of gold thread with pearls for eyeballs. Peaches stumbles a bit, first to the left, then to the right, disoriented by the sudden bright light. After a few seconds, she gets her bearings and makes a beeline for Boomer's water dish.

Boomer growls. Peaches ignores him, and Boomer slinks off to sulk. Or maybe

to exact revenge by peeing on something. He's a wily little dog. Since no violence appears immediately imminent, I open the fridge, pull out a Heineken, and wander into the office. I check my answering machine. Nothing. Probably just as well. I have enough on my plate as it is.

The way I see it, I received three cases today, and the only one I'm getting paid for is the one I've already solved. Case #1: finding the missing pooch. Case solved, but not closed - Peaches may be safe and sound, but I can't return her yet because I agreed to look for Sheri Pao. Case #2: looking for Sheri Pao. Case #3: figuring out why anyone in their right mind would pay a low-level hood like Spider ten grand to watch a road for two weeks. Technically, I guess, this last one is none of my business. But it intrigues me. And after wasting a perfectly good afternoon being tailed, I'd like the satisfaction of knowing why.

Then there's this "Mad Max" character, who is either a high school red herring prankster or a potentially dangerous customer. That's really none of my business either, and for the moment, I'm content to leave the issue be.

I proceed to ruminate, reclined in the office chair, sipping the Heineken as the big inflatable grinch wafts gently to and fro above my head. Suppose Claire Peterson really has been working the streets, as Ethan Zimmerman implied. If the press got a hold of the fact, it could be a major hit to her father's gubernatorial campaign. Perhaps whoever hired Spider was looking to blackmail Tom Peterson.

On the other hand, that doesn't really make sense. If whoever was pulling the strings here already knew that Claire was a prostitute, then why watch the house? If he was trying to determine whether Claire was a prostitute or not, then why not follow

Claire around instead of a random visitor? It doesn't make any sense.

I'm stumped. So I decide to quit thinking so hard and do a little research.

I turn on my computer and wait for it to boot up. The computer is a piece of work, an absolute antique (at least in technological terms), circa 1996. The big beige monitor, on my tiny desk, in the confines of my tiny office, looks just a little less imposing than those refrigerators NASA used to send people to the moon in the sixties. Around 1999, the CD-ROM drive on this monstrosity got stuck in the "out" position, so nowadays I use it as a cupholder.

The beer fits just perfectly.

It takes what feels like about an hour for the computer to boot up. I fit three pieces on my plain white jigsaw while I wait.

Finally, the computer chimes and displays its desktop. I connect to the internet and pull up a search engine. I search for "Sheri Pao" and pull up a few pages mentioning a sociology professor at the University of Florida. I don't particularly expect these sites to be relevant, but I check them out anyhow. Thoroughness is my middle name.

The sites aren't relevant. This Sheri Pao is 63 years old.

A search for "Sheri Pao Ocean City" turns up nothing. I try "Big Cues Pool Hall" and get a one-page site which lets me know, among other things, that Big Cues holds dart tournaments at 9 P.M. on Fridays. What an impressive bit of sleuthing.

On a lark, I search for "Elly Bentworth Ocean City" and find out that, prior to being the owner of an ancient blue Volvo station wagon, miss Bentworth was a runner up in the 1964 "Miss Ocean County" pageant. Who woulda guessed?

I type in "Claire Peterson" and get about twelve zillion hits about Claire Petersons

all over the globe. I narrow the search by adding "Ocean City" to the end. This brings up about two dozen sites, most of them archived newspaper articles. None of them are directly about Claire - they're all concerned more with her dad, state rep Tom Peterson. I click on the first one, which carries the headline "House Leader Peterson Speaks Out For Families." The accompanying photo shows a gently graying man with one arm around a younger-looking Rachel Peterson and the other around a twelve year old Claire. Rachel looks alert and gorgeous, Claire happy and fresh-faced. A lot can happen in five years, I guess. I breeze through the article. Nothing useful.

I move to the next site. Another news article, this one from a national circular. The headline reads "California Politician Leads Landmark Campaign Crime."

Sacramento, CA - Tom Peterson, republican speaker of the California House of Representatives, spoke today in support of the state's proposed surveillance policy, a statute which would allow warrantless telephone surveillance if law enforcers are given "sound reason" to suspect the surveiled parties are involved in organized crime. Mr. Peterson illustrated his arguments with police reports from his hometown of Ocean City, CA. Ocean City has suffered a rash of organized crime in the past decade, primarily thanks to the Mazetti crime family.

Several members of the OCPD were present to offer the lawmaker their support. "Folks are worried about their constitutional rights being violated," said Sgt. Bruce Brock, a member of the department's organized crime unit, "but what they don't understand is that there are strict regulations which prevent this measure from being utilized against anyone who is not a suspect who may pose an immediate threat to

civilians. This law is meant to save lives, not infringe on them.”

The bill is opposed by many prominent democrats in the state senate...

Blah blah blah. The article is ten pages long. I skim down, but there's only a passing reference to Claire in the second to last paragraph. I move on to the next site.

After an hour of staring at the screen, I've learned nothing about anything. I heave an exasperated sigh and wearily shut down the computer. Boomer has wandered into the room. I suspect for a moment that he may have sensed a need for companionship. Maybe the little fucker has a soul after all.

Then he starts to lift a leg on my file cabinet. So much for that.

“Boomer, no!” I tell him sternly. He looks me right in the eye and continues to leak. I guess this is how dogs exact revenge when intruded upon.

Luckily for me, and for all my case files from Q-Z, the phone rings. Boomer, being the courageous watchdog he is, forgets about exacting uirinary vengance and begins yipping madly. I hustle him out the door into the kitchen, grab some paper towels, return to the office and pick up the phone.

“Lyons Private Investigation Services, this is Peter Lyons speaking.”

“Hey Pete.” Jenny's voice wafts from the other end of the line.

This is unexpected. For a moment, time seems to freeze as I remember the last time I heard Jenny's voice. It's been... Hell, almost two years. I glance at the half-full Heineken and briefly contemplate chugging the rest of it as fast as possible.

“Uh... hi.” There's a brief, awkward pause.

“What's up?” Jenny still has that certain way of speaking that sounds the way

perfume smells.

“Not much. I’m actually cleaning up after your dog right now.” I drop the paper towels onto the wet spot at the base of the file cabinet.

“Oh, did he poop in your shoe again?”

“Well, actually, yes. This morning. But this is more of a jealous number one in the office.”

Jenny laughs, and sounds like she means it. Boy, that takes me back. “Oh, Boomer. He hasn’t changed a bit, has he?”

“Unfortunately.” There’s another pause. The silence is filled with the gentle static long-distance calls always generate. After a few moments, I clear my throat. “So... What’s up with you, Jen? How’s the library treating you?”

“Good, it’s good. I actually got promoted a couple weeks ago.”

“That’s great! Good for you!”

“Yeah. I’m now a ‘senior children’s librarian.’”

“So... what, you get an AARP discount on late fees now?”

She laughs again. “I wish.”

Pause. Then she continues.

“Well, anyhow, Pete, the reason I’m calling is because I’m going to be back in OC in a couple days to help my mom move into a home...”

“Meredith’s going into a home?” I’m genuinely shocked. I remember Jenny’s mom as a remarkably spry woman of sixty, one of the smartest old ladies I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting. Then, I remember it’s been nearly a decade since I’ve seen her. Lot can happen in ten years.

“Yeah. Alzheimers. She first got symptoms four or five years ago, and it’s been getting pretty bad lately. She’s started wandering off and stuff. Dad can’t keep track of her any more, so... It’s... Well, putting her someplace where she can be taken care of is the best thing to do.”

Jenny and Meredith were always close. This has to be hard for her. “Wow... I’m sorry, Jen. Really, I am. Meredith was like a mom to me, too.”

Jenny sniffs. “Yeah, I know she was. It’s funny...”

“What?”

“She still talks about you. Like, sometimes she’ll think that we’re still together. I’ll be on the phone with her, and she’ll ask me to put you on, or ask how you’re doing. Always wants to talk about music with you.”

“Huh.” I search for a response to this and come up empty.

“The other day, she even gave me a little lecture. She was like, ‘that boy’s such a catch, Jen. Don’t you let him slip away!’ I didn’t want to burst her bubble, so I was like, ‘Sure thing, Ma!’ I think it cheered her up.”

“Huh.” Another monosyllabic response. You know, I’m a pretty smart guy. But anyone listening in on this conversation would assume I have the intelligence of a wood chip.

“So... yeah.” Jenny continues. “I’m coming in late tomorrow night.”

“Do you folks need help moving?” I ask. Finally, more than two words in a row!

“No, we’ve got a service coming in. I was just wondering if... y’know, you want to get some coffee or something on Wednesday. We could catch up a bit. Like, late morning or early afternoon.”

I think about it. Except for my meeting with Claire at six, I'm free all day. But this seems like awkward city. Coffee with the ex-wife after ten years of separation and two years of no communication whatsoever? Yikes.

On the other hand, what the hell?

"Sure. Gimme a time and a place."

She thinks about it. "Is that Starbucks over on the East side still there?"

I grimace as silently as I can. Starbucks? Double yikes. "Yeah, it's still there."

"Good. Can you meet me there at, say, one?"

"Sure thing."

"Great. I... I guess I'll see you then." Jenny sounds like she may be angling for more conversation, but my nerves are too shot to handle it right now.

"Okay, I'll see you then," I say. "Have a safe flight."

"I will. Bye, Pete."

"Bye."

The phone rings again the instant I touch it to the cradle. I jump about a foot in the air, but, being a hardened investigator, manage to refrain from screaming like a little girl. I pick up the phone.

"Lyons Private Investigation Services, this is..."

"Pete!" Omar's voice booms from the earpiece. With him as a best friend, it'll be a wonder if I make it to forty with my eardrums in one piece.

"Hey! What's up?"

"What?"

Ay carumba. "I said, 'what's up?'" I shout.

“Not too much, my man. Got a little bit of information about that note of yours.”

“Shoot!”

“Damn, son,” Omar chuckles. “No need to shout.”

“Yeah, yeah. Wasn’t that funny the first time you made that joke either. Get on with it.”

“Fine. I’m just gonna read you the note this handwriting lady gave me word for word, aiight?”

“Okay.”

“Ahem.” Omar clears his throat. “Dear Omar - interesting little sample you’ve got here. It’s impossible to determine based on the penmanship alone the dominant hand of the author. Luckily, your mystery person used pencil, which allows me to analyze the markings his or her hand made as it traveled across the paper. Now, this is *highly* unscientific, because this note has been handled so much since it was written. But if I had to guess, I’d say your author is left-handed.

“More intriguing still is that whoever wrote this has a very unique way of forming letters - for an adult, at least. He or she pressed pencil to paper quite firmly, a trait generally associated with confidence and strength. But the letters are crude and amateurish, almost like a schoolchild who has yet to fully absorb the process of writing, and subsequently labors over each character. There’s great variance, for example, between the double ‘e’ in ‘see’ and the double ‘e’ in ‘meet.’ I think it is quite likely that the author of this note was writing in a language that was not their first, and that their native language employs an alphabet different from our own.

“I Hope that helps! I’d examine it more thoroughly, but I just have too much on

my desk at the moment. Love, Sherrie. P.S. - If this is for that cute detective friend of yours, tell him I say hello.”

I wrinkle my brow. “Sherrie? Who the hell is Sherrie?”

“What?”

“Who’s Sherrie?!?”

“Oh.” Omar laughs. “You remember that precinct Christmas party I brought you to like six, seven years ago?”

You mean the one during my bout of depressed alcoholism? Where I had four glasses of wine and a pint of scotch?”

“Yuh-huh.”

“Shockingly, no.” I take a sip from the Heineken. It’s gotten warm and it’s starting to taste lousy.

“Well, she was there,” says Omar. “Y’all danced for ten minutes, roundabouts.”

“Huh. And she still remembers me?”

“Yep. Pretty sharp for a sixty year old lady.” Omar laughs again.

“Ha. Ha. Ha. Do you trust her on the handwriting stuff?”

“No doubt,” says Omar. “She’s been on the force for like 100 years, she’s the best there is.”

I sigh, and take another sip of warm, crummy beer. “So I’m looking for a left-handed foreigner, huh?”

“I guess so. Sherrie’s usually right.”

“That narrows it down to about two million people in the downtown area.”

“Aw, c’mon man. You’re exaggerating. Probably one and a half million, tops.”

I glance at my clock and subtract two hours. It's almost 6:00. "All right. Thanks for checking on that for me."

"No prob. Kept me from having to wash the floor for 15 minutes."

I gag down the rest of the beer and drop the empty bottle into the wastebasket.

"You off work now?"

"Thank Christ."

"Wanna come over and have a drink?"

"Can't." Omar must be on his cell phone. I can hear the sudden blare of traffic as he steps outside. "Wish I could, but me and the wife gots a date."

"Ah. Better not risk it. 'Hell hath no fury,' and all that. But hey, there's been some interesting turns in the case from this morning. I might need you tomorrow evening."

"What for?"

"Oh, you know... Danger, peril, adventure. All the usual stuff."

Omar chuckles. "You gonna buy me a drink for doing all your damn dirty work?"

"Who said it was dirty?"

"It's always dirty, man."

"Good point. I'll give you a call tomorrow."

"Aiight. Later."

"Bye." I hang up the phone and stroll into the kitchen. The phone call from Jenny is hanging heavily on my mind. It continues to hang as I cut up a bell pepper and sautee it with some leftover steak from the previous night. Why is she calling me after all this time? Sure, she's coming into town. But I know for a fact that she's been in town

several times without ever trying to get in touch. Could it be that, after ten years, she's finally realized what a charmer I am?

And since when does she get coffee from Starbucks? These are questions that need answering.

Boomer looks up jealously at the steak sizzling on the stove as I pour kibble into his bowl. He's had a rough day. I pour some kibble for Peaches into a separate bowl. She dashes from the dining room, perfectly-manicured nails clicking on the tile floor, and digs in voraciously. Classiness be damned.

I take my stir fry and another beer into the office and turn on the TV. Sportscenter's on. I let it play and wait for the Notre Dame basketball score. With a massive effort, I thrust Sheri Pao, Spider, Claire Peterson and Mad Max to the back of my head. But try as I might, I can't forget about Jenny's call, the sound of her voice and the way she said my name.

I pass my night away, sitting in the comfy chair and watching sports. Usually, given a steak stir fry, a TV, four beers and a couple of feuding pooches for company, I'd consider myself contentedly engaged. At the moment that is not the case. There's an aching knot in my chest. As I recline in my fancy \$200 leather chair and bask in the intermittent flicker of late night cable, I feel overwhelmingly small, and paralyzingly alone.

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I walk back down the boardwalk the way I came, trying to ease the rotten taste of the phone call from my mouth. Yes, Mrs. Andrews, your husband is cheating on you. Yes, it's with that bimbo from your office. Yep, they're boinking each other on her boat three times a week. Jeez. Spousal tailing is easy and generally low-impact, but man - it sure can be depressing. I touch my coat pocket, where I can feel the waterproof camera. On it is fifteen clear shots of Mr. Andrews and the so-called bimbo partying on the yacht. I hope Mrs. Andrews will not insist I develop them.

The rain is light but getting heavier, the moon merely a spot of muted beige on the otherwise colorless sea sky. Somewhere in the distance, a gull cries. Small wavelets break against a marina. I wonder if Jenny carried through on her threat to cook eggplant for dinner. Jenny is a good cook - she can make almost anything palatable - but eggplant just naturally tastes like foot. Maybe I'd like it better with soy sauce. Or ketchup. Or both.

Suddenly, I hear voices ahead. Three or four of them, speaking in rapid and hushed Spanish. A car door opens and slams shut. The docks are technically closed, the entrance gates locked. How did somebody get a vehicle in here? I ease my pace as I draw nearer, and list towards the cover of a pile of crates.

Ahead, four men, mere shadows in the darkness, are unloading something from the back of a black van. Lack of light is giving them trouble. One of the men rams a knee into the van's bumper and curses loudly in English. Bilingual. One of the others produces a battery-powered lantern and turns it on. The light it casts is meager, but

seems near-blinding in juxtaposition to the blackness that preceded it. I shrink further behind my stack of crates.

The men return to their business. I can make them out more clearly now - all of them similarly dressed, in dark undershirts, jeans and open coats. Three of them are lean and light-skinned, the fourth heavier, with a shaved head. All four of them are laboring to withdraw something from the back of the van. Something very heavy.

Slowly, the men ease a six-foot railroad tie from the back of the van. They set it carefully on the docks, the heavy iron bar making a dull, thick noise on the wet wood. The men rest for a moment. Then, two of the skinny ones return to the van and return with something wrapped in sheets. This thing is much lighter, and they heft it without difficulty. The two men carry it casually, as if it were a sandbag or a set of golf clubs.

But there's no mistaking the distinctive, rounded silhouette of this package. It's a body. A woman's body.

My stomach leaps into my throat, and as the four men begin to tie the body to the railroad tie, my hand itches at the holstered .45. I peer intently through the rain towards the horrific, dimly-lit scene. One of the men has a handgun tucked in his waistband. It's impossible to tell whether the others are armed.

Suddenly, I remember - the camera! I dig it from my pocket. 24 exposures, fifteen of them used. Nine chances to get a clear shot of these goons in action.

The rain has picked up, now, its drum on the sea muffling whatever conversation the men may be having. I drop to my belly and inch quickly and silently forward to the next line of crates. I'm only about fifteen feet from the group strapping down the shrouded, soaking corpse. If one of them looked my way, they might be able to see me,

but they're all hard at work. It's a risk I'll have to take.

Rising to my knees, I snap a photo and wind the camera. The click of the shutter seems unbelievably loud to me, but somewhere between my position and theirs, the wind carries it away. I risk a second picture. And a third. There's no telling whether any of these will turn out, given the rain and the lack of light, but I feel that I have to try.

The men finally secure the body to their satisfaction. All of them then labor to hoist the heavy railroad tie. I take another picture, and another, shooting the remainder of the roll as the four thugs lug the tie - and the body - to the edge of the pier. The wind gusts as they drop their grisly load into the black ocean. I can't even hear the splash.

I expect the group to disperse, their business concluded, but they hang around. The heavysset guy lights a cigarette. One of the others picks up a rock and hucks it aimlessly into the ocean. Their body language is clear. They're waiting for somebody. So I wait with them, crouched as motionless as a stone gargoyle in the night.

After fifteen minutes, my knees are starting to ache. My jeans are soaked, and even eggplant is starting to sound tasty, as long as it's served warm. But I stick around. I want to make sure I see everything. My testimony could be important if the dead woman is to get any justice.

Chunky lights another cigarette. Time passes.

Finally, someone arrives. Another man, walking briskly from the far end of the boardwalk. He's dressed differently from the others, in a white undershirt and no coat, soaking wet but apparently oblivious. He's tall and muscular, his thick arms dark with tattoos. His hair hangs in one long braid down his back.

I blink rainwater from my eyes and shake some of the stiffness from my shoulders.

Why couldn't they do this crap June?

Muscles joins the men standing on the pier. They talk for five minutes or more. The group's conversation is unintelligible to me, drowned out by wind and weather, but their body language tells a story. Muscles is calm at the outset. Then, as the others gesture towards the dock, he becomes visibly upset. After a few minutes, he's screaming in Spanish at the four men in black, pacing back and forth, visibly distraught. The original group, for their part, shows no emotion.

Lightning forks through the sky somewhere far out to sea.

Muscles turns his back on the others and walks frantically towards the edge of the pier. The others trade glances with one another. The heavysset guy nods. One of the skinny guys raises his hand. In it is a pistol, aimed at Muscles' back.

In that moment, the moment I see the lantern's light gleam off the cold metal of the gun in the skinny guy's hand, time slows down and I act without thinking. I feel like I can see each raindrop falling to earth. The other men move in slow motion. My mind is an utter blank. All I know - and all I ever knew, and will ever know - is that these men have killed, and they're looking to kill again.

I have the .45 out of its holster in a split-second. The guy with the gun has his finger on the trigger. In my slow motion world, I can see the tendons in his hand bunch as he prepares to fire. Using my aching knees as support, I squeeze off a shot. It catches the gunman in the side, spinning him like a rag doll. His shot caroms wildly to the left of its target. Muscles, suddenly alert, wheels around and dives behind a dumpster.

Before the gunman has fallen, before his companions' faces can even begin to

register surprise, I steady myself and fire again. The slug hits one of the other skinny men in the middle of the chest. He drops instantly. A quick, efficient double tap. Just like they taught us in basic.

I see the heavysset guy go for a gun tucked into his waistband. But his movements are slow to the point of absurdity. Before he can even raise the gun, I've rolled to my right and out of sight. His shot, half a year too late, strikes the boardwalk three yards to my left.

I spring to my feet and run along the edge of the pier, keeping low behind the rows of heavy crates. I don't have another clip for the .45. Didn't particularly think I'd need one. That means I've got 12 rounds left. My breathing is loud in my own ears, my heartbeat frenetic. A bullet strikes the top of a crate to my left. I return fire wildly. No chance of that being a hit - I didn't aim properly, didn't take my time. Eleven rounds left.

I stop and crouch, my back to the last of the crates. There's no cover for the men in black except their own van. That's where they'll be - crouched behind the cab, waiting for me to show myself. I don't know whether both of the men are armed, or just one. C'mon Pete, think.

I pat my pockets. Wallet, keys... Keys! I pull out my key ring as silently as possible. On it, along with keys to the Z-28 and the cliff house, is my Jabba the Hutt keychain. It's heavy, pewter, maybe a little smaller than a golf ball. Perfect distraction. I detach the keychain from the ring and fling it as hard as I can over the crates, in the direction of the van.

Over the patter of rain and the roaring of blood in my ears, I hear glass breaking - headlight, maybe - and a shout in Spanish. I've anticipated the reaction. I'm already

charging out from concealment and into open space. I sprint past the lantern, overturned on the pier, and the two motionless bodies lying within its oblong halo. The survivors are behind the van. A shot skims past my feet. I aim into the muzzle flash and fire two shots. Someone screams.

I dive behind a low pile of ropes, drop to my belly and slither out the way I came. A shot whistles harmlessly over my head. I breathe out and fire twice - calmly, carefully, aiming with every fiber of my concentration. The reports from the .45 are massive. Sparks fly from the van. Smoke hangs heavy in the sodden air.

And then all is still.

For a moment, I don't move. I hear wind, and rain, and nothing else. It seems impossibly silent after the deafening symphony of gunfire. Slowly, painfully, I rise to my feet. The adrenaline of the firefight is still pumping, but I'm starting to become aware of some aches and pains. Especially in my knees. Ouch. And the right side of my face feels swollen and puffy. Must have smacked it on the ground at some point. I guess I'm getting too old for this shit.

I walk to the side of the van, limping slightly, knees tender. Both men there are dead. The heavyset guy has a slug in his leg and one in his chest. The last skinny guy took a lucky one in the temple, and now is missing a big chunk of his head. The water around them is stained scarlet. Looking at them up close, I can see how young they are. Twenties, maybe - even teens. Younger than me. Just kids. What a messed up world.

I'm still standing over the bodies behind the van when I hear a scraping noise behind me. I wheel around. The big tattooed guy in the wifebeater is there, standing in the midst of the bodies by the lantern, holding one of the dead men's guns. The gun is

coming up. It's being pointed at me. This doesn't make any sense! I saved his life! I saved his fucking life!

Then, I remember - his back was turned when the others shot at him. I know that this clown owes me, but he has no idea.

I whip the .45 up, but it's too late. He fires an instant before me, and even as I pull the trigger, I can feel the impact in my stomach. It's like being punched by a gorilla. Eyes wide, I stumble backwards against the van. Holy shit. I've never felt so much pain. I can't catch my breath. Can't catch my fucking breath. I gasp painfully for air. The fingers of my free hand clutch at my throat. I'm vaguely aware of my assailant's hand exploding, shattered by the big .45. But it's difficult to focus. Too much pain.

Slowly, I sink to the ground, not far from the men I killed just moments before. Muscles is down, screaming and clutching his hand. I need to go deal with him... Need to go kick the gun away... Make sure he can't get off a second shot...

But all I really want to do is sit here, slumped in the rain with the life leaking out of me, until Jenny comes and saves me.

DAY TWO

I

MARCH 13, 2007

“Mexico City? But why?”

I furrow my brow and adopt a sympathetic tone that I hope will sound credible through the phone. “It’s hard to say, Mrs. Peterson - pardon me, I mean Rachel - but dognappers are often devious. That’s one of the tenets of the gumshoe business, actually - ‘watch out for the dognappers.’”

Rachel Peterson makes a nervous noise. “But... My goodness. My poor Peaches. How do we even know that she’s all right?”

“Well, ma’am, I spoke to one of the militia’s lieutenants yesterday evening, and he claims that Peaches is unharmed. He had pictures to prove it.”

“Oh, my poor baby!” Rachel wails. “Those brutes probably don’t even know what cut of steak she prefers!”

I make a stern face, which I hope projects a grain of integrity into my voice. “Unlikely, I agree. What a group of ruffians.”

Peaches is perched on the countertop next to the sink, taking in the scenery. A squirrel darts across the lawn. Peaches tenses and lets out a small bark. I give her a stern look.

Rachel sighs over the phone, a plaintive wisp of a noise. “That sounded just like Peaches.”

I make a sympathetic “mmm” noise, and Rachel, after a moment, continues.

“Well, Mr. Lyons, there’s no doubt about it. You must follow these criminals to

Mexico and bring home my baby. How much will you need to get there today?"

"Uh..." There's a limit to how badly I can rip a person off without feeling bad. Airfare to Mexico would cross that line. "Why don't you just wire the \$600 daily fee into my account. We'll deal with the travel expenses when I get back." I give her my account number.

"Consider it done. I'll have the housekeeper do it when she goes to town. " Rachel's voice is full of conviction. She sounds like a general ordering her troops - well, *troop* - into battle. "Get there as soon as possible," she says, "and bring Peaches back to me."

"Okay. I'll call when I get back."

"Godspeed." The line goes dead.

Godspeed? Really? Who says that?

It's about ten o'clock in the morning. The day has dawned sunny, still and unseasonably warm. Shafts of sunlight stream in through the big bay windows in the kitchen, illuminating a thousand tiny motes pirouetting in midair. I try to remember the last time I dusted, and fail.

I retrieve my running shoes from the dryer, where they've been languishing for the past 24 hours, and lace them up. I let the dogs out to do their business in the backyard, then go for a run. The cliff house is built on a road that is essentially a five-mile loop, with plenty of satisfying dips and gradations to work all the different muscles in your leg. It makes for a good run, especially when the air is thick and warm like it is today. By halfway around, I'm soaked in sweat. I feel loose and alert.

I begin to map my day. First, a visit to Ned. If there's anything to be known

about all this, he'll be the one to know it. Then, as long as I'm downtown, might as well have a talk with Naomi, Sheri Pao's replacement. Then, lunch. Then, play it by ear.

Pleased with my game plan, I put my head down and finish the loop in record time.

I arrive home a little after eleven. I do 200 sit-ups and 100 push-ups, then shower and throw on the same clothes I was wearing yesterday. I don't enjoy doing laundry.

I've found that if you wear the same outfit until it no longer *looks* clean, you can stretch out laundry day indefinitely. Martha Stewart I am not.

I clip the .45 holster to my belt. Martha Stewart I most *definitely* am not.

The drive downtown is uneventful. I'm wary, in case another tail turns up, but at this time of day there are only a few cars near me on the highway, none of which appear to be malicious. Or Volvos. Or even malicious Volvos. I listen to the oldies station at high volume, and when 'Hotel California' by the Eagles comes on, I play one-handed air guitar.

Ned's bar has no name to speak of. It did, at one point - you can see the impression where a sign you to sit above the door - but the sign was destroyed long ago, either by time or weather or punk kids, and now the bar is just Ned's bar. It squats like some sort of unpleasant insect at the corner of Hill Street and 34th, consistently filthy and made of elderly lumber. The place is a deathtrap, frankly. If Ned wasn't so chummy with several members of the health board, the place would've been torn down a decade ago.

I park across the street in the lot for a deserted-looking factory. The factory is made of grimy brick, and plastered in graffiti. Much of the graffiti is of questionable taste. One, in highly stylized script, reads "My Pussy." Another reads "Fuck the faggots." A third simply depicts a woman with a bullet hole in her head. In the doorway,

a vagrant in tattered flannel sleeps off the contents of the paper bag by his feet.

Gotta love downtown.

I cross the street and walk into Ned's bar, where I'm hit in the face with a cloud of cigarette smoke thick enough to blot out whatever meager light the grimy windows provide. Ned doesn't believe in smoking bans. The bar is full of its usual clientele - ex-cons, thugs, crusty locals, the occasional dog or cat. None of them turn to look at me.

I grope my way to the bar and sit down. Ned is there.

"Pete," he says. "What's your pleasure?"

"Glass of milk?" I give him my cutest smile.

Ned grunts and pours me a shot of vodka.

The best way to describe Ned is to observe how perfectly he matches his surroundings. It's not hard to imagine him closing up at night, then receding into one of the dank, scummy walls of the bar until opening time rolls around. Ned's a little over six feet tall, white, with a shaved head. His face is covered in scars and his forearms are covered in poorly drawn prison tattoos. The last nub of a Kool filter is glued perpetually to his bottom lip. Ned isn't the sort of person I'd hang out with on a normal basis, but he's the kind of guy who knows how to keep his ears open. And given his usual clientele, he often hears interesting things.

I take the shot. It tastes a little like gasoline that's past its expiration date. I slide the glass back across the bar with a hundred dollar bill wrapped around it, and Ned pockets the money without batting an eye.

"Whattaya need?" he asks. Guy has a way with words.

"Same old stuff. You know, a little of this, a little of that. What can you tell me

about a hooker named Sheri Pao? Used to work at 32nd and Broad, now apparently missing.”

“Never heard of her.” Ned produces a soft pack of smokes, apparently from thin air. He flicks one out of the pack and lights it from the butt of the old cigarette.

“Never?”

Ned grimaces as he inhales. “What do I look like, some fuckin’ john that bangs hookers every night?”

“Surely not a delicate flower like yourself.”

Ned’s eyes narrow. “Don’t be a wise-ass, Pete. You here to talk, or just to bother me all fuckin’ day?”

“Well, mostly I just think you’re pretty,” I say. Ned grunts. I continue. “But I was also looking for the lowdown on a guy named Spider. Met him yesterday. Big guy, moustache. You know him?”

“Big guy, moustache... In love with his shades?”

I nod.

Ned snorts and spits behind the bar, all without ever removing the cigarette. “Spider Rios. Real name’s Thomas. He’ll come in here with his boys from time to time, but mostly he’s outta that pool joint on Oak street. Lotta muscle, no spine. I seen him get his ass handed to him in a fight by fuckers half his size.”

“Who’s he work for?”

Ned shrugs and snorts. “Whoever’ll hire him. Probably not good for much. Maybe put pressure on someone, but only if that someone ain’t anyone to start with.”

“Or to watch a road or tail a guy?”

Ned shrugs again. “I guess. I wouldn’t trust him to fucking wipe my ass without fucking it up.” He chuckles, and the chuckle turns into a cough, which turns into a spit.

“How about a guy named Tech?” I ask.

“Who?”

I sigh, pull out my wallet and hand over another hundred. There were gonna be an awful lot of bribes on Rachel’s expense list. On the other hand, if I could get her to believe that a Mexican militia kidnapped her cocker spaniel, I could probably explain away a few payoffs.

The bill goes into Ned’s pocket. “Tech,” he says. “Just Tech, far as I heard. Enforcer, big guy, covered in tats. Looks scary, acts scary, may actually be scary. I dunno. He’s pretty much just muscle, like Spider, but a notch up the ladder. Freelance, see him around from time to time. Don’t really think he’s got one place he hangs out.”

“He shoot people?”

“Nah. He breaks legs, sits around and looks like tough shit. He may have a piece, but trust me -” Ned flicks his eyes towards my hip, where my gun is only barely visible under my jacket “- he don’t know how to use it. Pardon me.”

Ned strolls to the other end of the bar and pours a patron a beer. I wonder idly whether anyone has ever paid Ned to chat about me. A small part of me would like to think that Ned would never give out any information that might put me in danger. A bigger part of me suspects that Ned doesn’t give a crap, and would discuss me just as soon as he would discuss anybody else.

Before I can ruminate on this rather disturbing concept much longer, Ned returns. He lights a third cigarette from the nub of the second, and then glances my way.

“You still here?” he asks. Ah, the love.

“Apparently.” I rub my eyes, which are starting to sting from the acrid environment. “I’ve got one more thing I need your opinion on. You ever heard of anyone named Mad Max? Not the Mel Gibson flick, an actual guy.”

For just a split second, Ned freezes. The glowing cherry of his cigarette goes dull as he pauses his eternal inhaling. His eyes widen about an eighth of an inch. Then, just as fast as it came, the moment passes. Ned is back to his normal, inhaling, squinty-eyed self. The nanosecond of surprise might never have happened.

“Never heard of no Mad Max,” Ned says, and he spits.

“You sure?”

“Fuck you.” I interpret that as a yes.

Ned’s never lied to me, so it’s difficult to determine whether he’s lying now. Perhaps what I interpreted as an expression of surprise might’ve actually been a small seizure or something.

And maybe Donald Duck is my uncle.

I get up to leave. “Thanks for the drink, Ned. Let me know if you hear anything more, huh?”

Ned scowls, which is as close as he gets to a friendly expression, and disappears into the back of the bar. I weave my way through the dark and the smoke to the exit, then step gingerly out into the light, and the heat, and the fresh air.

II

It's my understanding that, in more reputable locales, the hookers wait until after dark to start hooking. Not so in Ocean City, where girls line the streets of certain neighborhoods twenty-four hours a day, ready to prey on whatever wealthy businessman, drunk tourist or horny kid wanders by. As I cruise down 51st, past palm trees and pawn shops advertising jewelry and guns, I can spot the occasional pro leaning against a wall or lurking in the shade of a storefront. I've always heard that a decent hooker can make good money - upwards of a grand a shift, if you cater to the right folks - but I wonder now what exactly you give up in return. All the girls I drive past look hollow, empty, with lanky bodies and feral eyes.

51st and Broadway is on the very Eastern edge of downtown, one block from where Broadway dead-ends. The interstate runs on a bridge overhead. One corner of the intersection houses a long-defunct gas station, and the other a nightclub called "Sluice XXX," currently not open. In other words, thrillville. There's a girl leaning against the doorway of the nightclub, eyeing the sporadic traffic. I pull into the parking lot and ease the Geo Metro to a stop in front of her.

The girl strolls to the passenger window. Just like in the movies. She's practically indistinguishable from all the other hookers on the street, nineteen or twenty with sandy hair and extensions. She's wearing a tank top and fake nails.

"What can I do for you?" she asks. Her voice is a faux-sexual purr, her eyes vacant.

"Are you Naomi?"

She eyes me. "I can be, if you want."

Aw, jeez. "Look, kid," I say, "I'm not looking to score, I just need twenty minutes of your time. I get some information, you get paid, maybe I buy you lunch, everyone goes home happy. Just be straight with me - are you Naomi?"

The girl frowns and straightens a bit. "Information? What are you, a cop? What the fuck kind of car is that for a cop?"

"I'm not a cop. I'm a PI." I show her my license, which I keep in my wallet for just such an emergency. "And it's a Geo Metro. Times are tough."

The girl studies my license thoroughly and chews on one of her extensions. Finally, she leans towards me again. "Dude, Geos suck."

"Don't have to tell me. Now, are you Naomi or not?"

She sighs. "Nah. My name's Sharon. Naomi's been off this beat for a couple days now. You still gonna buy me lunch?"

"You opposed to answering a few questions?"

"Not if I get lunch." Sharon's trying to play coy, but from the way she hangs on the words - almost longingly - I'm guessing she could use a meal.

"Sure. Hop in."

Sharon gets into the passenger seat, and we chug our way to a Burger King a few blocks away, which apparently has the finest food available in this particular neighborhood. We get our meals and chow down whilst reclining in the least comfortable plastic booth I've ever encountered. Our nearest neighbor is a schizophrenic several tables away, mumbling to himself and drinking a Diet Coke mixed with something pungent. Atmosphere.

Sharon eats enthusiastically, taking big bites of a hamburger the size of her head. She washes it down with gulps of pink lemonade.

“So,” she says, in between chewing, “what is it you need to know?”

“Why don’t you start with Naomi. What happened to her?”

“Dunno.” Sharon finishes the last of the burger and moves onto the french fries. “I mean, it’s not like I see her a bunch anyway. Just from time to time, when our paths cross, or when some dude wants us for a twofer.” She shrugs. “I know she used to work where I work now, but that shit changes all the time. Jerry just dropped by the other day and told me he wanted me somewhere new. I’m like, fuck, whatever. You know?”

“So Jerry’s the guy in charge?”

She shrugs again and keeps eating french fries. “I guess. He’s the one in charge of me, anyhow. Naomi’s someone else’s girl.” She smacks her lips. “You know how it is. Jerry’s probably got bosses, and they probably got bosses, and so on up to the top. Everyone gets a cut.”

“Any idea who’s at the top of the food chain?”

She shakes her head. “Fuck if I know. I just work here.”

The schizophrenic man leers at the ceiling and makes an inappropriate gesture at no one in particular. His lips never stop moving, mouthing words that only he understands.

I take a sip of Dr. Pepper. “Ever heard of Sheri Pao?”

Sharon cocks an eyebrow. “Who? Nah, doesn’t ring a bell. Who’s that?”

“Someone told me that she used to work your block before Naomi.”

Sharon shakes her head. “Naomi’s been there for a while, man. I mean, I’ve only

been doing this shit for about a year, but I've never heard of any Sheri Pao."

Her eyes are open, honest. I try another track. "How about Mad Max?"

"Nope." She tosses the last fry in her mouth and chews.

"Not even the movie?"

"That's a retarded name for a movie. And no, I've never heard of it."

It occurs to me that Sharon might not have even been born when that movie came out. Suddenly, I feel very old. Well, even older than usual.

"Is that all you need? 'Cause I gotta get back."

I check my watch. It's been half an hour since I picked her up. "Almost," I say. "If I wanted to talk to Jerry, where could I find him?"

Sharon pauses. "Man, I can't tell you that. You go and bug him, you know who he's gonna blame?"

"Does he get violent with you?"

"Nah, not usually. He's actually real protective of us girls, makes sure we get everything we need. But he might get pissed if I sent a fucking gumshoe to be a pain in his ass."

"I can be very discreet."

She eyes me, her gaze pausing where I keep the .45 holstered. Either I need to get some baggier shirts or a smaller gun. "Yeah," she says, "I bet you can. Alright, I'll tell you, but you didn't hear shit from me."

"Scout's honor."

"Whatever. Just don't mention my name. Jerry's mom owns a grocery store on Harding street, near the park. He's got an apartment above the store. He's usually either

there or at the gym down the street, the one with the big boxer painted on the side.

Monday and Friday, he's cruising around checking on us girls. But if you wanna talk to him any other time, that's where he'll be."

"Harding street."

"Yup."

"Okay." I gather up the remains of our paper-wrapped feast and toss them in the nearest trash can. Sharon nurses the last of the pink lemonade before pitching the cup.

"How much do I owe you?" I ask as we stroll towards the car.

"What's it been, an hour?"

"More like half."

She considers. "Call it one-fifty."

"That cheap?"

"I'm a rookie. And I like you."

I hand over the last pair of Rachel Peterson's hundreds. Sharon makes change from a moderately thick wad of bills concealed in her cleavage.

We get into the car, and she turns to me. "You sure you don't want me to blow you or anything?"

Ugh. "Positive."

Sharon shrugs. "Suit yourself." She gazes out the window as we roll back to her station.

If anything, she looks a little hurt.

III

I drop Sharon back off at “Sluice XXX,” where she resumes her position in the doorway, then head back down Broadway the way I came, passing the same seedy shops and the same bored hookers. It’s about three in the afternoon, and I have nothing to do ‘til my rendezvous with the mysterious Tech later tonight, so I decide to pop by Harding Street and see if Jerry feels like talking. Unfortunately, I have no idea where Harding Street is.

I pull over and ask two teenagers with close-cropped hair and pants twice as big as they need. After bickering a little about some details, they give me relatively decent directions. One of the teenagers has “FUCK U PIG” tattooed in spidery script across his left forearm. The other is drinking something out of a bottle concealed by a brown paper bag. Kids these days.

Harding Street, as it turns out, is about a mile northwest, part of a small residential district where all the streets are named after presidents. I cruise past Coolidge Drive, Taft Place, Adams Drive and Fillmore Circle. I don’t see anything named for Washington or Lincoln. Seems strange that those two should be absent. Maybe the names were already used somewhere else in the City.

The houses in the neighborhood are old and small, but generally well-kept. Most of them have small yards. A few of the yards are occupied by children throwing footballs or playing in sprinklers. Everyone I see is African-American. One little girl pauses in her play long enough to watch me drive by. My presence, it seems, will not go unnoticed in these here parts.

Jerry's mother's grocery store is small establishment, a former home painted tidily in browns and yellows. The sign in the front says simply "Grocery." The bottom floor of the building serves as the store, and the top floor, as Sharon reported, appears to be living space. At the moment, all of the lights are out upstairs.

A half block further down the road is a larger building with "Sloan's Gym" written in large letters above the front door. Large bay windows frame the entrance. Through them I can see the murky outlines of people running on treadmills and using weight machines. The building does indeed have a boxer painted on its side, but the painting is heavily faded with age. The boxer no longer looks like the noble fighter he no doubt was at one time. Instead, he looks worn-down, defeated and lonely.

I park across the street from the gym and make my way to the door. When I enter, a bell jingles. The girl at the front desk looks up from her magazine and gives me a grim once-over. I'm overwhelmingly conscious of my whiteness.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

I look past the desk, hoping to see one person immediately recognizable as Jerry. No such luck. The place is bigger than it looks from the outside, and there are dozens of people exercising. I turn my attention to the girl. "Is Jerry here?"

She purses her lips suspiciously. "Check the boxing room, that's where he spends most of his time." She turns her attention back to the magazine and I walk past her into the midst of the exercise equipment. The gym floor is dense with elderly but well-kept machines. Its floor is covered with faded rubber. In a few spots, the rubber is worn away and I can see the cement below it. Vintage.

As I proceed towards the rear of the building, I begin to hear the faint *thump-*

thump-thump of someone hitting a heavy bag. The strikes are evenly spaced and powerful, the telltale cadence of someone who knows what they're doing. I walk towards the sound and find myself in front of a red wooden door. The sound is coming from the other side. I put my hand on the doorknob, then wonder for just a moment about the potential ramifications of surprising a professional criminal while he's in the midst of punching things. Oh well. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

I walk through the door.

The boxing room, as it turns out, is well-lit and in better shape than the rest of the facility. It has a full-size ring, in which two fighters are sparring in front of a small crowd. The ceilings are high, and the *thump-thump* of the heavy bag in the back of the room echoes slightly over the murmur of the spectators and the grunts and shuffles of the two guys in the ring.

I sidle up to a bystander wearing track pants and a shirt that says "Rocky's Oyster House" and ask him where I can find Jerry. Without taking his eyes off the sparring match, he gestures past the ring, towards the thumping. I circle around the crowd and head in that direction. No one pays me any mind, which is a welcome change.

The man who must be Jerry is alone in the in the rear of the room, still going to town on the heavy bag. Muscles bunch in his shoulders and neck as he hammers on it relentlessly, *left-right, left-right*. With each blow, the bag bucks and dances. Jerry has on baggy shorts and a sleeveless shirt with the Adidas symbol on it. His hair is in small dreadlocks. He's shorter than I am by a few inches, and slim, but there's no doubt about his strength or skill.

I stand and watch for a few minutes. Jerry throws a knee into the bag from time

to time, always staying perfectly balanced. Once, he dances backwards and lands a flying kick that would probably take my head off my shoulders. Before the poor bag can even recover, he's back at it with his fists, *left-right, left-right*.

Finally, after about ten minutes, Jerry gives the bag a final smack, turns around, and sees me for the first time. Shockingly, he doesn't appear to be frightened. "What's up?" he asks.

"That was some impressive striking. Really nice." Nothing fake about the admiration. "How long you been fighting?"

He shrugs modestly. "Most my life I been fighting for something, I guess. Who're you?"

"My name's Pete. Are you Jerry?"

"Yeah, that's me. You a cop?" He grabs a towel from a nearby stack and wipes his face. He's sweating hard, but he doesn't appear to be out of breath.

"Nope. Just a guy with some questions."

"Some questions, and a gun." Jerry wipes his face with the towel. "Plus, you're the only White cat for five miles. So please excuse me if I ask for you to prove your non cop-hood."

I prove my non cop-hood by handing over my investigator's license. He studies it calmly, for a long time. Finally, he hands it back and shrugs in a bored sort of way. "So what brings mister private eye to the neighborhood?"

"I'm looking for a missing hooker."

"And you're looking for her in a gym?"

"Nope. I'm looking for you in a gym."

Jerry drops the towel and slips a sweatshirt over his sleeveless tee. “And what makes you think I would know anything about a hooker?”

“I was told you would know.”

“And who told you that?”

“The North Wind.”

Jerry laughs. “The what? Look man, come over here.” He gestures me closer.

Jerry puts his arm around my shoulder and speaks with his voice lowered. All traces of laughter have evaporated from his voice. “Okay now, mister private eye. See that cat up there in the green shorts? That’s my big brother.” He points to one of the fighters in the ring. The guy is 6’5”, easy, and probably 250 pounds of solid muscle.

“And that other guy,” Jerry continues, gesturing at the other fighter, who is similarly built, “is my cousin. In fact, pretty much all these cats are family.” He pauses for a moment. “So I’m gonna deal with you straight, ‘cause I wouldn’t do anything to any of my girls, but if you try and feed me bullshit, or if you get my ass arrested...”

I glance back at the fighters. Point taken.

Jerry removes his arm from my shoulder. The smile returns to his face. “So, paleface, what can I do for you?”

“Does the name Sheri Pao ring a bell?”

Jerry thinks. “No. She the hooker?”

“Yeah.”

“Never heard of her.” He wipes sweat from his eyes. “But that doesn’t mean anything. I’m just an employee, man. There’s a hundred other guys just like me.”

“You’re not the point of the pyramid?”

“Nah, man. I wish. I pay my dues, just like everyone else.” He laughs. “No taxes, but dues for sure.”

“How about Naomi?”

Jerry runs a hand through his dreadlocks. “Sure. She’s one of mine.”

“Where’s she work?”

“Just moved to Hill street, near the overpass.”

“And before that?”

“51st and Broad. Corner didn’t use to be open, then it was, so I stuck her there. Why all the questions about Naomi? She okay?”

“As far as I know.” I change tacks. “You mentioned ‘dues’ earlier. Who exactly are these dues paid to?”

One of the combatants in the ring behind me must’ve done something impressive, because the crowd suddenly breaks into scattered applause and catcalls. Jerry motions for me to follow him. “C’mon, private eye. You really wanna talk about this, we should go somewhere quieter.”

“Hey Jerry!” calls somebody from the crowd. “This guy bothering you?”

“Nah, man. He’s cool,” Jerry responds. It’s nice to feel loved.

I follow Jerry out of the boxing room and through a forest of elderly stairmasters to a door marked “Private.” He produces a key. The room has a bench and two lockers. A minifridge hums in the corner.

“Changing room for the refs,” Jerry explains. “Or at least it used to be. They don’t really host fights here too much any more.” He reaches into the minifridge and pulls out a bottle of water. “Want one?”

I shake my head and sit on the bench.

Jerry shrugs, twists the cap from the bottle, and takes a quick sip. “What was the question, now?”

“Who’s running the show here?”

Jerry smiles. “Beats the shit outta me, brother. I just make my drops. I never see anyone in person.”

“Who got you into the business?”

Jerry takes another gulp of water. “Look, paleface. All this action most likely works its way back to the Mazetti family. Way I hear it, they’re behind pretty much everything here. But there’s lots of people between folks like me and folks like them.”

“So you never see anyone in person?”

Jerry laughs, humorlessly. “You think I play golf with these people or something? Dude, the only way I’ll ever see anybody in person is if I don’t make my drop or if they catch me skimming. And then it would be a real short visit.”

Score: professional private eye 0, street criminal 1. I decide to try a different tack.

“Ever heard of Mad Max?”

“Who?”

“Mad Max.”

“Nah, man. That sounds like a video game.”

“Ever hear of anybody named Tech?”

“Nah.”

“Spider?”

“Dude, you just makin’ shit up now. That really someone’s name?”

“Sadly, yes.”

“Nah. Never heard of him.”

“How about Claire Peterson?”

“Nope.”

“Skinny girl, dirty blond, acne scars. She told me Naomi was working at 51st and Broadway.”

“Well, man, you just described half the pros in Ocean City. But I never heard of any Claire Peterson.” Jerry rolls his shoulders and shakes out his thick arms, no doubt eager to continue pummeling the heavy bag. His face is open and honest, his responses fluid and unforced. Either he’s the world’s best liar, or he really doesn’t know squat about anything.

We sit quietly for a few seconds. The only sound is the gentle hum of the minifridge.

“I heard you live above your mom’s store,” I say at last.

He flattens his brow. “Maybe. Why?”

I shrug. “Just curious whether she knows what you do for a living. I’ve never met a pimp who lived with his mom before.”

Jerry gives me a scrutinizing glance. “You fuckin’ with me, private eye?”

I throw up my hands. “Nope. Just curious.”

He stares for another second or two. The sweat that coated his face is dried now. Even at rest, leaning as he is against the bank of lockers, the muscles in his arms and shoulders bulge ominously. Maybe if I ate Wheaties for breakfast instead of oatmeal, I could look like him.

Jerry breaks the silence. “All right, look. You know how all these streets around here have president names?”

I nod.

He continues. “This neighborhood’s called Presidents Park. The government built it in the fifties as, like, low income housing or whatever. I hear it was nice back in the day, but by the time I was born, it was the worst kind of ghetto. I’m talkin’ bangers and drugs and whores and whatever else. It was no kinda place to grow up, man. No one went to school. You couldn’t play outside cause of the junkies and the gangs. It was a piece of shit.

“My dad left when I was born, so it was just me and my mom and my brothers. I never went to school or anything, and by the time I was fifteen, I was into the pimp game. A lotta cats that do that, they go and spend all their money on guns and drugs and shit, and before you know it they’re either broke or dead. But I tried to be smart. As soon as I got some cash, I went and opened a real honest-to-God bank account. I started makin’ interest. And I expanded - I started out with five girls, then six, then ten, whatever. You know, layin’ low and makin’ bills.”

Jerry takes a sip of water and continues. “So by the time I’m 18, I got like twenty grand in the bank. I use half of it to start up that store so my Mom can make a living. And she hired some folks from the neighborhood, so then they had jobs. And people in PP had a grocery store they could walk to. Things started to get a little better. My next fifteen grand, I built that playground over on Coolidge and hired this cat to mow the grass in the park there and keep the junkies out. So then the kids had someplace to go play.”

He pauses. “When we opened the playground, it was like a damn mob scene. Little kids were there, but so were these older kids that were covered in tats and wearing gang bandanas. We were all so scared of the gangs that we didn’t even realize that some of these bangers were only twelve or thirteen. They’d never been on a swing set before. So they were there playing right along with the real little kids. Seein’ them all play together just brought out the absurdity of it, man. I was like, damn - how messed up is all this shit? Kids killing other kids, kids doing drugs, when all they really wanted was a swing set. I wanted to fix things. I wanted to make it right.

“And that’s how it’s been, man. Everything I make, I try to build something, or fix something, or loan it out to someone else so they can fix something. The neighborhood still ain’t rich or anything, but it’s at least cleaned up a little. Folks can take pride in where they live again.”

I think of what I saw on the drive in: small but neatly maintained houses, children dancing in sprinklers. A community on the rise.

Jerry shrugs. “So I guess what I’m sayin’, paleface, is yes - my mama knows what I do. And I think she and I can agree that, as long as I treat them girls right, the ends justify the means.”

And that’s that. Jerry finishes his water and opens the door. I give him my number and ask him to call me if he hears anything about Sheri Pao or Mad Max. He and I slap hands and part ways. Jerry heads back towards the boxing room, from wherein I can here the shouts and claps of a sparring match still in progress. I head towards the front of the building, making my way through the dense jungle of stairmasters and weight machines.

The same girl is still at the front counter, her head bent low over her magazine. I slow as I walk by.

“That Jerry guy,” I say. “He’s something else.”

“Yes, sir,” says the girl, without lifting her head. “He surely is.”

IV

I'm sitting on the deck, drinking diet soda, watching the sun set and thinking about my forthcoming date with Jenny when Omar arrives. He's traded his work blues for jeans and a dark turtleneck. At the sound of the doorbell, Boomer comes running. Peaches trails after him, more slowly. I sincerely hope that Boomer is not training her to be an apprentice pain-in-the-ass.

Omar lifts an eyebrow. "Two of them now?"

"One's on loan."

He chuckles. "Sure. That's how it starts. Whose is it?"

I shrug on a black windbreaker, step outside, and shut the door. "Client's."

"Man... I thought you were kidding about that dognapping thing. How long you gonna have it around?"

"I dunno. I'm supposedly just hanging on to it while investigating the thing with the hooker, but that's going nowhere in a hurry, so it could be a while."

We start down the hillside towards the circular drive, where Omar's car, a late model Toyota with dark tinted windows, is parked. I notice that he's taken the liberty of attaching fake plates. "That what we're working on tonight? The hooker?"

"Nah. This is something else. Guy was following me yesterday."

Omar unlocks the car and opens his door. "You lead an interesting life, man."

"That's me," I say. "Pete Lyons, captain of adventure."

"Pete Lyons, captain of tiny-ass dogs," says Omar.

The drive to Oak Street is uneventful. No blue volvos tail us. Omar sings along

with the radio, which, given his deafness and exemplary lung capacity, is painful but endearing. Big Cues is on the west side of downtown, toward the ocean. By the time we arrive, the darkness of night is nearly complete. Just a lacy hint of orange hangs on the horizon.

Omar parks the Toyota in a bank parking lot around the corner from the pool hall. I get out and hike the rest of the way. Big Cues is a dumpy, unattractive bar with blacked-out windows and a neon sign that advertises “PO L AND CO D BEE .” A small, ratty man with a cigarette dangling from his lip is standing next to the door, speaking raspy Spanish into a cell phone. He lets out a deep, phlegmy cough as I walk past. Atmosphere.

The interior of Big Cues is grimy and artificial, but (thankfully) smoke-free. Two dozen pool tables cluster in the middle of the establishment, which is bigger than it looks from the outside. Along the walls are a handful of arcade games and video poker machines, about half of which actually appear to be working. At the rear of the hall is a bar. There are four guys playing pool and two more drinking, but none of them are particularly large or covered in tattoos. Time to play the waiting game.

I pull out \$100 at a dilapidated ATM (thank you, Rachel Peterson), then walk to the bar and order a beer. The bartender, a prematurely aged woman in shirt that says “Show Me Your Cue,” slides me a bottle. I sip and pretend to watch bowling on TV. Ten minutes later, Omar walks in. I avoid eye contact, but give a slight shake of the head. No Tech yet. Omar nonchalantly pops three quarters into a bar table and racks himself a game of nineball. Just a couple of ordinary guys.

A few more people trickle in as time crawls on - blue collar workers, mostly, a

couple tough-looking guys, but none of them Tech. Two white guys in suits come in and take a table near Omar. One of them lights a cigarette and gets bitched out by the bartender. Not regulars. A few empty-eyed souls set up shop in front of the video poker machines, absently losing money. The ratty man from the porch enters and takes a seat at the other end of the bar. He orders a Coke and spikes it with something from a hip flask. Omar clears three nineball racks and moves on to eightball. Two hours pass.

Finally, at 10:15, the door swings open and Tech walks in. It has to be him. He's six foot three and gigantic. Tribal tattoos snake up his forearms, disappear under a straining white T-shirt, then reappear as curlicues at the base of his neck. He's got close-cropped hair and three days' worth of stubble on his face. Tattooed teardrops cascade from the corners of his eyes. I look closely for any sign of a gun. None is apparent, but then again, I could never find Waldo either.

Tech greets a couple other burly patrons, then grabs a table and starts shooting an expert game of nineball.

Time to move. I slip out of my barstool and wander in towards the gigantic man. I don't look at Omar, but I know that he's watching, ready to intercede should the need arise. We're like Batman and Robin, if Robin were a 250-pound black police officer.

I stroll up to Tech, who's lining up a shot on the five ball. "Are you Tech?"

He doesn't miss a beat, sinking the ball smoothly and easily. "Yeah," he says.

"Can I talk to you for a second?"

Tech looks at me absently, his inked face devoid of expression. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Omar drifting towards us. He's maybe fifteen feet away.

"Right hip," says Tech.

Suddenly, I sense somebody behind me. Before I can move, a hand is on my right hip, smothering my access to the .45. Simultaneously, I feel a distinct pressure in the small of my back.

“Don’t move, or I’ll fucking kill you.” The voice comes from behind me. It’s slick and quiet and scary. I don’t move. In my peripheral vision, I can see Omar’s eyes widen slightly as he abruptly changes course and heads for the washroom.

The hand on my hip disappears, but the gun buried in my back stays. One of white guys that had been shooting pool, the one who tried to light up indoors, strolls from behind me and hands Tech a roll of cash. Tech puts it in his pocket without counting it and returns to his game.

“Okay,” says the voice behind me. “Here’s what we’re gonna do. We’re gonna walk outside very quietly, and get into a car, okay? If you make any noise or if you try to run away, you will end up dead and you’ll be placing all these innocent people in the line of fire. And don’t look too scared. We don’t want attention. Got it?”

I nod.

“Good. Now move.”

We move. No one seems to notice as we make our way through the felted tables, meaning that A) patrons regularly march other patrons out of Big Cues at gunpoint, or else B) guy covering me is really good at making it look natural. I’m betting on the latter.

The two guys in suits usher me out the door, through the parking lot, and into the back seat of a large black sedan, the make of which I don’t recognize. There’s a third guy in a suit behind the wheel. The gunman sits beside me on the left, and his partner on the right, the partner adjusting his tie. I’m beginning to feel a little bit underdressed.

“Hey, Rick,” says the gunman, “stay here for a sec. There was this other guy, this Black guy. He started to come over and then didn’t. Sit tight and see if he comes out.”

“You got it, Bobby.”

We sit in silence for about ten minutes. No one goes in or out of Big Cues. The only sound is the distant rumble of highway traffic and the more immediate hiss of ocean wind in palm trees. I’d love to break the ice with a joke, but it really doesn’t seem like the time.

Finally, Bobby seems satisfied. “Drive.”

Rick starts the car and pulls onto Oak Street, heading East. The third guy, the one who’s neither Rick nor Bobby, deftly removes my gun from its holster and trains it on me.

“Okay, guys... look, I just had a pool debt with that guy. What’s this all -” I begin.

“Shut up,” says Bobby.

“I think we have a misunder-”

“Shut the fuck up.” Bobby looks annoyed. “Jesus.”

For a moment, we ride in silence. I’m nervous, of course, and my heart is beating about three times faster than it should, but I’m somewhat comforted by the fact that we’re driving away from the docks, which would be the logical place to shoot someone, and towards downtown, which would not.

“You know,” I tell Bobby, “you’re cute when you’re angry.”

Bobby slaps me hard with the back of his gun hand, and leaves my bell ringing. But his partner snorts. Let’s hear it for humor.

When we get to Oak and Paradise, Bobby’s partner pulls out a bandana

and wraps it snugly around my eyes. The blindfold is completely effective. The guy should be rented out with piñatas. For a while, I try to keep track of left and right turns in a last-ditch effort to retain my bearings, but it's hopeless. Soon, I'm completely disoriented. My cheekbone stings where Bobby hit me. I wonder vaguely what happened to Omar.

After what seems like forever, the car slows, then creeps to a halt. The front door opens and closes, and outside the car, I can hear a metal grate being opened. Some sort of garage? The front door opens again, and we pull forward. Then Rick cuts the engine. I guess we're here.

Bobby and his pal hustle me out of the backseat, still blindfolded, Bobby guiding me with the gun. I listen intently as we march across a smooth cement floor, hoping to hear something that would give away our location. No dice. I don't even hear any traffic. It smells a little like cat piss, but that's probably not a clue.

"Stairs," says Bobby's partner.

He's not nearly in time. I trip on the first step and fall painfully to my knees. Somebody hauls me roughly to my feet and we march up a short flight of stairs and through a heavy doorway with a coded lock. Tile floor now. Another doorway. Carpet. An office? It smells like leather and ink and cigars.

We stop. Abruptly, the blindfold is torn off. For a moment, I'm blinded by the sudden light. Then, kaleidoscopic blobs begin to coagulate into definable surroundings. Thick, green carpeting. Bookcases stuffed with books. A big brown desk, crowded with papers. No windows anywhere, no clues to our location. And behind the desk, another guy in a suit, standing with his arms crossed over his barrel chest, studying me. I blink

twice, and the man's face comes into focus. We've never met, but I recognize him from countless photographs and news articles. He's supposedly the most intelligent, ruthless and violent person in the Western half of the United States. He's been in power for over twenty years, and has more sway in Ocean City than the mayor, the town council and Ronald McDonald put together.

The man is Harry Mazetti, the head of the Mazetti crime family. And whatever this thing is that I'm involved in, it's way the hell over my head.

V

“That’s the guy,” says Mazetti. “Were there any problems?”

Bobby responds from behind me. “Not really. He was packing. Gino’s got it.”

“.45 army issue?”

“You got it.”

Mazetti nods. “Empty it and give it back. Then get outta here.”

Bobby’s partner - Gino, I suppose - obediently pops the clip out of the .45, ejects the round in the chamber, and hands it back to me. I slide it into my hip holster, still a little unsteady. Not to mention very confused. Gino tucks the ammo into his pocket and disappears, along with Bobby and Rick. I hear the door slide shut as they leave the room.

“Have a seat, Mr. Lyons.” Mazetti gestures broadly at two expansive leather-bound armchairs that face the desk. I sit in the one on the left. Very comfortable. Leather chairs, sharp suits - if I were to become a professional criminal, I’d take a cue from these guys.

Mazetti sits in the large office chair and swivels to face me. His face is round and childlike, deceptively doe-eyed and clean shaven. He has a wisp of a mustache and carefully-maintained sideburns. Not what one would expect a ruthless crime lord to look like, but there you go. Life is surprising sometimes.

“First things first,” Mazetti says. “If you try to make a move, Hap will put a bullet in your brain. He will act before you can, and he will not miss. Do you understand?”

He motions towards the back of the room. I follow his gaze. Lounging on a small

sofa near the door is a pale, skinny teenager in flip flops, toying idly with his fingernails. Next to him is a .22 pistol. A marksman's weapon. The teenager looks at me and smiles. It is not a pleasant smile.

“Got it,” I say.

“Good. Mind if I smoke?”

“Uh... no.”

Mazetti produces a thick cigar and makes a great show of clipping, trimming and lighting it. I know instinctively that this is an act designed to make me as antsy and uncomfortable as possible, but my knowing this doesn't keep it from working. I twitch my left leg. I scratch an itch on my scalp. I realize suddenly that I need to pee. This does not help the situation.

After about five minutes, the cigar is prepared to his satisfaction. Mazetti puffs in a satisfied manner. A dense perfume wafts through the office. Behind me, Hap coughs. Allergies, maybe.

“Okay,” says Mazetti. “To business. Yesterday, Mr. Lyons, you disrupted a very important facet of my business interests. You also, albeit unwittingly, cost me an employee.” He ashes the cigar directly onto the floor. Probably has minions who vacuum.

I stay silent. For once.

Mazetti frowns. “Tom Rios, known to some as” - he sneers - “‘Spider,’ called his superior from Las Vegas yesterday evening. Apparently, he thought he was sufficiently removed from the area to escape the consequences of fucking up his assignment so egregiously. Needless to say, Mr. Lyons, he was not.”

Poor Spider. Too many muscles, no brain.

Mazetti continues. “Mr. Rios did have one useful bit of information to relay - the license plate of the stupid fuck who busted the tail. I phoned a friend at the DMV, and learned, with some surprise, that the stupid fuck in question was none other than Mr. Peter Lyons, a licensed fucking private eye.”

I try to look bashful.

Mazetti puffs contemplatively at the cigar. “And your name... it rings a bell with me. Something from a long time ago. Something I’ve nearly forgotten. And so I say to my men, ‘Go find this jackass and bring him in so I can talk to him.’ And so they go to the address on your driver’s license, and they find a Kentucky Fried Chicken. And they call the number for your agency, and get a very hostile Chinese restaurant. You are, it seems, a hard man to find.”

“The phone number was an honest mistake.”

“Whatever.” Mazetti waves his hand dismissively and puffs again at the cigar. “So let’s recap. At this point, you’ve meddled in my business, lost me an employee, and wasted my time with your stupid games.” He leans forward. “You may well be asking yourself, ‘Why the fuck am I still alive?’”

He’s got a point.

Mazetti eases back into the chair again before continuing. “Well, I’ll tell you. That little something that was tickling my mind when I first heard your name? This morning, I remember what it was.” He perches the cigar carefully on the edge of his desk and reaches into a drawer to withdraw two sheets of paper. He pushes them towards me.

“Read,” he says.

The pages are clipped from newspapers, fragile and beginning to yellow with age. The first is from the front page of the Sunday, December 21st *Ocean City Telegraph*.

FOUR SLAIN IN TURF WAR

Ocean City West - Four members of the Los Locos street gang were found shot to death on the boardwalk of pier 119 yesterday morning, and a fifth has been hospitalized with severe gunshot wounds and other injuries. The young men were apparently gunned down in a brutal midnight battle with a rival gang.

The carnage was discovered by Roland Whitley, the owner of the clipper which docks in pier 119, around 6:00 yesterday morning. Whitley called 911 and police responded immediately. "It was a shock," said Whitley, visibly shaken. "I mean, this is the last thing you would expect. I was just coming in to make sure the boat made it through that squall okay, and there they were. It was... grisly, like a battleground."

Only two of the slain gang members have been positively identified. Juan Ramos (22) and Eduard Diaz (23) were both wanted on numerous unrelated charges, including manslaughter, larceny and drug trafficking. The others who were killed remain nameless for the time being. They are suspected of being illegal immigrants. The hospitalized man has been positively identified as Victor Gordon (25), a second-generation Mexican immigrant with several prior arrests. Police are eagerly awaiting Gordon's testimony, but he had yet to regain consciousness at time of press.

Despite an extensive investigation which transformed much of the West Side boardwalk into a crime scene well into yesterday afternoon, police say they have no

suspects at the present time. "It's a difficult situation," says lieutenant Calvin Beck, the chief investigating officer. "The rain during the night washed away a lot of trace evidence. No bloodstains, no fingerprints... we're starting from square one."

Lt. Beck went on to say that, although all of the victims were killed with similar .45 caliber munitions, it seems unlikely that there was just one gunman. "We're looking at a turf war, here. Yet another senseless act (cont. on p 5)

Accompanying the article is a photo, in which a half-dozen cops are bent studiously over something. I recognize a young Ethan Zimmerman, decked out in patrolman blue in the days before his promotion.

The second page is from deeper within the same paper. It has quite a few articles. One of them, however, is circled in red pen. It's a tiny write-up on the left hand side of the page, under "Local News."

MAN HOSPITALIZED WITH MYSTERY GUNSHOT WOUND

An Ocean City man was hospitalized Friday night with a gunshot wound to the abdomen. Peter Lyons (32) was admitted to Mercy General by his wife, who was unable to explain the incident. "He just walked in [to the house the couple shares] and passed out," she said. Police have taken Mrs. Lyons' testimony and do not consider her a suspect. Mr. Lyons, a former military man and investigator by trade, remains in critical condition with severe internal trauma.

I look up to find Mazetti puffing on the cigar and studying my reaction. I hand him back the scraps of paper, and he replaces them in his desk drawer.

“So here’s what the papers never knew,” he says. “There was never any ‘Los Locos’ gang. That was something invented by somebody who paid some reporter a lot of money. Those men were employees of Rey Vazquez, the spic king of the West Side. Used to be a big shot, dealt in coke and designer drugs. Died not too long ago. But back in the day, he and I for the most part left each other alone.”

Mazetti smacks his lips and carefully stubs out the cigar in a large bronze ashtray.

“So imagine, if you will, that stormy night in ‘97. Rey’s men have business down at the docks - a shipment, maybe. Whatever. And then it suddenly all goes to hell and they all die. That same night, you, a nobody, get checked in for a gunshot wound. The cops never connects the two, because what would a nobody P.I. have to do with senseless gang violence?”

“But I notice things. I notice that you carry that gigantic fucking gun. It’s the same caliber as got buried in Rey’s guys. I notice that you are ex-military. Maybe marines, maybe army rangers. Maybe you have the skill to take down five morons.”

As he speaks, Mazetti rises slowly from his seat.

“So, Mr. Lyons,” he says, leaning over the desk towards me. “Allow me to ask - was it you that did Rey’s guys? And what the fuck for?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

Mazetti raises his eyebrows. “Whattaya mean, you don’t know?”

“Amnesia. Scout’s honor.”

“No shit.” Mazetti continues to stare at me. “You never tried to figure it out?”

You're an investigator, for Chrissakes."

I try to slow my racing heart. "it was a tough time. My wife left me. I couldn't walk for two months. Investigating wasn't high up on my list of priorities."

"Huh." Mazetti slowly sinks back into his chair. His doe eyes sink to half-mast and he drums absently on the desktop. We sit like that for what seems like hours. I become very conscious of the ticking of a clock somewhere in the room. I remain very conscious of my need to pee.

Finally, Mazetti speaks. "Mr. Lyons, amnesia or not, I've got a problem. And I think a man like yourself could help me with said problem." He smacks his lips. "I guess what I'm saying is, I'd like to hire you. Now, you can either accept my offer, in which case maybe I let you live a little longer, or you can choose to get shot in your fucking skull. What'll it be?"

Mazetti looks at me. I glance back at Hap. Hap is staring off into space, but his little .22 is leveled unwaveringly at my head, hammer cocked. I didn't even hear him move.

"Happy to be on board," I say.

Hap lowers the gun. I'm proud of myself for not losing bowel control.

"Great," says Mazetti casually. "Here's the deal."

He gets to his feet and clasps his hands beside him. Executive style.

"I own the whores in Ocean City," says Mazetti. "Every single cheap, trashy one of 'em. I own every pimp. I own every corner. Every fucking backstreet BJ that someone shells out fifty bucks for, most of that cash lands in my hands. You got that?"

"You own the whores."

“You’re Goddamn right I do.” Mazetti lights another cigar. Now that he’s no longer trying to feed my unease, the trimming/lighting process takes maybe ten seconds.

“I own the whores,” he says, “but lately, someone’s been muscling in on my business. My employees are disappearing. The girls on the West Side are under someone else’s control. And the police, who I pay lots and lots of money for just such a contingency, don’t fucking know anything. No one knows anything. The girls don’t know. The pimps don’t know. Not one single person has been able to tell me who the fuck is stealing from me.”

Mazetti exhales thick smoke. Hap coughs again. Definitely allergies.

“So I send my cousin over to the West Side with some guys to find out what the hell’s happening. He never comes back. That was three weeks ago. Meanwhile, more and more Ocean City whores - *my* whores, lest we forget - are under new management. All over the damn place. Right now, everything from City Park to the docks is out of my control.”

Mazetti look at me. I look at him. I wonder where the bathroom is.

“So, Mr. Lyons,” he continues, ashing his cigar menacingly on the floor, “I want you to detect who this jackass is. You give me a name, I give you your life and forgive you all your numerous transgressions against me. I will allot you forty-eight hours. This is a very generous amount of time. After that, unless you get me a fucking name, you will be dead. My men will be watching you. You won’t see them, but they’ll be there. If you try to leave town, or if you fuck up and go to the cops, or if you fucking look the wrong way, you will, again, be dead.”

No pressure.

Mazetti clamps the cigar between his teeth and reaches once more into the desk drawer from whence came the newspaper articles. He pulls out a wrinkled sheet of notebook paper.

“One last thing. This came to my home in the mail yesterday. Along with” - his lip wrinkles - “my cousin’s ring finger. There was no return address. There was no postmark.”

I gingerly take the sheet of paper and read.

Harry -

Please do not get involved in my affairs.

- Mad Max

For a long time after I read the note, Mazetti and I sit without speaking. The only sound is the ticking of the unseen clock and the occasional cough from Hap.

Then, off in the distance, its sound carrying dimly through the thick walls and plush decor of wherever the hell we were, a church’s bells begin to chime the hour.
Midnight.

DECEMBER 19, 1997

“Who was it?”

I return the phone to its cradle. “Lady about a case.”

Jenny takes a sip of her tea and flips a page. “You don’t sound too happy about it.”

“She wants me to follow her husband around.”

“Ah. One of those.”

“Yep. Not a fun way to spend an evening.”

I open the door to the office area, where Boomer is corralled by necessity every time the phone rings. The little rat stalks out, looking resentful, and hops into Jenny’s lap. She places her book face down on the kitchen table and scratches his ears. “Aw, poor thing. Was Daddy being mean to you? Huh? Was he?” Boomer emits a low, guttural whine. “I know, I know,” says Jenny. “You were just trying to defend the house from the big, bad telephone...”

Boomer widens his eyes. Angling for sympathy. What a punk.

“Hey, Boomer,” I say. “I’ve got a joke for you. What’s worse than a really big rat? Wait, wait, I’ll tell you. It’s a really big rat that yips like a banshee when the phone rings!”

I laugh. The dog doesn’t seem to be amused.

Jenny smiles and leans in conspiratorially as she strokes the top of Boomer’s head. “That’s right, boy. Just stay stoic for now, then piddle on something he likes when he’s asleep.”

“Hey, wait a minute. That’s not funny. I think that dog may seriously have a problem.”

Jenny smirks. “It’s a little funny.”

I sink back into my chair. and resume nursing my coffee. The late morning sun is bright. It billows vigorously through the large kitchen windows and drenches everything in the space. Outside, the birds have quit fighting. The cliff house lawn, despite a near-freeze two nights ago, is still a deep, satisfying green. All in all, not bad for late December.

Jenny looks beautiful, as usual. Her hair is pulled back in a ragged ponytail. Here and there, stray ribbons of blonde have escaped, and they swirl around her faace like a halo. On other women, this might seem unkempt, but Jenny makes it look good. She’s dressed in weekend wear for her day off - an oversized hooded sweatshirt with just panties underneath.

I try to keep from drooling.

“So what do you wanna do today?” Jenny asks. “No work, great weather - the world is our oyster.”

I sip my coffee. “I dunno. If I’m gonna be tromping around downtown all night, I might just take it easy. Rent some movies.”

“We could go out for lunch.”

“We could.”

“We could eat Chinese.”

“We could. In fact, we should.”

“General Tso’s chicken?”

“Absolutely.”

Boomer makes happy dog noises from Jenny’s lap.

“That mutt gets more action than I do,” I say.

“Well see who gets more action after the Chinese food,” she replies.

For a few moments we sit in companionable silence. I sip my coffee. Jenny strokes the dog and absently brushes hair from her face. It’s been years since I had a job that operated on any sort of regular schedule, of course, but I can still appreciate the unique pleasure of a day off - relaxed, shoes off, planning the hours ahead as it pleases us. It feels nice.

“What time tonight?” Jenny says, after a while.

“What time what? Oh, the tail. I guess around eight or so. The husband says he’s going to poker night.”

“You and Omar have poker nights from time to time.”

“Sure. But we actually play poker.”

Jenny raises her eyebrow. “So the wife suspects that this is more of a ‘poke her’ night?”

“That’s about right.”

“So what happens if the guy really is just playing cards with his buddies?”

I shrug. “Then I tell that to the wife. It would be great, actually. The shitty part about spousal tails is having to report the bad news when someone is actually cheating.” I shift in my seat. “You can’t imagine how it feels to be the one that has to bust everything up and watch two poor people’s marriage just fall apart.” I slurp up the last of the coffee.

Jenny reaches across the table and touches my hand. "It's not your fault, baby."

"Yeah, I know. But the wives have no one left to cry on, so they cry on the detective. And the husbands have to be angry at someone, so they get pissed off at the detective. It's a bum gig."

I slurp the last of my coffee, rise, and pour myself another half-cup. Boomer, his hunger for attention finally sated, slides off Jenny's lap and scratches at the back door. I let him out into the yard.

Jenny sips thoughtfully at her tea. "What would you do if I cheated on you?"

I return to my seat. "Why, are you planning to?"

"Heaven forbid. Just curious."

"I'd shoot him. Two in the kisser." I say it in my film-noir voice.

Jenny makes a face. "C'mon, baby. Seriously."

I let air out through pursed lips. "I dunno. I guess if you were happier with someone else than with me, I'd have to learn to accept that."

"That's very enlightened of you."

"Pete Lyons, private eye and romance counselor for the new millennium. That's me."

She laughs.

"But," I continue, "if he ever hurt you, I'd be forced to delve into my primeval man instincts and tear him limb from limb."

Jenny laughs harder, and I join in.

I'm not actually worried about Jenny cheating, of course, but her safety does weigh heavy on my mind. I run into unsavory characters in my line of work. And despite

the numerous precautions I've taken to make our home difficult to locate, the idea of one of those characters tracking me down and harming her sometimes keeps me up at night.

And if she ever were hurt, I'm not kidding about the limb from limb stuff. I would track down and kill whoever did it. I would do it without mercy and without remorse. I can't promise I would hold on to my sanity. That's just how it is when you love somebody. That's what it means.

"So how 'bout that Chinese?" asks Jenny.

I snap myself out of my reverie. "Oh, yeah." I drain the last of my coffee. "Just let me put shoes on."

Jenny stands and puts her hands on her hips. The oversized sweatshirt hangs low, almost to her knees. "What do you think... pants or no pants?"

"No pants. Definitely."

She smiles. "Nice try. I'm gonna throw on some jeans."

I rinse my cup and put it in the dishwasher, then open the door and let Boomer back into the house. Jenny marks her place in the book and leaves it closed on the table.

We walk into the bedroom hand in hand. It's a long time before we come out.

DAY THREE

I

MARCH 14, 2007

Bobby and his pals are recalled. We go through the same song and dance with the blindfold and the long, confusing car ride. No one speaks. I consider asking one of my captors where they get their suits pressed, but my heart isn't in it. Plus, I'd rather not have to absorb another blow to the face. I wonder whether these goons ever listen to the radio as they kidnap and murder people. Maybe they think it would ruin their tough guy mystique.

Bobby pulls off my blindfold as the sedan coasts to a stop. We're back in the parking lot of Big Cues Pool Hall, which looks just as exciting as I remember it. Gino opens his door and rises to let me out.

"Thanks for the ride," I say.

Gino grunts in an unamused fashion. He slides back into the car, slams the door, and then the three amigos drive slowly away. I'm alone, except for the faint thump of the Big Cues jukebox, barely audible in the heavy air.

I hike around the corner to the bank where Omar and I parked five hours ago. His car is gone. With no other form of transportation available, I set out wearily on foot towards downtown. The night is still and muggy, and filled with the choruses of chirping crickets.

My back and neck are stiff, reacting to the tension of the past few hours, and my eyes are stinging with fatigue. My mind is reeling. On the one hand, I'm still alive. That's a plus. Not too many people meet Harry Mazetti face to face and walk away

intact. On the other hand, I'm saddled with a very dangerous *pro bono* investigation involving someone who's apparently so psychotic that even the mob can't handle him. So hip, hip, hooray.

At the corner of Oak and 9th street, I stumble onto an all-night gas station and mini-mart with a pay phone. The clerk is a plump Hispanic woman with hoop earrings. I smile at her through bulletproof glass and ask for a Pepsi and five dollars in quarters.

My first call is to Omar's cell phone. He answers on the first ring.

"Pete, is that you?"

"Yeah, its me." I sip the Pepsi.

"What?"

"It's me!" I shout. Inside the mini-mart, the Hispanic woman shoots me a puzzled glance. I give her what I hope is a reassuring smile.

"Where are you, man?" bellows Omar.

"Gas station near the pool hall."

"You want me to come and get you?"

"No. I mean, you can't. I'm gonna have people on my rear for a little while, so you need to keep your distance, okay?"

"People on your..." Omar pauses. "What is this, man? Who were those dudes?"

There's a beep in my ear. I pump two more quarters into the phone. "Look, I really can't explain right now. I'm on a pay phone. What happened to you after we left?"

"I went out the back," say Omar. "Got the car, tailed you for a little while. Then the driver started doin' some crazy shit - making weird turns and stuff. I had to back off, and then I lost you. But it kinda looked like you were headed towards the warehouse

district on the East side.”

I drink a little more of the soda. “You call anyone?”

“Not yet. I figured you’d be aiight. They wanted to shoot you, they woulda headed for the docks.”

“True. Look, Omar, I need you to do me a favor.”

“You need what?”

I sigh. “I need you to do me a favor!”

“Oh. Okay, what?”

“Do you know where I keep the spare keys to the Geo?”

Omar thinks about it. “Um... No.”

“They’re in that little cabinet above the microwave.” The phone beeps. I pump in another fifty cents. When did pay phones get so expensive?

“Aiight. I know where that is.”

“Okay. I need you to get the car and park it in the mall lot across the street from the Holiday Inn on Broadway and 9th. Take a cab to my house and then a cab home from downtown. I need wheels, but I might have guys on my ass and I can’t risk leading them back to the house.”

“You gonna hit me back for the cab fare?”

“Sure. But listen - I need that car there by five in the morning.”

“Five in the morning? It’s almost two. You kiddin’ me?”

“Nope.”

Omar exhales. “Aiight. You got it. But you owe me big for this one.”

“I know I do. Thanks.”

“Oh, and Pete...”

“Yeah?”

“You’d better have this shit worked out by Saturday. We’ve got a tee time, man.”

I laugh, but it feels hollow in my chest. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

I hang up the phone and glance over my shoulder. The street is empty, or at least it appears to be. But I’m not foolish enough to think I won’t be watched in the hours to come. This is Harry Mazetti we’re talking about.

I slide another fifty cents into the phone and call Steve, my nearest neighbor. He doesn’t pick up. Not surprising at two in the morning. I leave a message on his machine.

“Hey, Steve. This is Pete Lyons from down the street. I’ve been called away on, uh, a surprise vacation, and I was wondering if you could watch Boomer for a couple days. Oh, and there’s another dog at my house right now named Peaches, so feed her, too. I didn’t name her. I promise. The food’s in the normal place. Okay. Thanks! Bye.”

I hang up. Hopefully, he’s not in Europe or something.

One more call to make. I load two more quarters from my rapidly shrinking stack into the phone and dial what I hope is the right number. After five long rings, just when I’m beginning to think no one’s home, a breathless Rachel Peterson answers.

“Hello? Who is this? Mr. Lyons, is that you?”

“It’s me. I’ve got news.”

“Oh, my goodness! I came running to the phone, I just knew it was you. Who

else would be calling so late in the evening? Is my darling Peaches all right? Have you returned from-”

“She’s fine,” I interrupt. “I just got out of negotiations with the militia’s leader.”

“Good heavens. Who is this scoundrel? What’s his name?”

“Uh... Omar. His name is Omar. He’s a well-known Mexican... hombre.”

“Shame on that man!” says Rachel sternly. “Why, if I was there, I would slap him right on the-”

“Rachel,” I say, “here’s the deal. The group wants ten thousand dollars in ransom for Peaches’ safe return. I, uh, argued them down from a million. But they need it tomorrow, or else they’ll” - I scrape for inspiration - “sacrifice Peaches to their heathen gods. At dawn.”

Rachel’s intake of breath is so sharp, it sounds like a gunshot. “No!” She cries.

“I’m afraid so.”

“My - My God,” says Rachel. She sounds like she’s close to tears. “Mr. Lyons, you can’t let that happen! You must do something!”

I try to sound soothing. “Ma’am, the men in charge have assured me that if they receive the money, Peaches will go free.”

“Well, then I’ll send it. How much was it? Ten thousand?”

“Yes.”

The phone beeps, and I insert two more quarters.

On the other end of the line, Rachel is growing more and more incensed. “I’ll deposit it as soon as the banks open. I’ll send more if you need it. I’ll call the Mexican police! I’ll call Interpol! I’ll-”

“Just the ten thousand should do it for now,” I say. “Hopefully, I can obtain Peaches and fly back to the states in the next forty-eight hours.”

If I live that long.

“Fine. Wonderful. Mr. Lyons, bring her home to me. Please bring Peaches home.”

“I will.”

“You’re a great man, Mr. Lyons.” She sounds like she means it.

“Um... sure.”

“Good-bye.”

“Bye.”

I hang up the phone, feeling like the scum of the earth. Extorting large sums of money from brain-damaged elderly women is not only morally repugnant, but also illegal in more ways than I can count. It’s certainly illegal enough to get me sued, and most probably illegal enough to land me in jail for a long time. But then again, jail is the least of my worries right now. And I very well might need the cash to grease the wheels of my Mad Max investigation. As I pocket my last few quarters and toss back the remainder of the Pepsi, I vow to pay back Rachel Peterson. Assuming I make it through this mess alive.

I wave goodnight to the clerk at the mini-mart, who ignores me, and strike out down 9th street. Traffic is practically nonexistent. Only a few cars pass me as I hurry down the sidewalk. None of them are dark sedans with tinted windows. None of them contain Bobby, or Rick, or even Gino. But still, I jump every time one rolls by, and wonder if anybody inside is watching me. Probably just paranoid. Probably.

It's only two blocks to the Holiday Inn at 9th and Broadway. I cover them quickly. Across the street is the Seaview Mall. It's flanked by two massive parking lots. Right now, there are only a few cars in the parking lots - probably security staff - and no blue Geo Metros.

I walk into the Holiday Inn. It smells like paint. The clerk at the desk is in his twenties, with red hair, freckles and an aggravatingly sunny disposition.

"Room for you, sir?" he asks.

"Yep." Man, I hate being called 'sir.'

"Okey-doke." The kid punches buttons on his computer, continuing to speak as he works. "Our pool hours are seven a.m. to seven p.m. We also offer a continental breakfast starting at six-thirty. The breakfast features fresh fruit, cereal, a self-serve waffle maker..."

I hold up a hand and he trails off. "Just need a place to grab some sleep."

The clerk gives me a sympathetic smile. "Tough night?"

"You have no idea."

"Very well, sir. Your total will be \$72.50."

I've got eighty bucks in cash. I hand it over, and the chipper desk guy hands me a card key. Room 405. I trudge up three flights of stairs and locate the room. It's right across the hall from the ice machine. Convenient.

I pull the door to the room shut behind me and secure the chain lock, almost laughing with the hopelessness of the action. If Harry Mazetti wants to barge in and kill me, there's no way a three-inch brass chain is gonna stop him. I unholster the .45 and place it on the nightstand. Within reach, just in case. I set the alarm on the clock radio

for 5:00.

The bed is lumpy and uncomfortable, but at this point, I'm way past caring. I slip away in seconds, and dream of nothing.

II

At 5:30, I'm showered, dressed, in the Geo Metro, still exhausted, and buying coffee from a drive-thru McDonald's. The coffee is strong and good, the service at the drive-thru passable. Yet, somehow, it fails to improve my mood. Steaming cardboard cup in hand, I turn Northward and head for the Peterson estate.

The light is ethereal - there, and yet not there. Ocean City is resting in a murky twilight state, clinging to night while anticipating the morning. As I cruise North, feathery wisps of fog cling to the edges of my headlight beams. The roads are nearly empty.

I'm almost sure I'm being followed - a blue pickup truck hangs behind me for a mile or so, then turns off and is replaced by a light red coupe - but it doesn't bother me. It's what I expected. For the next forty-eight hours, I get to feel famous. The radio plays "House of the Rising Sun," but I don't feel like singing along. Too early.

I park a quarter-mile from the Peterson house and hike up the long, sloping drive to the estate entrance. Mist hangs low over the Peterson's spacious lawn. Cement cupids lurk in the semidark like overly cute demons of hell. I find the spot where Claire and I had agreed to meet, and stand with my arms crossed. Mr. Business. My stomach growls. Should've picked up a sausage biscuit or something.

At five to six, I hear her coming - light, hurried footfalls, approaching from my right along the wrought iron fence. She crests a hill and comes into view. Claire looks like hell. Her eyes are rimmed in red, her hair wildly perched on her head. She's wearing jeans and a tank top. I can almost feel the fatigue radiating from her body.

“Did you find her?” Claire asks in a half whisper, while still several feet away.

“Nope. No one seems to know anything about Sheri Pao.”

She stops next to me, produces a pack of Marlboro reds, and lights one. I watch her as she puffs. Her hands are shaking.

“But let me tell you what I did find out,” I say casually, ticking off items on my fingers. “One - I found out that your house is being watched, for reasons about which I can only speculate, by Harry Mazetti. Two - I found out that Mazetti really, really doesn’t like it when someone throws a wrench in his plans. And three - I suspect that you are most likely a prostitute yourself.”

Claire’s eyes widen a bit.

“Last but not least,” I continue, “it turns out that you have lied to me a whole hell of a lot.”

Claire stiffens, the cigarette glued to her lips.

I sigh. “Now maybe you didn’t think you were doing any harm by not giving me the whole story. But let me explain something - you tossed me out there into a situation I didn’t fully understand, and because of that, my life is now hanging by a thread. So I’m gonna need you to tell me everything you know about Mad Max. Right now.”

Claire shakes her head. “I...” Her eyes flick nervously from side to side.

Suddenly, her body tenses. She wheels and sprints towards the house.

I’m ready for her. Within two steps, I’ve caught up. I grab her arm. She bites me, hard, and tries to struggle free. I hang on, cursing under my breath.

“No! No! I can’t! I’ll scream!”

Claire thrashes wildly, her nails bared. My windbreaker protects me from the

worst of the damage, but she catches me on the neck a little. It stings. Trying to keep my distance as best as possible, I hold her by her shirt and catch a pressure point behind her ear. I squeeze hard. She stops struggling and sinks to her knees.

“Ow! Ow! Fuck, what are you... OW!”

“Okay, look,” I say. “I’m not fucking around here. I need to know everything you can tell me about Mad Max, or else I’m a dead man. Now, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. Which is it gonna be?” God, I sound like a Clint Eastwood movie.

Claire whimpers and claws weakly at the hand applying the pressure.

“Do you want me to let you go?” I ask.

“Ow!... Yes! Fine! Fuck!”

I let go of the pressure point, tense in case she decides to take off again. But Claire doesn’t spring to her feet. Instead, she slumps to the ground and pulls her knees to her chest. Tears spring from the corners of her eyes and run down her face, streaking her cheeks with mascara runoff. She shakes, then shivers, then heaves as her small frame is racked by uncontrollable sobs.

Aw, jeez.

“I don’t know what to do!” Claire exclaims through her tears. “I... I don’t know what to do! It’s not fair!”

I sink wearily to a crouch and try to inject sympathy into my voice. She may have unintentionally marked me for death, but she’s still just a kid. “Look, Claire. Why don’t you just tell me what’s going on?”

Her sobs slow, but the tears continue to flow copiously from her bloodshot eyes.

“I can’t.”

“I might be able to help with whatever it is.”

More tears. “Trust me. You can’t.”

“I might. And I’m sort of already into this Mad Max thing.”

Claire rolls into a sitting position and eyes me resentfully, nose running. “You’ve got no fuckin’ idea, man.”

“You’re right, I don’t.” I meet her gaze. “So why don’t you tell me?”

Claire’s silent for a moment. Watching her mull over her next move, I realize with a start that it’s daytime. The sun has begun its crawl over the horizon. The mist that had hovered ominously over the lawn is burned away. Birds are singing in the elm trees that line the estate, and the air is no longer damp and chilly. Pleasantville.

“All right, fuck it,” says Claire at last. “It’s all fucked up anyhow.”

“What is?”

She sniffs and wipes her face angrily, smudging the thick, mascara-laced tear tracks. “This whole thing. I don’t even know where to start.”

“Why don’t you start at the beginning. How’d you get into hooking?”

She sighs. “It was... Shit, probably a year and a half ago. I needed money.”

I must look incredulous, because she sounds defensive as she continues. “Yeah, that’s right. My family’s got fucking millions, and I never saw any of it because Rachel hates my guts. I mean, she was starting to lose it by that point, too, but mostly she just didn’t like me, and Dad was never here, so, y’know, no allowance or anything.”

Claire’s first cigarette was lost in our tussle. She produces another and lights it with a trembling hand.

“What made it real bad,” she says after a second, “was being broke in fucking

private school. It was like, day in and day out, people would rub it in my face how fucked up my situation was. I was constantly surrounded by these little rich girls showing off their thousand dollar handbags and their new Porsches, and I didn't even have fucking lunch money. It pissed me off. God, it pissed me off so bad. So I quit going to school."

"You mom - Rachel - she was okay with that?"

Claire laughs humorlessly. "I don't think she even noticed. Or if she did, she didn't care."

The cigarette seems to have helped Claire regain her composure. Her hands are no longer shaky. Her eyes are red but dry.

"So I'd spend most of my time downtown. All I really wanted was a job, so I could have some spending money. But no one'll hire you when you're sixteen without talking to your parents first. So I stayed broke and just kind of hung around."

She pauses and puffs. "And then one day I'm trying to score some food from this diner, and this old dude sees me. He buys me lunch. I'm not used to people being nice to me, so I open up a little and bitch about not having money, and he tells me about this operation he runs. And he asks me if maybe I'd be interested in being one of his girls.

"At first, I was like 'no fucking way.' but then I started to think - which is better, really - being broke and hanging around doing nothing, or being loaded and hanging around and occasionally fucking some dude? Plus, this old guy was really nice."

"What was this guy's name?"

Claire smiles a little. "Romeo. I don't know if that was his real name, but that's always what he had us call him. He was pretty cool."

“Claire,” I say, “the guy was whoring out teenagers. That’s not cool.”

“Whatever, man.” She glares at me. “It’s not like he forced us to do anything. We were all there by choice. Romeo gave me a fucking chance when no one else would. And he showed me more love than my own fucking mom. So in my book he’s okay.”

Fair enough. I guess.

“So where does Sheri Pao come into it?” I ask. “Assuming that she actually exists and you weren’t just yanking my chain.”

“Fuck you. Sheri’s real.”

“Prove it. You’ve lied to me an awful lot.”

Claire sighs. “Sheri worked a block over from me, in front of that titty bar. Just like I fuckin’ told you. We used to get coffee at the Burger King every day. I know it doesn’t sound like much, but it really meant a lot to me that she was friendly. I... I wasn’t really used to people being friendly.

“Sheri was... Well, she was real smart. And always working on her English. Trying to get better. When I first started, she couldn’t really say anything - Y’know, she could moan like a pro, but not really anything else. But a year later, she was pretty much fluent, and reading poetry and shit. She used to carry around these big poetry books and try to get me interested in them. I didn’t really care, but she loved it. She was a big fan of, uh... What’s his name... The ‘Grecian Urn’ guy...”

“Yeats?”

She shrugs. “Sure. Like I said, I didn’t care much. Point is, Sheri was, like, the smartest person I’ve ever met. And she was nice as fuck, and she was the only real friend I’ve had in years.”

Her cigarette hand is shaking again. I wonder if Claire and Sheri were really nothing more than friends.

“Go on,” I say.

“So for while, like a year or so, that’s just how it was. Me and Sherri working, Romeo collecting, everything cool. I finally had some money. I could buy the things I wanted. And I had some people around who actually gave a shit about me.”

As she speaks, some of the tension leaves her face. I can tell she’s remembering this period of her life fondly. On the streets by choice, with pimps and pros as her only friends. I try to remember what made me happy when I was sixteen: a good report card, maybe, or getting a couple hits on the JV baseball team. Sheesh.

“So what happened?”

She stubs the cigarette out on the moist grass and flicks the butt into a nearby bush. “Beats the fuck outta me, man. One day, this dude rolls up and asks for the cash. It’s not Romeo - it’s some Mexican guy. And so I’m like, ‘fuck you, man, Romeo’s the only one that gets that shit.’ And then this dickweed pulls out a gun and points it at me, and tells me that Romeo’s not in charge anymore. At that point, I didn’t really have a fuckin’ choice, so I gave him the money. And he counted it and told me I’m short, which is fuckin’ impossible. But he had that gun. So I gave him some of my cut, and he said it still wasn’t enough.” She swallows. “In the end, he... made me get in the car, and, y’know, *do* stuff before he would go. I kept hoping Romeo would show up and kick this guy’s ass, but no one came. No one.”

A breeze ripples the lawn. The sun is warm on my back.

“When it was over,” Claire says after a while, “he gave me this note.

Handwritten, like the one you saw. All it said was 'Don't try to leave.' Signed by Mad Max."

"So Mad Max is a Mexican guy?"

Claire looks at me angrily. "Would you let me finish, man? The next pickup day, it was a different guy, but he pulled the same shit. Same B.S. about the money, same free blowjob. The next time, it was another different guy. Same fucked-up deal. After a month of this, I'd had enough, man. It was horrible. I didn't really have any money any more, cause my cut was so small. I wanted to leave - just walk away and leave all that shit behind. I was almost eighteen, almost old enough to get a real job where I could make more money anyhow. But I was scared to go. The whole setup was fuckin' unnerving - the notes, the different delivery guys, the whole thing. I didn't know whether Mad Max was one dude or fifty dudes. But I was sure that if I tried to quit, someone would find me and shoot me."

Claire fumbles another cigarette from her pack and lights it, inhaling deeply before continuing. "It was Sheri who finally decided she'd had enough. She was the brave one. She... She said she finally felt good enough about her English to try for a real job, and that now was as good a time as any." Claire puffs harder at the cigarette.

"So she left?"

"We left together. We agreed never to come back, and just, y'know, lay low for a while."

"So she skipped town?"

Claire shakes her head. "You don't understand. We still wanted to see each other. I mean, we were friends, right? Best friends. So before we parted ways or whatever, we

agreed to meet up in three days at this diner on the South side.”

The cigarette is half gone.

“So this was” - Claire thinks - “two weeks ago last Saturday. I took a cab down South. I was half an hour early, but I didn’t mind waiting, cause I was so fuckin’ excited about seeing her and making sure she was okay. We were gonna do actual friend stuff, man. Go to movies, go to concerts, not just get crappy coffee in between fucks. I was... I dunno... looking forward to having a normal life for once, I guess. I got a booth and waited. And waited, and waited, and waited. I drank like fifteen cups of coffee and sat there like a moron for an hour and a half. She never showed up.” She stares at me. “Don’t you see, man? Don’t you fuckin’ see? Mad Max got her. He killed her, and He’s gonna kill me, too.”

I can see the tears welling once more in her eyes, so I try to seem consoling.

“Look, kid. Maybe she just left town. Or got a job somewhere else.”

Claire shakes her head sadly. “No way. She wouldn’t do that to me. She’d let me know. I’ve been too scared to even leave the grounds since then. I can’t fuckin’ sleep. I can’t eat. I’m so scared that someone is going to kill me like they... Like they killed her!”

This sends her over the edge again. Tears forge new paths down her pitted cheeks as she sobs quietly into her hands. I let her regain control. My tired brain is working over her story, looking for holes.

“So you don’t leave the grounds anymore?” I ask after a few moments.

“N... No.”

I raise an eyebrow. “How do you get your cigarettes?”

“The housekeeper sneaks them to me.”

She looks too miserable to be lying. But something still isn't quite clicking in my mind. A wisp of something...

Then it hits me.

“Claire,” I say with a renewed sense of urgency. “Focus for me. The Mad Max note that was in your room, the one that I saw when I was here on Monday - when did you get it?”

“I... I dunno. Like a week ago, maybe.”

“And you haven't left the grounds in two weeks, which means it came here. To the house.”

“Yeah.” She sniffs. “It was stuck in with the mail. Who cares?”

“You obviously don't read a lot of crime fiction.”

“A lot of what?”

“Crime fiction. You know, detective novels.” She looks positively flabbergasted. I shake my head. “Never mind. But look, I need to know something. In all your days on the street, and all your months of hooking, who did you tell about yourself?”

“What?”

I sigh in exasperation. “You, yourself. Your real name, your family, who you are. Who knew all that?”

She's silent. I bend down and look into her eyes. “Claire, this is very important. You need to tell me who, if anyone, knew who you were.”

Her eyes turn down and her lips move. Her words are barely audible. “Sheri knew. Nobody else.”

“Sheri knew your name.”

She nods.

“She knew about your family.”

“Yes.”

I glance at my watch. It’s 6:37 in the morning, and for the first time in quite a while, I feel like I kind of understand what’s going on. I stand and roll my shoulders, feeling the muscles stretch and the joints pop. Maybe, with some hard work and some luck, I can live to see the weekend after all.

“One last thing,” I say to Claire, who’s still sitting on the grass, nursing the last of her second cigarette. “Where’s your dad right now?”

She looks at me glumly. “How the hell is my dad gonna help you?”

“That’s for him to know and me to find out.”

I extend a hand towards her, and after a moment, Claire grabs it and pulls herself upright. She tells me what I need to know, then walks slowly back towards the house. I watch her until she disappears over one of the rolling hills that punctuate the lawn, then turn and hike back to the metro.

The .45 feels heavy on my hip.

III

“For too long, we’ve let the unions dominate the way our companies are run. For too long, managing executives have had no choice but to sit and watch their businesses suffer as the California government - your government, my government - passed legislation after legislation restricting their practices far beyond what is practicable and what is right. The state representatives seem to think that the unions are infallible. But while these politicians continually accrue more rights for the so-called working man, they’re blind to the fact that our economy is suffering and our businesses are struggling to stay afloat. California jobs are being sent overseas to cut costs. The unemployment rate is rising. Can’t anybody in government see that padding worker’s rights is having exactly the opposite effect they desire, while crippling our free market at the same time?”

Tom Peterson’s voice, which had risen in a booming crescendo, now drops to a near whisper. “Well, let me tell you something. I see it. I see how businesses based in California - your businesses - are suffering. And I promise that if you vote to give me the governor’s seat, I’ll work tirelessly to achieve a more workable equilibrium between workers and administrators. I’ve got a plan that will address the needs of workers everywhere without forgetting about our economy. My friends and statesmen, I know that times are tough right now, but if I win that seat in November, I promise you - better days are on the horizon. Thank you.”

The Ramada Inn banquet room breaks out into thunderous applause. The hundred or so men in suits and jackets, here for a meeting of the Ocean City business bureau, rise to their feet as Tom Peterson steps down from the podium at the head of the chamber.

Peterson has a smile glued to his face as he pumps hands with a dozen people or more on his way to the rear exit.

I'm standing by the buffet table, sipping punch and trying to look like I belong. I'm wearing an expensive dark suit, purchased at Men's Warehouse not an hour before, as camouflage (thank you, Rachel Peterson). The .45, loaded with fresh ammunition from Wal-Mart, is hidden pretty well by my jacket. I feel a little like James Bond. I wonder if my punch was shaken or stirred.

Tom Peterson continues to gladhand his way down the aisle to the exit. People are still applauding. I can't blame them. There's no gumshoe union, so I don't really have any strong opinions on labor laws, but there's no denying that Peterson is a captivating speaker. He projected genuine empathy, keeping his eyes out of his notes and on the audience. A born politician.

As he nears the exit, I drain the last of my punch and move to intercept. Peterson is flanked by two bodyguards, who are keeping tabs on the hand shakers. One of the bodyguards is big and bald, and the other one is wiry, with long, blond hair. A brawler and a shooter. The brawler watches me as I approach his boss.

"Mr. Peterson," I say, shaking the smiling man's hand. "That was an excellent speech."

"Well, thank you very much. I'm glad you enjoyed it. Remember me in November, okay?"

He tries to pull his hand away, but I keep a firm grip. "Mr. Peterson, do you have some time to talk this afternoon? You know, a private chat with one of your most enthusiastic constituents?"

He tries again to escape the handshake, still smiling. I hold firm. “That’s really not -”

“Perhaps I should introduce myself,” I interrupt. “My name’s Peter Lyons. I’m with Mad Max Industrials. We’re big fans.”

Tom Peterson continues to smile, but his cheeks blanch. “Well, in that case,” he says, after a tense half-second, “why don’t you stop by my hotel later. The Elms Courts, top floor suite. Three o’ clock. I don’t want to see you before then.”

“Sounds good. Enjoy your afternoon.”

I release his hand and withdraw into the crowd, which is condensed around the buffet. Peterson, looking cheerfully stricken, greets one or two more businessmen before allowing his bodyguards to escort him out the door. I watch him go and help myself to a finger sandwich. It’s not bad.

After about twenty minutes, the luncheon crowd begins to dissipate. I chow down on a couple more sandwiches - no sense letting them go to waste - and meander down three flights of stairs and out of the hotel. I’m on the North side, near the airport, in a commercial district dominated by hotels. The day is warm and the sun is bright. My car is parked two blocks away. By the time I reach it, my skin under the expensive suit is slick with sweat, and I’m cursing the name of whoever thought up men’s formal wear.

I crank the metro’s meager air conditioning and pull into traffic. Half a block behind me, a blue sports car follows suit, but I don’t panic. I’ve gotten used to having my own personal paparazzi.

Traffic is minimal as I cruise on the interstate back to the Holiday Inn. The sports car tails me the whole way, departing only when I turn into the hotel parking lot. I take

the side stairs to my room, and keep a hand on my gun as I open the door, but there's no one waiting to ambush me. I check the bathroom and the shower, then peer at the phone cord and scour the corners of the room for bugs. Nothing. I relax and sit on the edge the bed. The digital clock on the night stand tells me that it's 12:45 PM.

I pick up the phone and dial Jenny's cell. It rings four times before going to voicemail. I wait for the beep.

"Hey, Jen. It's Pete. Sorry to cancel on you so late in the game, but I'm hung up on some work stuff, and I'm not gonna be able to make it this afternoon. I'm really sorry. I was looking forward to catching up. I'll, uh, give you a call when this is all worked out. Hopefully we can get something together before you have to leave town. Okay? Sorry again. Bye."

I hang up the phone and lay back wearily on the bed. The suit isn't comfortable. Then again, if I wanted comfort I would've bought pajamas.

I think of Jenny. For all I know, she's already at the East side Starbucks, drinking expensive coffee and waiting for me to show up. I can see her in my mind's eye, sipping, checking her watch, sipping some more. Waiting for someone who's not coming. I wish I could be there. In fact, I feel like I swallowed a brick, I'm so guilty about standing her up. But I can't risk leading Mazetti or his men to anything that I care about. Especially her.

The air conditioner clicks and whirrs to life. It's a pleasant white noise. The bed is warm and comforting, especially after the stressful night and early morning. My mind drifts as my eyelids start to shut. I think about Claire Peterson, seventeen years old and waiting for the only friend she remembers having to show up at a South side diner.

Drinking coffee - fifteen cups of coffee - and waiting for someone who's not coming. Sipping, checking her watch, sipping some more. Jenny and Claire Peterson, sipping and waiting. Waiting for someone who isn't coming. Their two faces start to become one face, waiting for somebody. Waiting for me. Sipping, checking their watches, sipping...

Sipping, waiting...

I jerk awake. The air conditioner is still humming. I consult the clock radio and realize with a start that it's nearly 2:30. Holy shit. I almost slept through my own investigation. What a fantastic private eye. Joints creaking, blinking sleep from my eyes, I stumble into the bathroom and splash water on my face. I feel groggy and dull. Too old for this business.

The car's where I left it. I crawl in and putter off towards the Elms Court Hotel, which is right in the center of downtown. I've never been inside, but I understand the place is pretty ritzy. Nothing less than the best for Tom Peterson.

I arrive at ten to three, find parking three blocks away, and brave another trek through the spring heat in my three-piece Italian pressure cooker. The Elms Court building is a forty-story behemoth of brownstone. Ornate gardens line the double sidewalk outside the hotel. At the entrance is a uniformed doorman, who nods as he opens the door for me. Class.

The lobby of the hotel is spectacularly done. In the middle of an ornately patterned marble floor is a fountain shaped like a cube. Chandeliers dangle from the domed ceiling, which is inlaid with intricate cobwebs of beaten metal. The hotel's palette is all mahogany and ebony and brass. I stop for a moment and take it in. After all, I might very well be dead soon, so I'd better marvel at things while I can.

No one stops me as I make my way across the lobby to a bank of elevators. I press the up button and wait. After about thirty seconds, one of the elevator doors slides open. Inside is an honest-to-God elevator attendant, a heavysset blonde woman in a uniform that matches the doorman's. Huh. I've never seen one before.

"What floor, sir?" she asks as I step into the car.

"Top floor suite."

"The top floor suite?" She gives me the eye. "Are you expected?"

I give her a friendly smile. "More like dreaded."

Apparently deciding I look trustworthy, she smiles back. "Alrighty then. Up we go."

The attendant presses the button for the fortieth floor. The car jerks and begins to rise. As we soar upwards, she speaks quietly into a walky-talky.

"Guest coming up, Mr. Peterson."

She gets a burst of static and something unintelligible in return. This must be the expected response, because she nods at me in an encouraging manner.

At the fortieth floor, the elevator dings, and the car doors slide smoothly open. I step out, wave goodbye to the blonde woman, and start down a short corridor lined with art prints and end tables. At the end of the hallway is a single door. There's no room number on it. It just says "suite." I smooth out the jacket of my expensive suit and make sure the snap on the .45 holster is undone. Deep breath - in, out.

I knock on the door. Time to get some answers.

IV

The brawler bodyguard opens the door, scowling and looking for all the world like Lurch from *The Addams Family*. I half expect him to moan. Instead, he grunts and stands aside to allow me entrance to the suite. I slide briskly past, careful not to let him entirely out of my sight. The brawler grunts again and closes the door.

The suite is even swankier than I anticipated. A short, broad hallway leads to a pushily carpeted living room, lined with bay windows that overlook the harbor. To my left, a half-wall sections off a kitchen that looks, at a glance, like something you'd find in a five-star restaurant. Doors which must lead to the bedroom and bath are inlaid to my right. In the center of the room, flanked by two small potted trees, is a semicircular leather sofa. On the sofa is Tom Peterson. He looks very unhappy.

I keep my eyes peeled for the shooter bodyguard as I slog my way through the thick carpet towards the senator. Finally, I spot him loitering near the rear of the room, between two of the big bay windows. It's a good position. If I tried to make a move on him, I'd be shooting into the sun.

I sit down across from Tom Peterson, who has loosened his tie since I last saw him. Absent is his politician's grin. His face is instead lined with worry. He lowers his eyebrows at me as he speaks.

“What else do you assholes want? What else can I possibly give you?”

I cross my legs gingerly, careful not restrict access to my gun. “I don't know what you mean.”

Tom Peterson rises to his feet. “Don't fuck with me, asshole. I've done

everything you've asked and more. Why don't you jackasses just let off for one second? One lousy fucking second? Is five hundred grand not enough for you fucking leeches?"

I raise my hands in what I hope is a calming way. "Senator, you don't understand. I don't want anything but a quick little chat. See, I fibbed a little before. I'm not actually in the industrials industry. I'm a private detective. And for the past couple days, I've been detecting my way further and further down this river of shit you're drowning in."

Tom Peterson's jaw flops open. He sinks back into his seat. When he speaks, his voice has lost its booming quality. "You're... You're a what?"

"A private detective. Investigator. Gumshoe."

"And you know about -"

I cut him off. "I know this and that about some things, not too much about others. I need to fill in the gaps. And you're going to help me do it."

"A fucking investigator?" Peterson says.

"And a charmer to boot."

"Listen, Mr. -"

"Lyons."

"Whatever." Peterson regains some bravado. "The last thing I need right now is some goofball P.I. trying to dig up dirt on me right before an election. I don't know who sent you, I don't care what you want, I don't know what the hell you were talking about at the luncheon this afternoon, and I certainly will not tolerate you being in my hotel room. Rodney, get him out of here. And make sure you check him for a wire."

He thinks I'm bluffing. Time to tip my hand.

"Okay," I say as the brawler takes a step towards me, "but here's what I know. I

know that your daughter, Claire, is - was - a hooker. And I know that she is currently employed by a somewhat nebulous organization of pimps and thugs that call themselves Mad Max. That's all stuff I can prove. And if you threaten me again, I'll take it to the cops."

"Rodney, stop." The color is gone from Tom Peterson's face. The brawler freezes, looking disappointed.

I continue, sounding as casual as I can while keeping an eye on both bodyguards. "Here's what I suspect. I suspect that Mad Max discovered Claire's identity and decided to put the squeeze on you. You paid them to keep your daughter's indiscretions off the record. Sounds like you paid them quite a bit." I pretend to think. "What was it? Five hundred grand so far?" I give a low whistle. "That's a lot of money, senator."

Peterson is quivering with a combination of fear and rage. "Who... the hell... sent you?"

I shrug. "Who cares? The important thing for you is that it's in my client's best interest if this whole Mad Max thing gets sorted out soon. I'm here to help you fix what you can't fix on your own."

"Mr. Lyons, you'd better tell me what your angle is, or else - "

"Look, sir," I interrupt again. "Are you familiar expression 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth?' You're getting bled for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Your political career is one phone call away from the shitter. Your daughter is a goddamn prostitute. And here I come, a qualified professional offering to help you fix the situation, and you're trying to get all disagreeable with me. Be reasonable, Senator."

Peterson glares at me. A few seconds tick by. "If what you say is true - and I'm

not saying it is - how do I know that you won't turn around and ride me twice as hard when Mad Max is dealt with?"

"Because I'm as pure as Galahad. And because you don't really have a choice."

For a couple seconds, he continues to quiver, his fierce blue eyes searching mine. Then, suddenly, the fight in him is gone. Peterson blinks, shrugs, and sinks back into his chair.

"Fuck," he says.

I couldn't have put it any better myself.

"So we can talk?"

"We can talk."

"Good decision. But get rid of Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum." I gesture at the brawler and the shooter, who's still lurking in the rear of the chamber. "They make me nervous."

"They should." Peterson waves a hand dejectedly. "Rodney, Marco, go stand in the hall. You hear trouble, you know what to do."

The two bodyguards leave. Marco, the shooter, gives me a stern look as he ambles past. I try not to whimper.

The senator uses the first two fingers of each hand to massage his graying temples. For a few minutes after the gruesome twosome has left, he remains silent. I let him think.

"First things first," he says at last. "Anything I tell you today is off the record. Absolutely. Can I trust you enough to talk candidly?"

"Sure."

“You don’t have any kind of recording device?”

“Just a gun.”

“The preferable option in my line of work.” He sighs, concludes his four-fingered massage, and raises his head to look at me. “So what do you think I can tell you? It sounds like you’ve pretty much got it figured out.”

“I’d just like to hear your side of the story.”

He sighs wearily. “Story hour, huh? Well there’s not much to tell. I was contacted by Mad Max about two weeks ago. Someone handed me a handwritten note at a convention, dashed off into the crowd before I could catch a glimpse of their face.”

“What’d the note say?”

He frowns. “It was like something out of a movie. Like, ‘Call or else,’ something like that, with a phone number.”

“And you responded? That seems kind of vague.”

“I didn’t at first. But at my next campaign function, I got an identical note. And then another one came in the mail. In my private mail, not the stuff my campaign manager handles. So I finally called and talked to some guy, and he told me... about Claire.”

I relax slightly. The sofa is really comfortable. Probably costs as much as my car, too.

“What did the man you talked to sound like?”

He shakes his head. “I... I don’t really remember. He might’ve had a hint of an Hispanic accent, but I was so unnerved by what he was saying that I couldn’t really focus.”

“How much did he ask for?”

“A hundred grand a week.”

“And then they called back and wanted more.”

“Kind of.” Peterson grimaces. They contacted me again a week later and asked that I make a two hundred thousand dollar donation to the Ocean City Police Department. So I did. Still don’t understand why those assholes would want the cops to have a bigger budget.”

I shrug. “Easy. You’re paying Mad Max’s bribes for them.”

“Shit.” Peterson looks mournfully at the floor. “Yeah, you’re probably right. I’ve spent my whole career fighting organized crime and police corruption. Now I’m a part of it.”

“Looks like.”

We’re silent for a few moments. Outside, through the large windows, I can see a breeze disturbing the ocean. There are people milling on the boardwalk, but they’re too small to make out clearly. My eyes are drawn inexorably to the limitless blue expanse of the sea, stretching to infinity and the horizon.

“Tell me about Claire,” I say.

Peterson looks up. “What about her?”

“It’s not every senator’s daughter that moonlights as a streetwalker. Give me some background.”

The senator narrows his eyes. “What’s that have to do with Mad Max?”

“Maybe everything, maybe nothing. I told you, I’m just filling in holes.”

“You never said who you were working for.”

“Nope.”

He gives me a discerning look, but then, like a drowning man too spent to swim to shore, decides to let it go.

“Claire’s my only daughter,” he says. “She’s always been bright. Very bright. She read at a sixth grade level when she was seven, skipped the fourth grade, always had straight A’s in everything. All the way up through middle school, straight A’s on every report card. Smart goddamn kid. And she was always so nice. Real attached to me. Always happy, always smiling. Nice kid.”

The senator’s eyes are telescoping like camera lenses sliding out of focus. “For her tenth birthday, we went on a cruise to the Galapagos islands. She went to the library every day for a week and read up on the tortises and the Komodo dragons, and then logged every one we saw in her journal. I was so proud... My little scientist...”

He sighs. “But anyhow. When Claire was in eighth grade, I was elected to the state senate. The campaign was rough. My opponents hassled my family with baseless accusations, and invaded our personal lives in the public eye. I think there were even doctored indecent photographs of me in supermarket tabloids at some point.”

He clears his throat. “Thinking back on it now, I think that first campaign may have affected Rachel - Rachel’s my wife - although I guess you probably know that. I think that time was really rough on her. And then, of course, after the election, I went to Sacramento for nine months. I wanted Rachel and Claire to make the move with me, but neither one of them were for it, and I didn’t have the heart to make Claire change schools. So I went alone, and served my term, and came back. And everything was different.”

Through the bay windows, I can see gray clouds gathering over the endless ocean,

coagulating in preparation for an afternoon storm. “Different how?” I ask.

Peterson shakes his head slowly, looking more and more despondent. “Rachel was different. She had always been so on top of things... Always organized, always the one in charge, a member of every club and committee. Suddenly, she had quit all the social gatherings, all the clubs - pretty much cut off all of her contact with the outside world. And she was constantly forgetting things, which was not like her at all. I felt like she was losing her grip on reality.”

“How did your wife’s behavior towards your daughter change?”

He breathes out. “That was the most shocking part of all. Rachel had always been a loving, caring mother. Now she was lashing out at Claire for the most trivial things, things that weren’t Claire’s fault in the slightest.” He thinks for a moment. “I remember one time, my first trip home from Sacramento, she asked Claire to retrieve her purse. So Claire did. Then my wife forgot about the whole thing and began looking for the purse where it had originally been. She couldn’t find it, naturally, and then she screamed at Claire and accused her of stealing. She was threatening to revoke Claire’s allowance when I had to step in.”

“So she was behaving irrationally?”

“Absolutely.”

I cock an eyebrow. “Forgive me for being thick, senator, but why didn’t you get your wife help?”

Peterson gives a hollow laugh. “You must not be familiar with politics. It’s like...” - he thinks for a moment - “Being a gazelle on the Serengeti, with lions watching you around the clock. One sign of weakness, and you’re finished.” He draws a finger

grimly across his throat.

“Getting your wife psychiatric help makes you weak?”

“Absolutely. The press would be all over me, blaming, pointing fingers, slinging mud. Remember Bill Clinton? Impeached and dragged through town by his nuts for a two minute lapse with an intern.” He shakes his head. “That’s just how it is. When you’re in politics, you have to be perfectly normal. All the time. End of story. A smiling, happy wife, a smiling, happy kid, a dog and a white picket fence, or else it’s a shitstorm. If Rachel went to see a shrink, that would be the end of my career.”

I shake my head. “With all due respect, Senator, that’s bullshit. Bill Clinton didn’t just have a little tryst with an employee. He perjured himself, which is a federal crime. As I’m sure you know. And even that wasn’t enough to get his ass impeached. Hundreds of people in positions of power see a therapist every day, without the press or public catching wind. So forgive me if I don’t quite believe you.”

Peterson looks at me. I look at him. He blinks first.

“C’mon, Senator,” I say after a moment. “What really happened? Why the hell can’t you just get your wife the help she needs?”

Peterson is silent for a long moment. Finally, he clears his throat and speaks. “Rachel, as a result of her illness, made some... damaging accusations against me. They had no factual basis. But just the allegations could have been damaging.”

I lean forward. “What kind of accusations?”

“Rachel claimed that I was” - he sighs - “abusive towards her. It was part of a more general paranoia, an anxiety about everything outside the home. She... wouldn’t let me sleep in the same bed as her. Locked herself in the bedroom at night. It was a

difficult situation - horrible, actually. You can't possibly know what it's like to have the woman you love be so terribly afraid of you. To have her refuse your hugs, kisses, assurances..."

I wait. Eventually, he continues. "It was very hard. But I didn't dare bring in a specialist, because if those sorts of rumors - rumors of domestic abuse - started floating around, I'd be done for. There are certain things that can ruin you, even if they never happened. Beating your wife is one of them."

He closes his eyes and breathes deeply. "In retrospect, I should've just quit. Quit politics and stayed at home to take care of my family. But I was idealistic and stupid. I thought that the good I could do for the state outweighed the harm my absence was inflicting on Rachel and Claire. So I went back to Sacramento again, and again, and dug my head in the sand further and further. And then this... this Mad Max bullshit started."

I sink further into the couch and try not to look sleepy. My eyelids are heavy, and the couch is awfully nice. "So why not scrap your campaign for governor? Say you have to focus on your family in these difficult times, yadda yadda yadda. You come out smelling like lemons, looking like the world's most concerned dad. And Mad Max is out of ammunition."

He's silent.

I sigh. "Senator?"

"I..." he starts, then pauses. "I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"I just can't." He looks up, meeting my gaze. A bit of the spark is back in his eyes. "Look, it doesn't make any difference whether I tell the world about my family's

problems or whether Mad Max does. Either way, the press will go wild and the rest of Claire's life will be ruined. I've got to keep it under wraps. And if I'm elected, I'll have access to clandestine resources that I don't right now - agencies that can help me fight this thing privately."

I shake my head. "That isn't how it works, senator. If you get elected, that just means that Mad Max has their meathooks in your power *and* your money."

Peterson snorts, frustrated. "Well, if you have a better idea, asshole, I'd love to hear about it."

I examine his face. It's tempting to cast him as the villain in this scenario. For all I know, he really did clobber his wife and willingly abandon his daughter to a life on the streets. But I don't see it that way. His anguish seems heartfelt. The heavy lines etched around his eyes betray countless hours of genuine worry. Besides, we have a shared interest in dealing with Mad Max..

"As a matter of fact," I say, "I do have a better idea. Must be your lucky day. How good are your two goons out there?"

"Rodney and Marco? Great. They've been with me for years."

"Good. I'm gonna need them to help. Now, listen closely."

To his credit, Tom Peterson listens intently. He never interrupts. As I lay out my plans, I see nervous apprehension in his haggard face. But when I'm done, all he does is nod, slowly, like he knows that he has no better choice. Which, as a matter of fact, he doesn't.

It's almost five-thirty when the senator finally picks up the phone and dials. I look one last time through the big bay windows, where the storm hovering over the ocean

has gathered intensity, moving slowly, inexorably to the shore. Lightning forks the sky in the dim distance, and the murky drum roll of thunder resonates inside the penthouse hotel suite.

I'm very conscious of the hours slipping by.

V

I dial neighbor Steve's number from a pay phone near the downtown library. The night rain is coming down in sheets, and the roof of the phone kiosk has a leak perfectly placed to drench whatever poor sap is foolish enough to attempt a call. My expensive suit is soaking wet and potentially ruined, although that bothers me less than it probably should. Through a lighted window, I can see a woman in the library foyer chatting on her cell phone. Need to get me one of those.

Steve picks up on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey Steve, it's Pete Lyons. Did you get my message?"

"Oh, hey Pete. Yeah, I got it. I fed Boomer about an hour ago. And the other one, too. What's her name again?"

"Uh... Peaches."

Steve laughs. "Yeah, that's what I thought. What the hell kind of name is that for a dog?"

"A delicious one."

"What?"

A sudden gust of wind whips down the avenue, and icy water drips down my neck. I grit my teeth. "Nothing."

"Uh... Okay. When do you get back?"

"Tomorrow, I hope. I'll call when I get in. Thanks for taking care of the rat."

Steve chuckles. "Not a problem. Hope you're having a nice vacation. It's raining

here.”

“Oh, really?”

I hang up without waiting for a response and hightail it back across the street. The Ocean City Library is an imposing stone structure, complete with columns and spires, although its awesome aura is somewhat undercut by the Denny’s right next door. I chug up the big front staircase, through the revolving door and into the lobby, which is freezing, but at least dry. The woman at the front desk examines me the way you might examine something you’ve scraped off your shoe. I smile at her as I squelch my way past. She does not look amused.

The main floor of the library is a labyrinth of burgundy carpet and dark wood. It smells like knowledge, with a hint of light mold. After I was discharged, I was unemployed for about a year. I spent hours and hours in the periodicals section, poring over classified ads in newspapers I couldn’t afford, looking for work that would satisfy my lust for excitement. Obviously, none of those jobs worked out.

I thread my way through a maze of sturdy nonfiction shelves and trace a path to reading room number two, which is large and cozy. It has three long tables, each flanked by a dozen or more cushioned chairs with arms high enough to afford some privacy. Three or four people are camped out, noses buried in books. I snare a copy of yesterday’s newspaper and take a chair near the back corner of the room. My pants ooze rainwater as I sit down. Class.

At a quarter to eight, Tom Peterson comes into the room. Rodney and Marco drift in after him. Rodney looks like a brick house. Marco looks like a barracuda. Peterson, careful not to glance in my direction, grabs a magazine without looking at it and settles

into a chair near the center of the room. The gruesome twosome separate and assume seats relatively close to their boss. Everything is in place.

At eight o' clock sharp, just as I'm growing weary of skimming yesterday's headlines (turmoil in the middle east? Who would've guessed?), a man enters the reading room. He has the high collar of a rain jacket pulled up over his face, and a ball cap low over his eyes, making his features impossible to discern.

I watch the newcomer out of the corner of my eye, expecting him to take the seat opposite from Peterson. But instead, he strides briskly across the thick carpet towards the rear of the room. As he reaches the point directly behind Tom Peterson's chair, the man suddenly stumbles over his own feet. For a moment, it looks like he's about to fall. Then, miraculously, he gracefully regains his balance and wheels around. In three long strides he's made a sharp right and disappeared from view.

I look at the senator and realize that the magazine in his shaking hands has been magically replaced by a note on plain lined paper. Holy crap. I didn't see anything. The guy is good.

Marco looks to me. I nod. Marco rises from his chair and drifts purposely out the door into the library proper. I stand and move to the senator's side, leaving yesterday's paper sitting on my soaking seat.

"What's it say?" I ask.

Peterson shrugs casually, but his knuckles are white. "Nothing we didn't expect, I guess."

I take the note from him and read.

Dear Senator -

I hope you will reconsider. I would hate to have anything happen to you or your daughter. You have 24 hours to call, or everything will fall apart. That I can promise.

- Mad Max

I hand back the note. Peterson accepts it reluctantly, handling it the way you might a vial of hydrochloric acid.

“All right.” I say. “Go home, give it a couple hours, then call them back and make like you lost your nerve. Tell them what they want to hear. No point in betting your life on a gambit. You gonna be okay with just Rodney for tonight?”

Peterson nods. “Rodney’s more than enough.”

I think of Mazetti and his legions of men. “Senator, with all due respect, the entire marine corps might not be enough. Be careful.”

He nods.

I leave the senator sitting pensively in the reading room and hustle back into the library. Marco and the mystery messenger are nowhere in sight. I troll speedily back the way I came in, tracking wet footprints all the way. Eventually, I emerge into the lobby. The same woman is behind the front desk.

I approach her, charm in my eyes. “Pardon me, miss. Did my friend leave directions?”

The woman eyes me. Not impressed. “As a matter of fact, yes. A gentlemen just

a few moments ago asked me to tell his” - she smiles thinly - “*wet* friend to meet him at the East Side cafe.” She pauses. My jacket drips softly on the carpet. “I can only assume he meant you.”

“Thanks.” I raise my hand in a soggy half-salute, then turn and hustle down the front stairs, out from under the protection of the covered porch and back into the driving rain. I’m facing North. East is right. I turn in that direction and proceed down the sidewalk at a brisk walk.

I catch sight of Marco after two blocks. He’s meandering along on the far side of the street, hands in jacket, barracuda grin on his face, looking about as innocuous as a toaster in a bathtub. About a block ahead of Marco, I can just make out the dim silhouette of the mystery messenger. From time to time, he glances at his pursuer. It’s impossible to tell whether Marco’s making him nervous or not. But Marco makes me a little nervous, and we’re supposed to be teammates here.

The setup is a classic misdirection: Marco trails the messenger, being real obvious, attracting undue attention. I trail Marco. The messenger focuses on Marco to the extent that he misses me, allowing me to follow him directly to his nefarious lair. Once in the lair, I rescue the damsel and save the day, and we all live happily ever after.

The alternative, of course, is that the messenger gets wise and shoots us both. It’s good to have options, I suppose.

For five blocks, we keep up our little train - the mystery man taking the lead, Marco on his ass, and yours truly skulking along in the rear. The rain continues to pour down in sheets. I continue to get wet. Marco is wearing a fedora. He looks cool in the rain - very 1920’s. I am not wearing a fedora. I look like a drowned marmot.

At the corner of Sun Palm Drive and 21st, the mystery messenger makes a call from a pay phone. Marco camps across the street and lights a cigarette, which is really remarkable given the weather. I stay hidden in the shadows a block away.

The messenger's call is long. Too long. I watch, waiting for him to deposit the second round of quarters that I know from experience the phone must have demanded by now. But he never does. The phone call is faked. I suddenly become very aware that we're surrounded by empty warehouses. No one else is on the street. It occurs to me that, if I were looking to ambush a pursuer, this would be a great place to do it.

Marco's instincts are good. He knows when to abort. After about five minutes of aimless smoking, he flicks the stub of his cigarette into a puddle and ambles down 21st and out of sight. I breathe a sigh of relief from my position in the deep shadows. Moments later, a dark blue truck with no license plates pulls up next to the pay phone. The messenger confers briefly with whoever's inside. The truck douses its headlights and creeps down the street, tracing the path Marco walked moments ago. I stay very still and try not to drip too loudly.

When the truck is gone, the messenger strikes out again through the rain. He's walking more confidently, purposefully now that Marco is out of the picture. I drift behind him, moving from alley to alley, shadow to shadow. The rain is beginning to let up, replaced by a sodden ocean chill. A few stars are visible through the clouds overhead.

The messenger heads West along Sun Palm. After a block and a half, he turns into an alley. I wait thirty seconds and follow, my hand resting comfortably on the handle of the .45.

At the end of the alley is a chain link fence, festively adorned with a sign reading

“CAUTION! RISK OF ELECTROCUTION!” At ten o’ clock is a large metal dumpster, filled to the brim with soaking cardboard boxes. Behind the dumpster is the mystery messenger, standing in front of a reinforced door with no window and a very complicated-looking combination lock above the knob. The mystery messenger is hunched over the doorknob, punching numbers into the lock.

I take a deep breath, let it out, trying to calm my racing heart, then step purposely into open space. It takes me four long strides to cross the alley. In the middle of the second stride, the mystery messenger enters the last number into the combination lock. By the end of the third stride, the heavy door has popped open. The man hears my fourth stride echo off of the rainy pavement and wheels quickly, his hand flying to his waistband. I recall the grace with which he deposited the note into Tom Peterson’s shaking hands. Not somebody to be messed with. Need to get this right the first time.

I whip him in the left temple with the butt of the .45. The mystery messenger crumples to the pavement, a snub-nosed .38 skittering from his hand into the chilly darkness.

I’m about to congratulate myself when the reinforced door swings open suddenly, revealing a heavysset man with a goatee and a large gun slung across his chest. Since I’m already holding the business end of the .45, I cross my body and whip the new guy on the right temple. My backhand doesn’t pack quite the same wallop as my forehand. He stays upright and stumbles backwards a few inches. But everyone has their limits. I kick him in the groin, then knee him in the face as he folds forward. He lands flat on his back, unconscious, broken nose oozing blood. Over and out.

I holster the .45 and dig quietly through the pockets of the two men. Neither has

any identification. I suppose it would be a little optimistic to expect a driver's license, birth certificate and full written confession. The big guy with the goatee, however, does have ninety bucks in cash. I tuck it in my pocket. Spoils of war.

I drag both unconscious men behind the dumpster and use strips torn from their shirts to hogtie their hands and feet. Then, I use the mystery messenger's socks to bind them both to a drainpipe anchored in the brick wall. No use doing this halfway.

Just as I finish immobilizing the goons, Marco reappears, sauntering boldly into the alley, barracuda smile still plastered on his face. He looks over the scene, then looks at me and nods.

I nod back. Mr. tough guy. "What happened to the guys in the truck?"

"Not much," says Marco, expression unchanged. "I had to shoot 'em a little bit." He glances at the door, which is leaning heavily against its deadbolt. "Anyone home?"

I shrug. "Haven't checked it out yet."

Marco produces a silenced .22. "Shall we?"

"I suppose." The adrenaline is still pumping, my vision hyperacute, my muscles tensed and my heart racing. Even in the misty cool, I can feel sweat dripping down my back. I wonder briefly if I remembered to put on deodorant this morning, and conclude that I did not. Better survive all this mess. I would hate to die smelly.

Marco moves forward, gun at the ready, and nudges the door inward with his foot. It swings open smoothly and silently, revealing nothing but murk as thick as tar. I blink perspiration from my brow, draw the .45, and step into the darkness.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. I blink as my vision clears. The space is tiny, a closet-sized room painted drab white and lined with shelves. On one shelf is a tiny

antenna TV, three ammo clips, a walkie-talkie and a half-eaten pizza. Otherwise, the room is completely empty.

I exchange a puzzled glance with Marco, and holster my weapon. Together, we give the room the once over. If this were a movie, sliding a particular shelf an inch to the left would open up a secret passageway leading to the villain's lair. But this isn't the movies. All the shelves are sedentary, and all the walls are solid and bare. A single light bulb dangles flaccidly from the ceiling. I flick on the lone light switch by the door, and the bulb turns on, bathing the area in a weak, jaundiced light.

"What the fuck?" says Marco. He kicks the ground sullenly, as if expecting a trapdoor to materialize from the cement. "This is bullshit. There's nothin' here."

"Check again. There's gotta be something."

Marco checks again. There isn't.

I lean wearily against the wall. Why would Mad Max lead us back to an empty room? I run my eyes over the space one last time. Zero. Zip. Zilch. That's what we've found, and those are roughly my odds of surviving past tomorrow night unless I hit on something soon. My stomach grumbles. I consider eating a slice of the pizza. Probably shouldn't. Wouldn't want Baldy's cooties.

Suddenly, it hits me. It's a double bluff. Just another trap, like the faked phone call and the dark, silent truck. And we fell for it hook, line and fucking sinker. Now, we're stuck in a room with one exit, just waiting to get slaughtered.

I stand bolt upright, feeling like the stupidest person on earth. "Marco, we gotta go. It's a trap house. A setup. A decoy. We gotta get outta here."

"What?" He looks up at me, not understanding, traces of a barracuda grin at the

edge of his lips. But before I can clarify, before I can draw my weapon, before I can even think, the door swings violently open, and three men in jeans and dark shirts barrel through the entryway. Two of them are holding assault rifles. The third, smaller one wields a .38 revolver. I freeze. Marco's jaw goes slack.

In the blink of an eye, the third man raises his pistol and fires.

The report is tremendous in the tiny chamber. Marco shudders, as if a cold breeze were passing by, then crumples to his knees. Blood poors from his chest. The man with the .38 steps forward and fires two more rounds into his forehead.

Marco falls to the ground and lies still.

There's a moment of eerie calm following the gunshots. My lips are slightly open, my ears ringing. One part of me wants to make a move to my right, pull the .45 and mow these suckers down. Another part of me wants to curl up in the fetal position and cry a little. But since the two bigger guys now have their rifles trained on me, I settle for standing absolutely still and trying not to vomit.

The smaller gunman goes through Marco's pockets, producing a small wad of cash and a soft pack of Lucky Strikes. He makes an appreciative murmur, lights one of the smokes with a gloved hand, and puffs. The guy's face is a ruddy railroad of scars, covered in a patchy stubble. His hair is short, almost a crew cut, and graying. On his neck, peeking up from under the long collar of his overcoat, is a tattoo of a woman's face. The woman has a bullet hole in her temple, and for a moment, some small gnat of a thought tugs at the corner of my brain. I push it away.

After a long moment, the scarred man speaks. "You're the detective?"

I make a noise somewhere between a gurgle and a squeak. The guy nods as if I'd

actually spoken, tucks his gun into his belt, and hands me a sheet of plain notebook paper.

“Boss wants you to have this.”

I take the note numbly.

He takes another long drag from the cigarette and casually blows a smoke ring. “We’re gonna clean up. You’re gonna stay right there. You so much as twitch a finger towards that cannon on your hip, your brains leave your skull. Don’t move, and everything’ll be fine.”

He flicks away the cigarette and recruits one of the bigger guys to help him with Marco’s body. Together, they hoist it through the door and out of sight. The other big thug remains motionless, rifle trained unwaveringly at my head. He has big, bristly sideburns and eyes too small for his face. I can make out the edges of a tattoo on his neck, as well. It doesn’t look like he smiles enough. Probably too busy murdering nosy private eyes.

The scarred man and his accomplice return, carrying a mop, a bucket of water and a gallon of bleach. They swab up the lake of blood in the middle of the floor and drench it with disinfectant. The overpowering scent of bleach fills the tiny room. My eyes begin to water uncontrollably. The guy holding the gun on me seems fine. Probably didn’t even cry at the end of *Old Yeller*.

After thoroughly inspecting the floor and walls for any stray splatters, the guy with the scars steps towards me. “Here’s the deal,” he says, his ravaged face unreadable. “You hear us leave, you count to five hundred, you leave. You mess around, try to follow us, Curly here blows your head off and ass-fucks the remains. You got it?”

I clear my throat. “Got it. You guys... um, got style.”

He gives me an incredulous look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I gesture gingerly at Curly, the big guy with the sideburns. “The neck tattoos. Y’know, this is the second time in twenty-four hours I’ve been held up by matching criminals.”

The scarred man stares at me for another few seconds, then pops his collar defensively. “You’re lucky, jerkoff,” he spits. “I really get a kick out of shooting smart-asses like you. Now don’t fuckin’ move.”

I remain motionless as the three men, guns trained to the last, melt through the doorway and disappear into the darkness without. I hear the sputter of an engine, the roar as it turns over, the soft *whoosh* of tires receding on damp asphalt. When they’re gone, I exhale for what feels like the first time in hours and sink to the floor.

My eyes are stinging. I try to convince myself it’s just from the stench of bleach, still hanging heavy in the air. I don’t want to be here any more. I want to be back at the cliff house, watching Notre Dame play basketball while Boomer causes mayhem. I want to spirit myself far away from the Claire Peterson, and Harry Mazetti and Mad Max, far from the violence and fear that have consumed my life for the last two days. I want to escape the smell of Clorox and the memory of Marco’s eyes going blank as he slumped, empty, to the floor.

I realize that the note from the scarred man is still clutched in my shaking fingers. I unfold it and read.

Dear Detective -

Tomorrow at 9:00 AM. 31st and Pacific Ave. By the video store.

- Mad Max

I sit silently for a while in the weak light of the empty room, folding and refolding the message in my hands. I have no leads, no ideas, no clue. Nothing going for me at all, really, except that I'm still alive.

Hey... I'm still alive. Why is that? They shot Marco without so much as blinking, then left me standing like some sort of impotent moron.

What the hell's going on?

DECEMBER 19, 2007

The coffee is strong and good. Outside the big kitchen window, I can see the newly risen sun hanging heavy over the misty horizon. Boomer snoozes, blissfully quiet, on the chair opposite mine.

Life is good.

I'm basking in the afterglow of a good workout, relishing the delicious muscle ache that a long jog always brings. People who don't exercise don't get it. When I try to explain the feeling to Jenny, she always gives me the same disbelieving response - "Wait, so it's a good thing that you're in pain?" - to which there is no easy answer. One of these days, I'll convince her to come along on a run, so she can find out for herself. And maybe we'll see some flying pigs while we're out.

The back lawn is glistening with dew and alive with the songs of birds. A robin hops gingerly between the sparkling blades of grass, head cocked, alert. I watch as he bobs his head forward and reappears with a worm wriggling from his beak.

I sip my coffee. Ah, the circle of life.

A second robin swoops from his perch on the fence to contest the find. He grabs the free end of the worm, and the two birds battle for control of the meal. For a while, the first robin seems to have the advantage, then the second. The poor worm looks like he's about to get ripped in half. Then, as the birds become more involved with their own bickering, the worm makes a break for it, slithering from their grasp and disappearing into the brush.

The robins stop. They're confused. And probably hungry. I find myself silently

cheering the worm's ingenuity, which marks probably the first time in my life I've rooted for an invertebrate.

Boomer rises, yawns, and wags his tail as Jenny walks into the kitchen. She fills a mug with water for tea, pops it in the microwave, and leans over to give me a kiss on the lips. Her breath smells like mint and rainbows.

"What are you doing, honey?"

I sip the coffee.. "Just watching the birds in the yard."

She makes a mock-interested face. "Oh, yeah? And are the birds fascinating?"

"More than you might think." I glance out the window. The robins are gone now. The yard is empty, save for the gathering sunlight.

The microwave dings. Jenny pulls out a steaming mug and drops a teabag into it, then walks over to the table. Boomer hops off his chair, as if to say 'Here, I saved you a seat.' What a suck-up.

"Suck-up."

Jenny smiles. "Some would say suck-up. I prefer gentleman."

Just then, the phone rings.

Boomer goes nuts.

DAY FOUR

I

March 15, 2007

I feel like shit. I'm sure I look even worse. It's been three days since I shaved, and the stubble on my chin feels like razor wire against the soft flesh of my neck. My eyes are dry and puffy from lack of sleep. I did shower this morning, at the lousy East side hotel where I spent the night, but without a change of clothes, it hardly seems to have made a difference.

I forgot to buy deodorant. Probably smell like a yak. Not that I've ever smelled a yak.

I'm sitting in a window booth at the small cafe caddy corner from 31st and Pacific. I've never been here before. Given different circumstances, I'd probably be enjoying myself. The coffee's decent, the jukebox plays classic rock at an appropriate volume, and the wait staff is attractive. The decor features an overabundance of stainless steel and neon, which is appropriate.

I make a mental note to return if I survive the day.

The video store Mad Max alluded to in his note is part of a dingy strip mall, much of which is empty and boarded up. I've been peering at it through the front window of the cafe since dawn, pretending to read the paper while keeping an eye out for suspicious activity. It's 8:45 now. All I've seen across the street are bored video store employees headed to work for the day. Most of them are in their late teens or early twenties. They look only marginally happier to be working than the similarly aged prostitutes I drove past two days ago.

The waitress comes by. She's blonde and young for her age, with the slight hint of a southern accent. Her name is Alyssa. I keep wanting to call her Flo. Or maybe Irma.

"You want some more coffee, baby?"

I glance at my empty cup. "Um... Sure."

Alyssa obliges. Steam fills the air. "You been here a long time. Can I get you some pancakes or something?" She lowers her voice. "No offense, doll, but if you don't order some food soon, my floor manager's gonna be on my ass like a fat girl on cake."

"Uh..." I begin to decline, then think better of it. This might be my last morning on Earth. Why skip breakfast?

"I guess I'll have some pancakes."

"Single or double stack?"

Decisions, decisions. "Double, I guess."

Alyssa smacks her gum. "You got it. Thanks, baby." She saunters away from me, towards the kitchen.

I turn the page of my camouflage newspaper and direct my attention once more across the street. There's no sign of trouble at the video store. The employees, through the storefront window, are still uniformly moribund. The sign in the window still reads "Closed."

I haven't told Tom Peterson about Marco's death. When I called him briefly from my hotel room at two in the morning, he answered his cell phone on the first ring, eager for news. Like he'd been sitting awake and waiting for an update. I told him vaguely that there had been developments, and that I wouldn't be checking in until the next day.

When he pressed for details, I hung up. Explaining things to Peterson will take too much time. Time I don't have at the moment.

Against my will, I flash back once again to the deafening roar of gunfire in the tiny room, and the moment when Marco's beady eyes went dull. The inside of my nostrils still feel dingy with the aroma of bleach and blood. I remember Curly's shaggy mustache and the scarred man's neck tattoo. I wonder, for the hundredth time this morning, whether I could have done anything to prevent Marco's death.

And I ask myself again... Why am I alive? Why Marco, and not me?

"Here you go, baby."

I jump, but it's just Alyssa with a steaming double stack of pancakes. The flapjacks come complete with a generous pat of butter on top. The lactose intolerant be damned.

"Thanks. Looks delicious." I drizzle my meal halfheartedly in maple syrup.

"Don't mention it, baby. My pleasure." Alyssa cracks her gum. "It's a shame about that girl, huh?"

I pause mid-drizzle. "What girl?"

Alyssa sniffs and gestures at the open newspaper in front of me. "That poor darling they fished outta the ocean. Heard about it on the news last night."

I follow her finger to a headline. Alyssa cracks her gum again. "Anyhow, don't let that spoil your appetite. *Bon appetit* and all that stuff." She wanders to another table.

As I read the story, dark, delicate chills gather up and down my spine.

WOMAN'S BODY DISCOVERED IN OCEAN CITY DOCKYARD

OCEAN CITY - Ocean City Police, investigating reports from local fishermen, have dredged the body of a young woman from the seabed about a hundred yards from Ocean City's commercial dockyard. Though an autopsy is pending, the authorities have preliminarily ruled the death a homicide. An official close to the investigation, who requested anonymity, has said that the victim was most likely between fifteen and twenty years old, and that her body bore markings consistent with death by strangulation. Police have yet to identify the victim, although they say she had most likely been submerged for less than twenty-four hours.

"It was kind of a stroke of luck these guys found the victim when they did," said homicide investigator Ethan Zimmerman. "This is the kind of thing that can go unnoticed for a long time in Ocean City."

Arthur Morris (45) and Ross Keller, Jr. (43) had just put down their sturdy deep sea fishing nets, when suddenly, they felt what appeared to be a snag. What they pulled in, however, was (Continued on p. A19)

I don't bother turning to page A19. It's one minute until 9:00, and I need to keep an eye on the strip mall. But I am petrified - paralyzed - by the idea that I might be too late, that Mad Max has already gone too far, and that that body at the bottom of the ocean is Claire Peterson.

Did the senator give something away in the phone calls? Could killing Claire be some sort of sick warning? My mind is reeling with possibilities. I can't figure out why

Mad Max would take this drastic step, rather than just leaking Peterson's secrets to the press. But then again, given the circumstances of Marco's murder, logic doesn't seem to be Mad Max's forte.

Alyssa reappears, coffee pot in hand. "You gonna eat those pancakes, or wait for 'em to get soggy?"

"Oh. Uh..." I take a bite of pancake. It's light and fluffy, but somehow seems about as appetizing as tire rubber. I give Alyssa the most unconvincing smile of my life. "Delicious."

"There you go, baby. Phone's for you, by the way." She holds out a cordless phone.

I choke on the pancake. Alyssa pounds helpfully on my back as I cough. After thirty seconds and most of a cup of coffee, I've regained enough breath to speak.

"Phone... for me?"

"Well, they asked for the guy who was staring at the video place across the street. I mostly figured that was you."

"Well... Who is it?"

She raises an eyebrow and purses her lips. "What do I look like, your mom? Just keep it short, baby. Don't tie up the line."

I take the phone, eyes traveling rapidly over the scenery outside. Nothing seems out of the ordinary.

"Hello?"

"Peter Lyons." The voice at the other end of the line is deep and garbled, fed through one of those voice distortion that makes every man, woman or child sound like

Darth Vader with a headcold. His - or her - pronunciation of my name is not a question, but a statement, spoken the way a professor might call roll.

“Who is this?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady while ducking my head lower in the booth.

“Peter,” says the voice. “I want you to listen to me very carefully.”

“You’ve got my attention. Believe me.”

“Excellent.” The line snaps and hisses. “Peter, should you ever get near me again, I will hunt you like the hound hunts the fox. I will find you, wherever you go. I will tear you, and your life, and the lives of everyone you love to bloody shreds. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, yeah.” I give up on scanning the rooftops for snipers. If someone wanted to snipe me, they probably wouldn’t call first. “Look, Max - if I may call you by your first name - how’d you know I was here?”

I don’t expect an answer. Maybe a few more outdated hunting metaphors and cryptic threats, but not a genuine response. But the voice surprises me.

“Because that’s where I would be, were I you.” A pause. “You are a man with many gifts, Peter. Don’t allow them to go to waste. Leave this all behind you. Go back to your own life.”

Somehow, Mad Max’s compliments sting more bitterly than any insult ever could. My knuckles tighten around the phone. I’m sick and tired of being out-thought by everybody.

“What have you done with Claire Peterson?” I ask, gritting my teeth and attempting to keep my voice steady.

Nothing but silence from the other end of the line.

“Is it you who strangled her and dumped her in the ocean?” I say, going out on a limb and hoping to provoke a response. “Was that you, asshole?”

There’s a long period of silence, and then a short, mocking laugh, transformed by the distortion device into a terrifying *basso profundo* chortle. “Peter... do you know what’s usually the downfall of people in my position?”

“What?”

“Two things. Hubris and a sense of mercy.” The telephone silence pops and snaps in my ear. “You’ll find that I possess neither. If you ever, ever test me again, you and all those around you will be hunted. You will die. Leave, Peter.”

I rise halfway from my seat and speak in a half-shout, half-whisper. “That’s not true! It’s not true, ‘cause I’m still here. You showed mercy to *me*! When it made sense to murder me, when Curly and your other guys could’ve carved me up like a turkey, you called them off! Why did you do that? Why am I still alive when Marco and Claire and Mazetti’s cousin and everyone else in this fucked-up scenario is ending up dead?”

I breathe heavily. A vein on my forehead is throbbing. The elderly couple in the next booth over is looking at me in a very unsettled way.

Silence, a noise that might or might not be a final, slow exhalation, then a dial tone. The voice is gone.

My heavy breathing subsiding, I sink once more into my seat and take an angry bite of pancake. Adrenaline makes it taste better. I wash it down with an impetuous gulp of coffee that scalds my throat, then punch the downtown police precinct’s number into the phone. Contacting the cops is a dangerous move with Mazetti all over my ass, but I

don't see any other way to get the information I need.

"Ocean City Police. How can I help you?" The guy on the phone is the same bored young officer I saw the other day.

"Is Zimmerman there?"

The officer clears his throat. "Detective Zimmerman is in a meeting. Can I -"

"No. You can't. Go get him. Tell him it's Pete Lyons."

"Uh... Okay, sir. Hold on."

He puts the phone down without putting me on hold. I can hear the hum of office activity, muted discussion, and finally the *click-clack* of someone retrieving the phone from the desktop.

"Pete," says Zimmerman without introduction. "Where the hell have you been? That girl you were asking about turned up in the drink. You need to tell me what you were working on and for who. Like, now."

I get a sinking feeling deep in my gut. "Are you sure it's her?"

"I can't give out information willy-nilly here, Pete. The investigation's ongoing. Get your ass to the station."

"Humor me, Ethan."

He clears his throat in a frustrated way. "We're pretty much positive. Hands were removed, but we got a shot-in-the-dark dental ID from a guy who pulled a tooth for her once."

Shit. I pause for a moment, feeling hopeless.

"Pete?"

"I'm here." I sigh. "Does her family know yet?"

“Family? She has family here?” Zimmerman sounds surprised. “Jesus, Mary and Joseph. We had this one pegged as a runaway, or an illegal. You should see the scarring downtown. Looks like she’s been hooking since she was about eight.” Even over the phone, I can hear the scratch of pen on paper. “You know how to reach this family?”

“Wait...” Now I’m confused. “That doesn’t sound like Claire.”

Zimmerman laughs a dry, humorless laugh. I hear broad pen strokes marking out whatever he had just written. “Shit, Pete. Don’t get me all riled like that. I’m not talking about Claire what’s-her-face. This is the other girl. The Asian one. Sherri Pao.”

I blink twice and hang up the phone, cutting Zimmerman off mid-drawl.

II

Since I have no leads, no clues, and nowhere else to go, I check back in to the hotel where I spent the night. The small gym next to the lobby is open. I work out. I shower. I take a Heineken from the mini bar in my room and drink it slowly while watching fuzzy HBO. I'm all too conscious of the minutes and hours slipping by. Noon comes and goes. I sit, and sip, and continue to feel wretched and useless.

Sherri Pao, the girl I was (kind of) hired to find, is dead. But I had assumed that much already. Whoever coerced Claire's personal information out of the poor girl wouldn't have wanted her around to spread rumors. I remember Claire's description of Sherri: a small, shy hooker with a thing for poetry and Burger King coffee. Wherever she is now, I hope there's Yeats.

I take another sip of Heineken and attempt to follow the action on HBO. The bad reception makes it difficult. Something about parachuting, or maybe mushrooms. I sigh and switch off the TV. Without the boob-tube flicker, the room seems dark and cavelike.

I begin getting dressed, feeling that I ought to do something, but unsure about where to start.

I guess I could lean on Ned. He knew something about Mad Max, something he uncharacteristically refused to share. I consider the idea as I pull on my socks, then decide against it. Take on Ned, and I'd have to take on an entire bar full of thugs and criminals. And even if I somehow got him to talk, Ned might not know anything more than I do: that Mad Max is a bad motherfucker who shouldn't be messed with.

I search for other ideas, any little chink in the past days' conversations where I

might stick a fingernail and pull the mystery open. I come up blank. All dressed now, but with nowhere to go, I flop back on the bed. After a few moments of silence, I wrangle the hotel phone, dial the code for an outside call, and punch in Jenny's cell phone number.

It rings for a long time. I'm almost ready to give up when she finally answers.

"Hello?"

That voice. "Hey, it's Pete."

"Oh. Hey Pete. No, Mom, you've got to - Hold on a second, Pete."

I hold on a second. In the background, I hear a clatter and the buzz of conversation. After a few moments, Jenny returns.

"Sorry about that."

"It's okay," I say, staring at the ceiling. "I can call back if you-"

"No, it's fine. Mom just needed some help with the medication. One of the orderlies is gonna take care of it." She clears her throat. "So, uh... what's up? Did you finally get a cell phone? I don't recognize this number."

"I'm in a hotel."

"Pete, you need a cell phone. I tried to call you back like four times last night, and I couldn't get a hold of you."

I remember the pay phone conversation with neighbor Steve outside the library. My suit still smells like mildew. "Believe me, I'm planning on it." I sit up on the bed. "Sorry I had to cancel on you yesterday."

"It's okay. I know your work schedule is... unpredictable."

Something in her voice changes, and I know that discussing my work habits is

dredging up painful memories from a decade ago.

“How’s the move going?” I ask, navigating away from the topic.

She sighs. In the background, I can hear a voice announcing activities over an intercom. “Well, we’re about halfway there. Tomorrow, we have to take everything we can’t fit in her room here and find storage for it in town. That’s gonna be the tough part.”

“What’s the, uh, facility like?”

“Not bad. The staff is very nice, they’ve really made getting moved in a lot easier. Food is kind of bland, but that’s pretty much what I expected.” She chuckles dryly. “I guess I was spoiled, being married to you. You know how to whip up a meal.”

“Just one of my many talents.”

“And what are some of the others?”

“Jigsaw puzzles. I am a jigsaw expert.”

“Granted. I’ll give you that one. Got anything else in the bag?”

“Well, I’m pretty good at bragging about my cooking.”

She laughs, lets it fade, and for a moment we sit in companionable silence. I listen to the sounds of the nursing home, crackling through the phone line. In my mind, I’m picturing a hospital-white environment staffed by nurses in vintage 1940’s dresses and decorated all in linoleum tile. I realize that this is probably not an accurate visualization.

“It’s difficult,” Jenny continues finally, “to see the people here. Some of them are so incapacitated. They’re like... I don’t know... Shells of people. Empty shells. Mom gets confused about life sometimes, but she’s still pretty much herself in terms of how she acts. I don’t ever want to see her so vacant, so helpless. I mean, I realize that dementia

isn't a contagious disease, but I'm afraid that being surrounded by those sorts of patients is going to somehow drag Mom further down."

"I'm sure you're making the right decision."

"I hope so." She sighs again and changes the topic. "So what's going on with you? Why are you in a hotel?"

"Work. You know... Boring work stuff." Ha.

"Oh. I see. I someone looking after my baby?"

"Who?"

"Boomer."

"Oh. No, I thought I'd just let him starve this time."

"Pete..."

I roll my eyes, then realize that she can't see me over the phone. "Yeah, Steve's checking in on him."

"Okay, good."

There's silence again, longer, slightly awkward. Jenny probably needs to go and get back to her busy day. But I want to keep her on the phone forever, as if that would somehow chase away all my problems. I realize with a start that this could very well be the last time I talk to her. My mouth goes dry.

"Jenny." My voice cracks, and I clear my throat. "Would you believe that I had a conversation about Yeats yesterday?"

"You mean, like the poet?" she says distractedly. "No, I don't believe it."

"Well, it's true. Don't look now, but I'm moving up in the world."

"You don't usually read anything that isn't scrolling across the bottom of the

screen on ESPN.”

“Says you.”

She laughs. Somewhere, an angel gets its wings. “Have you ever even read anything by Yeats?”

“I read ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn.’”

She laughs again. “That isn’t by Yeats.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. ‘Grecian Urn’ is John Keats. Totally different guy.”

“Whatever. Yeats, Keats. I was close.”

She keeps laughing. I can picture her, cell phone tucked between her chin and shoulder, searching her purse for a tissue with which to dab away tears of mirth.

Her laughter finally subsides. “Okay,” she says. “Well, keep it up. Poetry is good for the soul. But listen, I have to go. We’re kind of in the middle of things here.”

“I understand. It was, uh, nice to talk to you.”

“You too, Pete. You wanna reschedule that coffee? I’m in town until Saturday.”

Boy, do I ever. “I’ll call you. This work thing may take a while.”

“Tough case?”

“You could say that. I’ve been all over, talked to all the right people, come away with nothing substantial.”

She considers. “So what you’ve got is a bunch of pieces.”

“You could say that.”

“So go at it like a jigsaw puzzle. Anyone can see a bunch of pieces, but what makes you special is seeing how they all fit together. And...” A long pause. “...And be

safe, Pete.”

I swallow with some difficulty. “I will.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

She hangs up. I place the phone back in its cradle and sit for a long while, alone in the dark and silent room, thinking about what she’s said. *Anyone can see a bunch of pieces.* As time ticks by, drawing evening (and presumably Mazetti) closer and closer, I sit and wonder about bums and boxers, bricks, window views and neck tattoos.

... But what makes you special is seeing how they all fit together.

It’s 2:30 when I finally realize I’ve seen two pieces that fit together, although I didn’t realize it at either time. The revelation hits me like a ton of bricks.

Ten minutes later, I’m on the road, the quiet despair of the morning behind me and Led Zeppelin on the radio. “Good Times, Bad Times.” It seems appropriate. To the East, the mountains are visible in the distance. To the west, the ocean stretches out into infinity.

I play just a little bit of air guitar.

III

“What?!?” Tom Peterson roars, fumbling the bottle and spilling gin on a suit that probably cost more than my car.

“Marco’s dead. Shot. It wasn’t his fault. It was a sucker move. But you need to focus, senator. You can’t let that distract you. If we’re going to save your family, your reputation, and what’s left of your dignity, you’re going to have to act now.”

We’re back in Peterson's Elms Court penthouse, where the senator has apparently been killing time by drinking martinis. He’s not a sloppy drunk, but his shirt is untucked and his clear eyes are clouded.

Rodney, the muscle-bound bodyguard, looks at me and practically growls.

“Dammit,” says Peterson, wiping at the gin splotch. “Shit. Motherfucker.”

“Couldn’t’ve put it better myself. You done?”

“No.” Peterson’s eyes narrow and he takes a couple steps in my direction. “This is all your fault, Lyons. You made a bad situation even worse.” He gives an empty, malevolent laugh. “Hell, for all I know, you did Marco yourself. Led him out of the library and blew his brains out.”

“You don’t really believe that,” I say.

He eyes me up and down. “No. I don’t. You couldn’t. But then why’d they shoot him and spare you? Tell me! Why him and not you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Exactly! It doesn’t make any fucking sense! So what have I got but your word that we’re on the same side here? I’ll tell you. Nothing.”

He stumbles and slops his drink. “Shit.”

“Senator, I -”

“Quiet.” He interrupts me with a wave of his free hand. “You got Marco killed. He was with me for six years, you know that? Best friend I had, pretty much. Certainly the best employee you could ever ask for. Used to drive Claire to school, back when...” He sighs. “And now he’s dead. And you want me to listen to you? Fuck you. Go to hell. I’ll deal with it on my own.”

He half-turns, dismissively. I step towards him and raise my voice, conscious of time being wasted.

“Senator, listen. If you give up on this thing now, then Marco died for nothing and Mad Max’ll still bleed you dry. We got ambushed because we didn’t have any real plan. Now we do. That’s the difference.” I run a hand through my hair. “You need to trust me, Peterson. For Claire’s sake. People all around this Mad Max thing are ending up dead, and unless we do something, she’s probably next.”

Peterson, suddenly calm, turns to me. “The only way my daughter will end up dead,” he says, “is if I’m foolish enough to entrust her well-being to you.” He gives a small nod towards the big bodyguard. “Rodney, get this asshole out of my life.”

Rodney grunts something affirmative and moves opposite me, the corners of his mouth inching upwards.

“Senator, just -”

And that’s all I have time to say before Rodney charges, surprisingly swiftly, and throws a ham-sized left fist into the side of my head. My body reacts faster than my brain, and I roll away from the punch, lessening its impact somewhat. Rodney follows

with two kicks to the ribs, which I spring up and away from, and a looping right hook, which I manage to deflect with my forearm. Bell ringing, I fall into a fighter's stance beside the plush leather sofa.

Peterson remains where he is. Rodney jumps over the sofa -again, very spry for such a gigantic individual - and charges towards me like a mad rhinoceros.

This time I'm ready, anticipating the left before he even throws it. Rodney's a big, strong guy, but over the years he's probably had little reason to perfect more than a few knockout combinations. Why bother, when you're the size of a humvee? I figure he'll probably come at me with the same combination again.

Bingo. When the big, swinging left arrives, I feint right, then duck under his follow-through and headbutt him in the nose. Rodney howls in pain and stumbles backwards as blood begins to flow from his nostrils.

At this point, an honorable fighter would wait for his opponent to regain his composure. But I'm not terribly interested in being honorable. I just want to get this over with. I kick Rodney in the groin as hard as I can, and he slumps with a small groan backwards on to the sofa.

Conscious of movement behind me, I whirl and draw the .44. Peterson has crept to a china cabinet and is in the process of withdrawing what appears to be a 9 mm pistol from one of its drawers. When he sees the barrel of my gun pointed straight at his face, he freezes. The pistol is halfway out of the drawer.

"Drop it, Peterson," I say.

He loses his grip on the 9 mm. It lands with a clunk.

"Now close the drawer and come sit next to your gorilla here."

He obeys, ashen-faced, moving deliberately. I drift to my left, getting Rodney and the senator both into my line of vision, keeping the gun trained on Peterson's head.

Rodney gurgles.

"Do you realize," Peterson says as he sits, "what you're doing?" He clears his throat. "You've just assaulted and threatened an elected official. Borderline treason. People have done life for less than that."

"Do I really look like I care?" I spit on the nice hotel carpet. It tastes like blood. "Harry Mazetti has a contract on me. I'll be lucky to see tomorrow, especially if you keep refusing to listen to reason. Besides, setting me up a date with the cops would be career suicide for you. A whole bunch of troubling questions could suddenly pop up."

Peterson clenches his jaw and sits very still.

I relax my gun hand and let it hang loosely at my side. "Let me be perfectly clear. The only thing that can save me is figuring out exactly who's involved in this Mad Max thing. If I can't give Mazetti a name, a place, something, I'm a dead man. And you..." I give him what I hope is a withering look. "...You're already dead, even if you don't know it. Incapable of action. Paralyzed by fear. Willing to let your own daughter die to save your political career."

Peterson half rises. "You son of a--"

"Sit down, senator." I gesture with the .44. He sits.

"I love my daughter. I would do anything for her," he says stiffly.

"Then act like it, for Chrissakes. Marco was killed, and that's hard. Believe me. You weren't there. You don't know how horrible, how nauseatingly awful it was to stand there and have to watch him get slaughtered. But you can't let a setback like that make

you impotent. You need to act. And you need to act now, before things get any worse.”

He gives me a long, hard look. His eyes are clear and hard, sober now. He suddenly appears much older.

“So you say you have some information,” he says at last. “A name?”

“A location. Mad Max’s real headquarters, I think.”

“And you know for sure your information is accurate?”

I shake my head. “No. It’s a deduction. But it makes sense.”

He sighs heavily. “And you have a plan... for what?”

I shrug. “Action.” One of my molars feels kind of loose. I wiggle it with my tongue. “If it works, it’ll solve all of our problems. If not, I’ll probably end up dead. You won’t be any worse off. Claire might be in danger. But then again, she already is.”

Peterson raises his eyebrows. “So what do you need from me?”

“Money, mostly, if everything goes right. And a promise to look the other way for a good cause.”

Peterson leans back, letting his body fall into the expansive suede sofa cushions. Rodney looks at me resentfully, still holding his nose. For a time, no one speaks. Outside, the sun is beginning to set.

“Fine,” the senator says at last.

“Can I put my gun away?”

“Yes.”

I holster the .44. “I need to make a phone call before we do anything else. Do you have any lines you know are secure?”

Peterson gestures towards the kitchen counter, where a cordless phone rests to the

left of a very expensive-looking toaster oven. “That one. I use it for all my official business because it’s separate from the hotel system. No one knows about it but...” He trails off, but I feel confident that the last word of his sentence was meant to be “Marco.”

I retrieve the telephone, keeping an eye on Rodney as I do so. No such thing as being too safe. The bodyguard glares at me, as if the idea of working together makes him ill to his stomach.

Back in the middle of the room, I put the phone on speaker mode, dial information, and ask for a connection to Sloan’s Gym. The tin-can soprano on the other end of the line patches me through, and after three rings, a voice I recognize as the gym receptionist picks up.

“Sloan’s Gym.”

“Hi. Jerry there?”

A short pause. “Maybe. Who’s this?”

“Pete Lyons.”

Another pause. Longer. Suspicious. “He know you?”

“Sure.”

Pause. “Aiight. Hold on.”

She sets down the phone, not bothering to put us on hold. We wait in the darkening apartment. Hollow over the speakerphone come normal gymnasium sounds: the whirl of treadmills, the clank of metal against metal. I glance at Peterson in the fading light and wiggle my tooth. Yup, definitely loose.

Finally, after three or four minutes, there’s a clatter and I recognize Jerry’s voice.

“Mister Private Eye. What can I do for you? Keep in mind, I don’t particularly

like telephones.”

“Understandable. But trust me, this line is as secure as they come.”

“Whatever, Paleface. Just don’t be too specific.”

“Fine. Listen, I’m calling because the... situation I’m in may present you with an opportunity for promotion in your chosen field of business.”

“This must be some situation.”

“You’d better believe it.”

“Hmm.” He pauses. “What sort of job title would I be looking at?”

“CEO.”

He laughs.

“Now I know you’re trippin,’” says Jerry. “Even if the current head of our organization was to retire, I would need an awful lot of financial help to make my way up that particular ladder.”

“Money’s no object.” I look at Peterson. He swallows heavily and gives a small affirming nod. “You scratch my back, I have friends who’ll pay your way. And offer you a certain amount of protection from... Whistle blowers.”

Over the phone, I hear Jerry give a soft, low whistle. “So you’re serious about this, huh?”

“Yup.”

“What do I gotta do?”

“I would need your help arranging a corporate merger. A hostile takeover, you could say. Maybe some of your people could come.”

Jerry’s voice is very dry. “Is this a high-risk investment?”

“Moderate. Hopefully even low.”

He breathes out heavily. “I... I dunno, man. I’m gonna need some time to think about this.”

“No time. It’s tomorrow or not at all.”

Silence.

“You take advantage of this opportunity,” I say, “and you’ll be able to build an awful lot of playgrounds.”

Finally, Jerry speaks. “Okay. Tell me more.”

IV

I decide to wait at a nearby Starbucks. It doesn't take long. I'm in the middle of my second crappy latte and nibbling at the remnants of my cinnamon scone when Bobby and Gino walk in the door. They're just as immaculately dressed as the last time we encountered one another. Gino's even sporting a silk pocket square. In a coffee shop full of self-righteous teenagers wearing frayed jeans and shirts advertising indie bands, they look about as comfortable as Egyptian penguins.

"Time's up, asswipe," says Bobby. "Come with us."

I pop the last of the scone in my mouth and chew. "Oh, Bobby. You're such a charmer. Do you do children's parties?"

He glowers, an expression that suits him well. "You've got ten seconds, wiseass. After that, I put a slug in your brain, walk out the door and never do a minute in the joint. Your call."

When he's right, he's right. I stand up and follow them obediently through the glass doors and on to the street.

It's still the early evening. There's some traffic, but the sidewalks are nearly empty. The streetlights are beginning to come on, transforming the last hint of lingering sunlight into artificial murk. Bobby looks relieved to be out of the Starbucks. Gino lights a cigarette.

"The boss wants a name," says Gino. "You got one?"

I try my best to look tough. "If Mazetti wants to know what I've got, he's gonna have to see me in person."

“That’s not the deal.”

“Tough shit.”

Gino pipes in, exhaling smoke through both nostrils. “You give us a name, we check it out. If it’s good, you live. That’s what the boss said. That’s what we’re gonna do.”

“I’ve got plenty to say, but I’m not spilling my guts to anyone’s hired goons.” I shrug. “I guess you could shoot me, but that seems like an awful waste of good detective work.” I lean against the side of the Starbucks, aiming for casual. I think I pull it off.

Bobby looks at me long and hard, then scowls and turns, cursing under his breath. Body rigid, he stalks a short distance away and punches numbers into a cell phone. He waits. He talks. The conversation is too far away for me to listen in, but it appears from his body language that Bobby is all for murdering me immediately.

“Nice suit,” I say to Gino.

“Shut up.”

“Where’d you get that? Nordstrom? Barney’s? Definitely made to order.”

“Shut up,” says Gino.

The door to Starbucks swings open and a dazed-looking young man with hair too long for his face wanders out. He glances curiously at us before rounding the corner and disappearing from sight. Gino follows the teenager with his eyes until he’s gone, then takes a lingering drag on the cigarette.

“It’s Brooks Brothers,” he says after a while. “Nordstrom is overpriced garbage.”

I nod. “Well, whatever it is, you look damn sharp.”

“Thanks. Now shut the fuck up before I blow your head off.”

I shut up. Twenty feet away, Bobby concludes his cell phone conversation. He flips the phone shut agitatedly and rejoins us.

“Car’s coming,” he says to Gino. Gino nods, savors one last inhalation and flicks the exhausted smoke into the street. After about thirty seconds, the same long, dark sedan I first glimpsed in the Big Cues parking lot coasts to a stop in front of us.

I get in the back without being asked. “Hi, Rick.”

Rick glances backwards from the driver’s seat as Gino and Bobby slide in on either side of me. “Jesus Christ, Bobby. He’s still wearing his gun. What is this, fucking amateur hour?”

“He knows if he moves for it, he’s a fucking dead man,” says Bobby. But he takes the gun.

“So boys,” I say cheerfully as Rick maneuvers the car from the curb. “Where we headed?”

Bobby responds by producing a blindfold and securing it roughly over my eyes. “Listen, asshole. You may think you’re cute. But to me, you’re just another smarmy fuck I can’t wait to rub out of existence.” He pulls the blindfold taut. It hurts. “If this information you have is no good, the boss has given me permission to personally rip off whichever of your body parts I choose. I’ll let you guess which ones I’m gonna start with.”

He’s quiet then, leaving me with that thought to mull over for the remainder of the lengthy journey. It makes for unpleasant traveling.

The car ride is just as twisty and discombobulating as I remember. I whistle “Brush Up Your Shakespeare” for a little while, until Bobby gets annoyed and tells me to

knock it off. No appreciation for the arts. After a while, we arrive back at wherever it was we were before. I recognize the sound of the aged garage door going up, the smell of the environment. I anticipate the stairs up which Bobby and Gino guide me, and manage to avoid falling. I step on to a carpeted surface, navigate a few more quasi-familiar twists and turns, and finally hear a heavy door close behind me.

The blindfold comes off. In front of me is Harry Mazetti, seated behind his expansive oak desk.. He's puffing on a cigar. He looks mad.

"Bobby, Gino," he says. "Go. Hap, stay."

I glance behind me. Bobby and Gino both make sort of a bowing motion as they slide the heavy wooden door open and quietly withdraw. Hap is playing Game Boy, the little .22 nestled at his hip. He doesn't appear to have noticed anything.

"Hey. They took my gun," I say.

Mazetti's eyebrows, already murderously close together, furrow into a single angry line. "Do I look like I give a fuck?" He snorts. "Mr. Lyons, I'm beginning to think you get your rocks off by wasting my fucking time. Perhaps you truly believe that by forcing my men to change their plans and bring you here, you are demonstrating some sort of authority. Well, think again." He takes a drag on the cigar, rolls the smoke in his mouth, releases it into the air. "You have no fucking authority. The more you try to play like you're a real tough guy, the more you become a pain in my ass. And people who irritate me have short fucking life expectancies."

I peek over my shoulder at Hap. Totally focused on the game.

Right.

Mazetti rises from his chair and leans over the desk towards me. "I guess what

I'm trying to say, Mr. Lyons, is that whatever you have on Mad Max better be pretty fucking good. I want a name."

I clear my throat and shake my head. "I don't have a name. But I've got something better. A plan. A way for you to find out who's in charge and wipe them out."

Mazetti sits. Not the answer he was expecting. His doe eyes narrow. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to reach into my pocket, if that's okay."

He nods. "Slowly."

I take out the note from Mad Max, the one given to me by the scarred man. It's wrinkled and warm from confinement, but perfectly clear. I lay it on Mazetti's desk. He glances at it.

"So what?"

A bead of sweat trickles from one of my sideburns. I consciously refrain from wiping it away, maintaining eye contact with Mazetti. "There's some sort of connection between Tom Peterson and Mad Max. I managed to talk to him a couple times. Once this afternoon. I couldn't get him to talk to me openly, but I could tell he was uncomfortable with the subject matter."

Mazetti's gaze is steady, non-committal.

"Anyhow," I say, "eventually Peterson got wise and kicked me out of his hotel room. I went back out to my car, and there was this note in my windshield wipers. I guess someone got word I was sticking my nose in his business. Wants to meet with me. Probably wants to do me some damage."

Mazetti glances briefly at Mad Max's note, then back at me. "I say again: So.

Fucking. What? Some guy wants to kill you. I've only met you twice, and I want to kill you. Probably the people who've been unfortunate enough to meet you more than twice want to kill you even worse. How's this help me?"

Another sweat droplet makes its way down my scalp and into my ear. This one is harder to ignore, but I do my best. "Here's how," I say. "Whoever these people are, they have no idea that I'm in contact with you. They probably think I'm just a pain in the ass private dick trying to dig up dirt on Peterson."

"You *are* a pain in the ass," says Mazetti bluntly.

"Sticks and stones." I clear my throat. "But think about it - I'm the perfect bait. I'll go to the video store tomorrow, meet up with whoever's there, and then you or your men can follow them. Get a bead on who's involved. Find out who's taking over your turf."

Mazetti puffs on the cigar and gets a poor draw. He relights the smoke carefully with a wooden match. Minutes go by. Finally, he speaks: "That seems like a solid plan, Mr. Lyons. And were I to accept your version of events, it would necessitate your remaining alive, at least for the time being." He puffs and exhales in a satisfied manner. "That's awfully fucking convenient for you."

"Whoop de doo. That's the way it is."

Mazetti chew thoughtfully on the cigar, then pushes a button on his desk.

"Bobby," he says.

Seconds later, the big office door behind me slides open and Bobby skulks into the room. He walks past Hap, who pays him no mind, and takes up a position to my right.

“Yo,” he says.

Mazetti cuts to the chase. “Bobby, where’d this jackass spend his afternoon?”

“The Elms Court Hotel” Bobby answers without hesitation. “One of the upper floors. We assume it was Peterson’s suite, but we couldn’t tail him all the way up.”

Mazetti nods. “You see anyone stick a note in his windshield wipers while he was up there?”

“No, but...”

“But what?”

Bobby glances at me. “I mean, we weren’t really watching his car. I guess it could’ve happened.”

Mazetti picks up the note on his desk, looks at it, turns it from side to side, crinkles it in between his fingers. “This is the same paper. Not loose leaf. Torn out of a notebook. Wide rule - that’s pretty unusual. You see any wide-rule notebooks in his car when you looked?”

“No.”

“You broke into my car?” I interject. Nobody bothers to answer me.

Mazetti frowns pensively. “He make any phone calls today? Keep in mind he might’ve called somebody from Peterson’s hotel.”

Bobby shrugs. “We got nothing on Peterson’s hotel line or cell phone. Lyons called his ex-wife this morning from this dump over on the East side. That’s about it.”

“What about his cell phone?”

Bobby shakes his head. “Doesn’t have one.”

Mazetti glances at me. “You don’t have a cell phone?”

I shrug.

Mazetti nods. “Fine. Stay close, Bobby. I’ll let you know if I need anything else.”

Bobby looks at me the way you might look at something you’ve scraped off your shoe, then turns on his heel and walks out the door.

Hap coughs.

Mazetti stubs out his cigar and uses two fingers to rub his right temple. “Your story, it makes sense to me,” he says after a while. “I had heard rumors that senator Peterson was somehow involved with this piece of shit scenario. Hence the hiring of the unfortunate mister “Spider” Rios to keep tabs on his family’s comings and goings. And this note...” He looks at the piece of notebook paper once more, then lays it flat on the desk in front of him. “...It appears to be the real deal. I’ve spent a long time looking over my own correspondence from this sick motherfucker. His handwriting’s branded into my fucking eyeballs. I think I’d be able to recognize any flaws in a forgery.”

I stay very still as Mazetti rises once more from his seat. “The right side of your face is swollen, like you got punched. That from one of Peterson’s bodyguards?”

“Yup.”

He eyes me up and down. “Your suit looks like it’s been rolled in a sewer. That from them, too?”

“Uh...” I look down at myself. “No. I just haven’t changed for a while.”

Mazetti takes a deep breath, as if making up his mind.

I hear a small rustle from behind me, but I don’t dare turn to see what Hap is up to.

“Fine,” says Mazetti at last. “We’ll give this plan of yours a try. Maybe if we’re lucky, these Mad Max folks’ll kill you and save me the trouble.” He reaches for another cigar and begins to trim it. “But if you’re trying to get smart with me, Mr. Lyons, trying to set my guys up for something, then you might as well just find a fucking bridge and throw yourself off. I hate it when pieces of shit like yourself try to get smart with me. You understand?”

“Sure.” I try my best not to gulp.

Mazetti lights his cigar and pages Gino and Bobby. They enter. Bobby looks a little disappointed that I’m still breathing.

“Mr. Lyons, meet your bunkmates for the evening,” says Mazetti.

“Oh, goody.”

Gino appears nonplussed at the news. His partner is visibly perturbed.

“Get Lyons outta here,” says Mazetti. “Watch him. We move at six.”

On goes the blindfold. The Bobby and Gino hoist me roughly to my feet and hustle me into the hallway. The last thing I hear before the office door swings shut and I’m escorted away is Hap coughing.

DAY FIVE

I

March 16, 2007

I spend the night in tense wakefulness, leaning against the wall in a fluorescent-lit, windowless, absolutely nondescript beige room equipped with a single folding cot. The cot is not for me. It's for Bobby and Gino. My so-called bunkmates sleep in shifts, one man keeping an eye on me at all times. Gino snores when he's asleep. Bobby glares when he's awake. All in all, it doesn't make for a terrific slumber party.

Eventually, the alarm on Bobby's watch sounds three shrill, staccato tones. He turns it off, blindfolds me once again (boy, is *that* getting old), and he and Gino hustle me down what feels like a labyrinthine honeycomb of hallways to the car. No one speaks. My joints are crying out in pain from the night spent upright. The insides of my eyelids feel like sandpaper. I could really use a back massage, but I doubt that either of my captors are game.

We drive for a while. The ride is quiet. Bobby's phone rings once. He listens without speaking, then hangs up. Getting instructions.

"Don't you guys ever listen to the radio?" I ask.

"Shut up," says Bobby.

I whistle a bit. "We could listen to some opera. Isn't that what you mobster types enjoy?"

No one answers. But I'm pretty sure I can hear Gino smirk.

After what feels like forever, the blindfold comes off. I blink in the watery early-morning sunlight. My eyes are starry and raw. The car is idling at a red light, a block

from 31st and Pacific, in sight of the diner where I spent yesterday morning.

“Okay, asshole, listen up,” Bobby says, tucking the blindfold into his pants pocket. “You’re gonna get a table at that diner on the left. Get some coffee. Get some waffles. Act natural. Our guys’ll be watching you. If you so much as blink the wrong way, we abort this whole endeavor and you’re a walking dead man. Kapsiche?”

“Did you really just say ’kapsiche?’” I ask. “How cliché.”

This time, Gino doesn’t bother to mask a chortle.

Bobby grits his teeth. “God, I hope somebody shoots you today.” He breathes deeply in and out. “Anyhow. At nine o’ clock, you’re gonna pay your bill, step outside the restaurant, and walk across the street. Don’t run. Don’t look from side to side. Nice and natural. If anyone’s there, you meet them and see where they take you. If no one’s there...”

He trails off, but the implication is clear.

The car cruises slowly past the diner and lets me out around the corner. I double back, walking. The sun is low over the ocean. The morning air is thick and salty. It feels nice. It would really be a damn shame to die today.

Inside the diner, I sit at the same table I sat at yesterday and order coffee. Two booths are occupied. One customer is an elderly Black man in suspenders who’s drinking tea and reading the newspaper. The other is a well-dressed Italian with a five o’ clock shadow who’s picking at a stack of pancakes and seizing on any excuse to avoid looking at me. No prize for guessing which is Mazetti’s employee.

Harry Mazetti didn’t claw his way to the top of California’s criminal underworld by being thick. I’m sure that this entire intersection is crawling with his men - guys on

rooftops, guys on street corners, guys I'm meant to be able to see and guys I'd never notice in a million years. And they've probably been at their stations since midnight, watching, waiting, making sure I'm not setting the boss up for anything. Which I am, of course. But not here. Mazetti can cover the video store with the whole US marine corps for all I care.

"Here you go, sweetheart," says my waitress, setting a steaming pitcher of coffee in front of me. She's an older, plump woman.

"Thanks," I reply. I was hoping Alyssa would be back, but personal disappointment is no reason to be impolite.

The waitress smiles in a grandmotherly fashion and heads back towards the kitchen. I sip the coffee, which tastes about the same as yesterday's, and think.

I've been lucky so far. My whole plan of action is based on the assumption that Mazetti's men surveiled me the same way I would have surveiled them, were the situation reversed. If a man leaves a hotel without checking out - the way I did yesterday morning - why bother to follow him all over the city when it's practically certain he'll be back eventually? Hotels are easy to keep track of. People are difficult to keep track of. Easy choice. In convincing Mazetti that Mad Max's note referred to a meeting today instead of yesterday, I was banking on the fact that Bobby and Gino - or whoever was on my tail at that particular time - didn't bother to follow me to this intersection twenty-four hours ago. And it seems my assumption was correct. Had I been seen here yesterday, my careful lies to Mazetti would have crumbled like so much ricotta cheese, and I'd be nine different varieties of dead meat right now.

I wink at Mazetti's natty operative a couple booths over. He tries not to notice.

Time passes. I sit, attempting to appear innocuous, watching the stainless steel wall clock creep slowly from seven o' clock to eight, then onwards toward nine. Customers come and go. Working people stopping in on their way to the office, groups of older women gathering for tea, the occasional kid on his way to school. All of them eventually request their checks, settle up, and depart. But Mazetti's operative stays. And so do I.

Finally, at five minutes to nine, I pay for the coffee (all two pitchers of it), stop by the bathroom (for the third time) and leave the diner. The day has become hot. Beads of sweat form underneath my filthy suit. Keeping my head down and my body straight, I walk meanderingly across Pacific avenue and into the parking lot of the strip mall across the street. I don't see anything out of the ordinary. But then again, I wouldn't.

I stroll across the cracked asphalt and into the meager shade of the video store canopy. I'm pretending to inspect the shop's hours of operation when a large Black man steps out of the shadows and taps me on the shoulder.

"You Pete Lyons?" he asks.

I look the big man up and down. He's wearing baggy jeans, a red hooded sweatshirt, and a red Yankees hat. He sports a shaggy lumberjack beard. He's probably six foot six, 300 pounds. Even without the added bulk of his chosen attire, he would easily dwarf me.

"Who the hell wants to know?" I say.

The big man smiles ominously, revealing a mouthful of gold teeth, and pulls a sawed-off shotgun from his pants pocket. "I figured you was. Come with me."

I look at the shotgun. The shotgun looks back at me. It's an uncomfortable staring match.

"You got it," I say.

The big man motions to his right, and I obediently allow him to parade me in that direction, along a few vacant storefronts and then around the corner. We move deliberately, without rushing. The big man keeps the shotgun level but shields it from traffic with his body. I don't dare glance behind me. We've walked perhaps a hundred yards towards Broadway when I feel a prod from the shotgun in my back.

"Left," says the big man.

I obey, and we turn into a narrow alleyway. It's dark here. To my right, I hear something dripping repetitively. An ancient dark green station wagon with Oregon license plates is parked facing us, engine idling. The headlights blink twice, somewhat blinding me.

"Get in," says the man with the gun, motioning towards the left rear door. I open it, with some effort, and slide inside. The seats are vinyl. The air conditioning unit wheezes asthmatically. The whole car smells like mothballs. I wrinkle my nose in disgust.

"Jesus, Jerry. I hope this heap is borrowed."

Jerry looks back from the driver's seat as the big man clambers in beside me.

"Don't diss the ride, Paleface. This is my great grandfather's car."

"He know you're using it?"

Jerry smiles. "He died ten years ago, man. But the DMV doesn't know that." He motions at the giant in the seat next to mine. "How'd you like my boy Rocket's acting

job out there?”

“Oscar worthy. Especially the part with the big gun. I genuinely though he was gonna shoot me.”

Rocket flashes his gold teeth and shrugs modestly. “Many years of practice have taught me how to appear fearsome. Bein’ real big helps some too.”

Jerry laughs and turns back to me. “So enough waiting. Let’s do this thing. We goin’ straight there?”

“Yup,” I say.

“Where?” asks Rocket.

I mull briefly over all the hardships of the past five days. Every sleepless night, every gut-wrenching moment of violence, all the fear. Soon, it’ll all be over. One way or the other.

What makes you special is seeing how they all fit together...

“Hill Street and 34th. Right across from Ned’s bar.”

“Word,” says Rocket. “I like that bar.”

“And I always did want to drive Miss Daisy,” adds Jerry. He puts the car in gear, eases into traffic, and heads due West.

II

As we merge onto the interstate, Rocket reaches into his apparently cavernous pants pocket and withdraws a .500 Smith & Wesson magnum. The gun is huge, but appears small in his grip. Rocket pops the clip and reloads methodically, then makes sure there's a round in the chamber and the safety's off before lowering the gun to his lap.

He glances at me. "They take your piece?"

I nod. "Yup."

Rocket grunts in an affable sort of way and reaches into the pocket of his sweatshirt. At this point, I wouldn't be shocked if he pulled out a bazooka, but what he produces is actually a handy little 9mm with the serial number filed off. He hands it to me. I take the gun, break it down, put it back together, and nod.

"This'll do," I say.

"Word," Rocket replies.

Jerry is driving conservatively - not that the rickety wagon is capable of much more than that - and checking his mirrors frequently.

"We got company," he says.

I don't turn. "How many?"

"Three sedans, at least. Maybe an SUV, too. Hard to say."

"So far, so good. At least they took the bait." I run my fingers through my hair, which is definitely in need of a good shampooing. "Your guy's in position?"

"Should be," says Jerry.

"Is he good?"

Jerry and Rocket both chuckle. “Paleface, this is my brother Duane we’re talkin’ about,” say Jerry. “Fifteen hours a week at the range. This boy could shoot a flea off a dog if we needed him to.”

“From seven hundred yards?”

“With his dick in his other hand.” Jerry checks his mirror again. “That SUV is definitely on our ass, by the way.”

I nod once, and breathe deeply in and out. “Great. The more the merrier.”

We get off the interstate, entourage in tow, and troll through downtown. My heart is racing. I can’t tell whether it’s from excitement or the twelve cups of coffee I had for breakfast. All around us is the hustle and bustle that comprises the nucleus of any big city - businessmen, street vendors, buses full of tourists and taxicabs laden with executives fiddling with their Blackberries, all of them oblivious to the caravan of heavily armed men cruising in a neat line through their midst.

It takes five minutes of stop and go to get to the corner of Hill and 34th. When we arrive, we park in the parking lot near the decrepit factory. The same vagrant is asleep in the doorway to the factory, the same brown bag at his feet. Ned’s bar, visible across the way, looks just as dingy as usual.

The cars tailing us at various intervals cruise by without stopping. When they’ve all disappeared, Jerry, Rocket and I slump low in our seats, low enough to give any passerby the impression that the station wagon is empty. For Rocket, this is tough. But he manages. Jerry reaches up and adjusts the rearview mirror, giving us a view of the street.

One by one, over the course of fifteen minutes, two dark sedans and one SUV

return, one by one, and park within a block of the warehouse. Although we can't see it in the narrow field of vision the mirror provides, I'm positive the third sedan is nearby as well.

No one exits the vehicles. Everyone is waiting. Jerry's killed the engine, of course, and what small measure of comfort the struggling air conditioning had provided soon dissipates. Jerry wipes his brow. Rocket seems to be falling asleep. I sweat in my suit and stare at the graffiti image on the factory wall - the one depicting a woman with a bullet hole in her head, the one that's identical to the horrible scarred man's neck tattoo - and hope against hope that we've come to the right place. But it has to be. What else could explain the matching graffiti and tattoos? And what else could account for Ned's refusal to discuss Mad Max than his business's close proximity to them? The pieces all fit.

I think about the jigsaw puzzle I left incomplete at the cliff house. I hope I live long enough to finish it.

After a good while, Jerry whispers to me. "What's goin' on, Paleface? They're just sitting there."

I shrug as best I can in such a slouched position. Sweat drips from my nose. "They think we're inside. We have to let them get impatient. Make them make the first move."

"What if they don't? Maybe they just leave and come back later."

I shake my head. "Nah. They've committed too much manpower. I'll give it ten minutes before they head over here to take a peek in the car."

Jerry makes a noncommittal gesture with his head. "Fine. You're the detective.

But I bet they have AC.”

“Sure. But we have noble spirits.”

Rocket laughs.

It takes more than ten minutes. In fact, we remain motionless, slumped in our seats in the sweltering wagon, for almost an hour. But just when I’m beginning to think I’m going to succumb to heat-induced nausea and puke all over the vinyl interior, the door to the dark SUV parked across the street swings open. Two men I don’t recognize step out. They’re both in suits and sunglasses. Hap, who’s wearing baggy cargo shorts, a pink undershirt and a hip holster, follows them. The group takes a few tentative steps into the street, headed in our direction. Coming to check out the car, just as I predicted.

“Okay,” I say, feeling my pulse rate quicken once again. I check the safety on my borrowed 9mm and tense up my aching muscles. “Here we go.”

In the next few moments, a lot of things happen.

Jerry, Rocket and I simultaneously throw open our respective car doors and step out into the bright sunlight, guns in hand. The two goons and Hap, who up to this point most probably assumed they were approaching an empty vehicle, halt in their tracks in the middle of Hill Street.

Jerry waves his right hand in the air.

Hap, mobile even while the two suited men are still frozen in shock, draws his .22 and gets a bead on us. The movement is impossibly fast, almost invisible, intuitive. But it’s not fast enough. Because perched atop a high-rise apartment building three blocks away, Jerry’s brother Duane - the man who could shoot a flea off a dog with his dick in his other hand - has already pulled the trigger on a .300 Winchester Magnum sniper rifle.

Jerry wasn't lying. Duane is a good shot. The round hits Hap in the middle of his chest. I see the puff of scarlet blossom from his figure even before I hear the report from the gun, faint over distant traffic. Hap does a slow pirouette and falls to the pavement, the pistol still clutched in his slim, lifeless hand.

And then we're running, away from the dark tinted cars, which are belching forth a dozen or more of Mazetti's men, and towards the entrance to the warehouse. The bum in the doorway isn't asleep now. He's springing to his feet even as the sound of the gunshot is still fading away, reaching into his brown paper bag and pulling out a radio and a gun. We're very close to him, and as he fumbles with the bag, I can see that the dirt on his face is makeup, that his eyes are clear and alert. A lookout.

The lookout screams something into the radio as he raises what appears to be a glock, unsure whether to direct it towards us or Mazetti's army. Before he can decide, we're on top of him. I grab hold of his shooting hand, skewing his aim as he squeezes off a wild shot. Jerry throws two powerful jabs into his nose and follows it with a thundering uppercut left that practically lifts him off his feet.

The lookout goes down.

Behind us, Mazetti's gang - a total of perhaps fifteen men - have shaken off their initial confusion about the origin of the gunfire. A couple of them are bent over Hap's inert body. The rest are pounding after us, crossing the street and reaching the far edge of the parking lot, drawing weapons as they come. Bobby's one of those in the lead. His face is flushed with rage.

I examine the entrance to the warehouse. The lock is complicated. The door, which from a distance appeared to be constructed of ramshackle timber, is actually heavy

steel. I glance back at Mazetti's men and fire two shots into the lock with the 9mm. The slugs bury themselves harmlessly in the metal, doing no real damage to the mechanism.

"This is a problem," I say, gesturing at the lock. "Ideas?"

"Sure," says Rocket. He's holding the sawed-off in his left hand and the .500 in his right. "Use a bigger gun." He calmly scatters the approaching mob with a booming shotgun blast, then turns and fires three quick shots with the .500 into the center of the door's heavy lock. The reports are enormous. The lock is all but obliterated. Jerry knocks the crippled barrier in with a roundhouse kick that would've rattled the gates of hell, and we duck inside the building as the first errant gunshots from Mazetti's men slam into the door frame around us.

III

Inside the factory, it's eerily still.

The entrance opens into a large workspace with cement floors, backed in the far distance by a row of squat offices, naturally lit by large, yellowing windows near an arching roof. Metal catwalks arch like dense spider webs on several levels overhead. The building is crowded with large pieces of some sort of industrial machinery, but the tons of metal are coated in rust and cobwebs. Out of use. The steel skeletons form a towering labyrinth into which Jerry, Rocket and I hastily beat a path.

We crouch in the heart of the metal forest, behind what looks to me like an oversized sewing machine. We're out of sight of the entrance.

"So what's the plan?" asks Rocket.

"Now, we stay out of the way," I say. "Keep hidden. Make it out alive, hopefully."

Rocket snorts. "Some plan."

Jerry looks around. "What is this place, man? Looks like a damn transformer graveyard."

I shrug and wipe my sweaty forehead with my sleeve. "Cover, I suppose. Mad Max probably left this machinery in place to make this place look more legitimate. They would really only need a handful of the offices to -"

I'm interrupted by a spray of gunfire, which ricochets with a clatter off of some sheet metal about three feet to my right. Leaving my sentence unfinished, I roll instinctively to the left and slide underneath a ragged conveyor belt. There's an

unnerving moment of silence. Gun hand tense, I peer out from my hiding spot and look wildly around. No attacker in sight. Ten feet away, Jerry and Rocket have scuttled beneath another piece of equipment. Jerry catches my eye and puts a finger to his lips as Rocket points gingerly towards the ceiling.

I glance up. Above us, the catwalks overlooking the big workroom floor are suddenly teeming with men, responding, no doubt, to the lookout's radioed warning. Some are white, most appear to be Hispanic. All of them are carrying guns. I see the guy who shot at us forty feet above, clutching an automatic weapon as peers down into the murky shadows. Even from this distance, I recognize him easily. It's the scarred man, the one who killed Marco. My whole body goes rigid as for a moment - merely a moment - it seems like the scarred man has spotted me. His lips twist into a sneer. He begins to raise his gun. But just then, Mazetti's army storms through the factory entrance, and all hell breaks loose.

There's a deafening chorus of gunshots as the guys on the catwalks open fire on the intruders, and the Italians, already on edge because of Hap's death, take cover and shoot back. The noises of battle boom and echo in the cavernous space. Above us, the scarred man lowers his weapon and charges towards the fray and out of sight.

Jerry dashes across the small clearing between us, keeping low. "Where to, Paleface?" he says, practically shouting into my ear to be heard over the din. "We gotta get outta here, man!"

I look around, weighing our options. There aren't many. "The offices!" I shout back. "If we can get into one of the offices, we can barricade the door and maybe climb out of a window or something!"

Jerry nods and motions to Rocket. The three of us head towards the rear of the building, away from the entrance. But the battle has quickly spread out, and now it seems that there's gunfire all around us. I quickly become disoriented in the maze of machinery. The air is becoming acrid and smoky. Sulfur coats my tongue, and after a minute, we're stumbling more than running.

A bullet zips over my shoulder, so close I can hear it pass. Rocket and I turn in unison and fire at a figure perched on a catwalk behind us. Through the smoke and murk, I see the shadowy shooter tumble backwards over the catwalk railing and plummet towards the floor. I don't watch to see where he lands.

Coughing and gagging, we weave our way further through the machinery graveyard. I'm leading the way. Jerry stays close behind me. Rocket, .500 at the ready, brings up the rear. The gunfire in the big room is more calculated now, more intermittent. The fog of smoke has dimmed the facility, and now the opponents are beginning to lose track of one another in the gloom. I step carefully over the body of one of Mazetti's men, facedown in a pool of blood, his back perforated. I don't have the time - or the desire - to turn his head and see if I recognize the face.

Finally, after what seems like forever, we reach the edge of the jungle of equipment. There, across a short clear area, is a row of four offices. The rooms look secure. Their doors are windowless, and they look look heavy. Hell, there might even be a mini bar in there somewhere. Who knows? All in all, an attractive option.

I scan the catwalks over our heads. They appear to be empty. I glance at Jerry, who's pulled abreast of me. He shrugs.

“After you, Mr. Private eye.”

“Sure,” I say. “But do me a favor. If anyone shoots me, punch him real hard.”

Jerry grins. “You got it.”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, then sprint toward the rightmost office door. Jerry and Rocket follow. The knob rattles, but won't turn. Rocket raises the .500, as if to shoot out the bolt, but I shake my head. No need to draw attention to ourselves in the quieting environment. Rocket shrugs, and we move on to the next office. Also locked. We try the third. Ditto.

I wipe grimy sweat from my eyes and grit my teeth in frustration. There's only one more office, tucked in the corner. If it's locked, we're sunk. We'll either have to head back into the deadly middle of the factory or shoot out the lock and make a scene.

We race to the final door. I reach for the doorknob, mentally reciting what prayer fragments I remember from Catholic grammar school. And shockingly, the knob turns. Praise Jesus, I guess. But before I can so much as genuflect, there's a sharp *crack* from our rear and a chunk of the wall to my right explodes, sending chips of plaster into my face. It hurts. I release the doorknob and fall to my knees as blood from a multitude of tiny cuts trickles into my eyes. I try to blink away the gore and only halfway succeed.

Rocket calmly fires two booming shots to our rear and shakes his head. “Missed. Motherfucker's reloading. Some sorta automatic. We'd best get in there.”

I stagger to my feet, heave open the office door and we pile in. A ragged burst of gunfire thuds into the heavy barrier as we swing it shut, but the slugs fail to penetrate the thick metal. The door shuts with a *click* of tombl-like certainty, and after a moment of fumbling, Jerry engages a heavy lock.

Inside the office, the lights are off and blinds hang thickly over the only window.

It's very dark, and very quiet. The only sound is our own heavy breathing and the faint hum of an air vent somewhere nearby.

I collapse into a crouch and lay my borrowed gun on the ground. My head is pounding. Every muscle hurts. My eyes, already painfully fatigued, are now filled with smoke and blood and plaster dust.

"Jerry, is there a light switch over by you?" I croak..

"Hold on, I'm looking. Your face aiight?" I hear Jerry scabbling in the darkness, feeling with his hands along the smooth walls.

"I'll live."

"Now what?" asks Rocket.

"Well," I say, picking a piece of plaster out of my cheek, "if there's no - ouch! - bars in the window, we can climb through get the hell outta here. Otherwise, we wait it out till the cops arrive."

"Cops? No one said nothin' about any cops."

"Don't worry about it, bro," says Jerry, off to the right in the darkness somewhere. "Whitey's got us immunity like you wouldn't believe. Oh, hey... Here's the switch."

The office is suddenly bathed in light. I blink twice, momentarily blinded, then begin to take stock of my surroundings. Rocket is directly in front of me, arms crossed. Jerry is to my right, his hand still on the light switch. They both look sweaty and drained, but otherwise okay.

Until the fire extinguisher hits Jerry in the side of the head.

The fire extinguisher is full-sized, heavy, and thrown with incredible force. The impact is sickening. Jerry's eyes go glassy. He falls to the ground and lies still as rocket

and I gape. The attack is so unexpected that I find myself suddenly incapable of action. My brain misfires. I fail to comprehend the situation. Precious fractions of a second pass before my weary muscles, wresting control from my impotent mind, force me to whirl to my rear.

There, behind a desk in the corner of the room, is a large Hispanic man in a black tee shirt. His raised left arm is dense with tattoos. In his left hand is a gun. He fires before I can even begin to grasp for the 9mm on the floor, and the shot whizzes over my head, hitting Rocket in the chest. Rocket's eyes dilate, and his arms go slack. He grunts once, takes three staggering steps forward, and pitches face first to the floor, where he lays still, his breathing shallow.

I scrape my fingers against the butt of the 9mm, grab for it, drop it, and finally snatch it up, but it's too late. The man behind the desk already has his gun trained on my head. His aim is unwavering, his eyes dark and sure.

"Drop your fucking gun," he says.

No point in arguing. I slowly set down the weapon.

"Now kick it over here very delicately. The big guy's, too."

I do as I'm told, moving slowly, careful to keep my hands in sight. I note that both my fallen comrades are still alive, although Rocket is rapidly draining blood onto the carpet.

When my 9mm and Rocket's gigantic .500 are both behind the desk, the tattooed man relaxes his gun hand without quite lowering it.

"Peter Lyons," he says. "Somehow, I always knew that you'd show up here one day, guns blazing, trying to play hero." He smiles thinly. "I suppose I should have killed

you a long time ago, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. Please, have a seat."

The man's voice, at odds with his thuggish appearance, is rich and cultured. He has no hint of an accent. The man gestures to a wheeled office chair on the opposite side of the desk. I cast a nervous glance back at Jerry and Rocket's inert forms and sit down. My tired mind is racing. Who the hell is this guy, and why does he seem to know me? Why the hell hasn't he shot me yet? How the hell can I get out of here to obtain help for Jerry and Rocket? All pertinent inquiries.

"A fire extinguisher?" I ask.

He shrugs. "You would have heard me click off a gun's safety. The situation called for a more subtle approach."

"Beating someone with a fire extinguisher is subtle?"

He smiles. "Well, said, Mr. Lyons. But I feel I must point out that my approach worked about as well as could be expected."

There's a short pause. He seems to be studying me. His eyes are razor sharp. The gaze makes me uncomfortable.

"How do you know my name?" I ask at last. "We've never met."

The man laughs. It's not a pleasant sound. "Oh, sure we have. Don't you remember?"

He raises his right arm - which, to this point, he has kept slack at his side - and places it on the desk. It ends in a gnarled nub just above the wrist, where an intricate sleeve of tattoos disintegrates into a mass of scar tissue. Absent is any reminder of what was once a hand. And suddenly, a tempest of memories, buried in some deep, unconscious crevasse for ten long years, comes boiling to the surface of my brain. In a

moment, I'm standing once more on those slippery docks of a decade ago, shivering in the winter rain and staring into the eyes of the man who almost killed me. The revelation is as searing as a white-hot knife.

He watches casually as I sink low in my seat, boggled. "Remember me now?" he says after a while.

I'm still trying to sort through the slipshod collage of memories that have suddenly flooded my mind's eye. I try to speak and fail, wet my lips and try again.

"Victor. Victor Gordon."

He nods. "Sure. That was me then. But a lot of things have changed, my friend." He rubs his nub of a hand thoughtfully and lowers it back beneath the edge of the desk.

"Nowdays, most people call me Mad Max."

IV

“Now, keep in mind,” says Victor Gordon - or, I suppose, the man formerly known as Victor Gordon - “I don’t really want to kill you. I pieced it all together, afterwards, after that night on the docks. You saved my life by taking out those backstabbing mercenaries, then took the time to bind me up before I could bleed out. You may have cost me my hand” - he raises the nub and examines it disinterestedly - “but you left me alive, and gave me a chance for revenge. And for that I thank you.”

He shrugs. “You can’t say that I didn’t try to return the favor. I’ve given you every reason and every opportunity to walk away from this investigation in one piece. But you wouldn’t listen to reason. I don’t know how you found out about this building, but now that you’ve seen it - and seen me - you can’t be allowed to live.”

“You’re awfully chatty,” I say. “The cops’ll be here any second. If you’re gonna shoot me, shouldn’t you get to it?”

The edges of Gordon’s lips turn up slightly. “Do you hear any sirens?”

We listen. As a matter of fact, I don’t. The only sound is Rocket’s increasingly labored wheezing.

“According to the police department,” Gordon says, “this factory belongs to the military and is used exclusively for weapons production and testing. Gunshots, therefore, are not only likely but expected. And if a beat cop ever decided to get curious, a half dozen department higher-ups on my payroll would see to it that he was transferred to a desk job in Sycamore Springs by the end of the week. So you see” - he almost chews on the words - “it’s just you and me, detective. Just like it was ten years ago. As

fate has dictated.”

“Wow,” I say. “You sound just like a James Bond villain. Do you have a remote volcano lair?”

Gordon chuckles. “Funny. It really is a shame I’m going to have to kill you.”

There’s a small knock, the scrape of key in lock, and the office door opens. For a single hopeful moment, I expect the entrant to be clad in police blue. But my wishful thinking is dispelled when the scarred man appears in the threshold. He looks at me and scowls, hardly noticing the inert forms on the floor.

“You,” says the scarred man, the word dripping with malice.

“Hey there, cupcake,” I say, mustering courage I don’t truly possess.

The scarred man glowers in my direction for another half second, then turns his attention to Gordon.

“The suits were Mazetti’s. I dunno what they were thinking, barging in here like that, but we did a fucking number on ‘em. Eleven dead. One wounded. We’re saving him for you. Three more ran for it. One guy’s out in the street with a hollow point in his chest, but he may be a civilian. Definitely not dressed like the others. Not sure what the story is there.”

“Any casualties?”

The scarred man shrugs. “Felipe and Leon are dead. That new Samoan kid pissed his pants. Negligible.” He motions towards me. “You want me to kill this asshole? I would consider it a privilege.”

Gordon waves the scarred man off. “Mr. Lyons and I are having a nice friendly visit. I’ve got the situation well in hand. Go run damage control. Get the new guy a

different pair of pants, and tell him to sprout some balls.”

The scarred man nods and reluctantly withdraws, eyeing me all the way. Gordon watches him go, the ink-drenched muscles in his good arm rippling as he idly toys with his pistol. When the door clicks shut, Gordon turns his attention back to me.

“I must give credit where credit is due. Clarence is a very intimidating man. And to top it off, he’s absolutely insane. It takes guts to interact so casually with him.”

“That guy’s name is Clarence?” I ask.

“Sure.”

I give a low whistle. “No wonder he’s got issues. Probably got bullied a lot in school.”

Gordon smiles a sinister smile. “If so, I’ll give you ten to one those bullies are no longer breathing.”

I recall Clarence’s casual expression as he ruthlessly gunned down Marco. Something cold tickles my spine. “No bet.”

Gordon chuckles and rises from his seat. Gun consistently aimed in my direction, he paces pensively behind the desk. Behind me, Jerry gives a small moan, but I don’t dare turn my head to look at him.

“So let me see if I have this straight, Mr. Lyons... Having somehow discerned the location of this facility, you managed to goad a small army of Mazetti’s foot soldiers into following you here, thus - intentionally, I assume - starting a minor war between the organizations. I gather that your goal was to cripple both Mazetti and myself. But as you heard, while Mazetti’s organization has been dealt a severe blow, mine remains more or less intact. So it appears you’ve done me yet another favor, intentions aside. With

Mazetti's manpower so limited, it's now only a matter of time before I'm in control of all the sex business in Ocean City."

"You're welcome," I say.

Gordon stops his pacing and leans over the desk. "I can't help but wonder. What possessed you to use yourself as human bait in the world's most dangerous game of cat and mouse? What's your interest in all this?"

I shrug. "A guy's gotta have a hobby."

"Bullshit. To pull a risky stunt like this, you had to have had an angle." He pauses, thinks. "Did Peterson hire you?"

"Peterson who?"

Gordon sighs, as if my response has caused him personal pain. "Mr. Lyons, I've had people torn to shreds for trying to be cute. Recently, I took great delight in ripping off the fingers of one of Mazetti's more flippant cousins. It irks me greatly when those around me insist on acting wise."

I have a sudden vision of an envelope containing one of my pinkies being delivered to Omar. Or Jenny. Or my mom. It is not a pleasant thought.

"On the other hand," Gordon continues reflectively, "it doesn't really seem to matter. If you are working for Peterson, it's a futile effort on his part. With Mazetti out of the way, business will be booming in a week. The senator's financial support won't be necessary for much longer."

"What about the girl?" I ask.

Gordon fixes me with his piercing stare. "What girl?"

"Claire Peterson."

He smiles. "Claire Peterson who?"

"Ha ha," I say sullenly.

Gordon shrugs, eyebrows raised, a hint of a smile still flickering on his lips.

"Well, once I no longer require financial support from the senator, she'll be of no further use. She's too much of a liability to keep on the streets. I'll have Clarence take care of her."

I feel a knot form in the pit of my stomach. "You don't have to do that," I say, my voice little more than a ragged whisper. "Claire's never even seen you in person. She's no real threat."

"Ah..." says Gordon in an understanding tone. "You're working for the girl?... Now that is interesting. Very unexpected." Keeping the gun steady, he scratches his chin with the nub of a right hand. "The truth is, Mr. Lyons, you're right. There's a ninety-five percent chance that Miss Peterson is no danger to me whatsoever. But I didn't get to be where I am today by playing the odds. I made it by seizing control whenever possible and leaving no loose ends in my business affairs. So based merely on the miniscule chance that the Peterson girl could someday, somehow link her experiences to me, I must - absolutely must - eliminate her. You see?"

"No," I spit out, suddenly bitter. "I don't see. You had tears in your eyes that night on the docks. I remember it all now. You were crying. You were in pain. You were human. How does a human being turn into something that can kill an innocent teenager over a slim mathematical chance that she could cause you problems sometime in the future? Or, or... Or murder a blameless immigrant girl who loved poetry and dump her body in the ocean without batting an eye?"

A drop of bloody sweat slides down my cheek. I wipe it agitatedly away.

Gordon slowly sinks back into his chair and regards me, bemused. “I always forget that you don’t know,” he says after a great while. “You were just an unlucky passerby with an oversized conscience in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Understatement,” I say.

“Sure.” Gordon nods slowly. “I suppose you deserve to know the whole story before you die. No one’s coming to save you. I’ve got all the time in the world. It’s the least I can do. And maybe” - he pauses - “maybe it will help explain a bit about why I am the way I am.”

He doesn’t lower the gun, but he relaxes his posture, thinking carefully. I sit, tense in my chair, exhausted, eyes burning. The air conditioning hums. There is no other noise. I notice for the first time that perched atop Gordon’s thick sleeve of tattoos, at the base of his neck, is inked the same graffiti image of the woman with a bullet hole in her temple that adorns the outside factory wall. The tattoo is more detailed than the scarred man’s. The illustrated woman has hypnotic, sorrowful eyes. I stare at them. They seem to hold my gaze.

And then, after perhaps three minutes of silent introspection, Victor Gordon begins his story.

V

“It all really starts with Rey Vazquez. Heard of him?”

I nod, recalling Mazetti’s mentioning the name.

Gordon shifts his weight easily in the office chair and continues. “Rey was born sometime in the fifties, a complete product of the Ocean City underworld. His mother was a hooker, and his father... who knows? One of those situations. Rey never attended any sort of school, naturally. He grew up on the streets, running errands for his mother’s pimp. In his teens, he might knock over the occasional liquor store. All that good stuff.”

“Sounds like quite the charmer,” I say.

“You have no idea.” Gordon smirks. “By the time he was twenty - which is pretty ancient in street years - Rey had developed a reputation as a real piece of work. He had the ubiquitous gang of younger followers. He was the biggest, baddest dude on the West side.”

“Like Leroy Brown.”

“Somewhat crazier,” says Gordon. “If you lied to Rey, even about something trivial, he would hunt you down and cut your achilles tendons with a machete. Then, he’d give you a ten count to try and crawl away before butchering the rest of you. Of course, Rey was impatient. Most times, he didn’t make it all the way to ten.”

I’m silent. Gordon continues.

“People respected Rey for being tough and crazy - or at least they feared him. But what really made Rey Vazquez stand out from the thousands of other small-time hoods in this state was intelligence. Business sense. Vision. When crack cocaine first started to

trickle into California from the East Coast, he was the first to realize its significance. He sank everything he had into this new drug. Rey got into the business even before Tommy Mazetti - that's Harry's father - and his foresight paid off in a big way. Eventually, he fashioned himself into the leader of a virtual West Side drug monopoly.

“Fast forward two decades. By the early nineties, Rey was a millionaire many times over. His assets were buried in offshore bank accounts across the globe. He jumped into the designer drug market early, producing and importing different kinds of ecstasy and the like, and that made him even richer and more powerful. His organization employed hundreds of people in Ocean City, and he was starting to branch out to Vegas and L.A.

“But Rey was nothing if not cautious. Underneath the successful businessman veneer, he was still the same street hoodlum he'd always been. He was always paranoid, obsessively paranoid. As a result of this paranoia, Rey dealt personally with only his most trusted men. Lieutenants, I guess you could call them. People who'd been working for him for years. And the youngest - and most trusted - of these lieutenants was someone who Rey often said reminded him of himself. A second-generation Mexican illegal who'd grown up on the streets, risen quickly through the ranks, and had intelligence to compliment his street savvy.”

Gordon pauses.

“You,” I say.

“Me.” Gun never wavering, he makes a small bowing motion. “I was Rey Vazquez's most intimate associate. A friend, so much as Rey had any friends. I was smart, strong, good with a gun - everything Rey admired in a man. Even though I was

half his age, I think he had more respect for me than anyone else in his organization. We planned shipments together. We did inventory together. Whenever Rey had a job he needed done right, he sent me. I was his go-to guy for six whole years.”

There’s a long pause, then. Gordon’s rich voice betrays no sentiment. He seems merely to be searching for the perfect words with which to continue. I gaze at his ruined right hand and remember Sherry’s analysis of Mad Max’s handwriting. *If I had to guess, I’d say your author is left-handed... Crude and amateurish...* The policewoman had theorized that English was the author’s second language. But the analysis also fit perfectly the profile of someone who wrote with their non-dominant hand.

Because it was the only one he had left.

“For the first forty years of his life,” Gordon continues eventually, “Rey was completely consumed with his work. It wasn’t until ‘95 or so, after he’d amassed all the riches about which he could’ve ever dreamed, that he started thinking about women. Or, more particularly, having children.” Gordon knits his brow. “Having built up this massive empire, Rey became very concerned about who was going to take over for him when he died. He had me, and a dozen other lieutenants he was close to. But in the end, Rey, like any great monarch, wanted to make sure that his heir was blood. Someone with *his* name and *his* face to claim the throne of *his* empire. By ‘96, Rey was obsessed with having a son. All he needed was a wife.”

“There’s always speed dating,” I offer.

Gordon smiles emotionlessly. “Hardly. Despite his newfound preoccupation with procreation, Rey was unwilling to loosen his grip on the reins of his business. He had no time, therefore, to acquire a wife by normal means. So instead, he had his cousins back

in Mexico bribe a local land mogul to load his beautiful daughter onto a plane and ship her out, forged documentation in hand, to marry a drug lord she'd never met in a city a thousand miles away..”

Though his face is still the picture of mask-like calm, Gordon's voice hardens on the next few words.

“The girl had just turned nineteen,” says Gordon. “And her name was Esperanza.”

Gordon's ragged stump of a right hand moves quickly, almost involuntarily, to the tattoo on his neck, then retreats quickly beneath the desk. I'm not sure he's aware of the motion.

“Rey and Esperanza got married on the way home from the airport. The next day, Rey went out to supervise his business affairs like usual, leaving his teenage wife - who spoke no English whatsoever - by herself, alone in an alien world. Same the next day. And the next. Needless to say, Esperanza was miserably lonely. It was only about a month before she made her first escape attempt. She was waiting for a Greyhound to Amarillo when Rey caught up to her. That night, he beat her bloody. And from that point forward, Rey made sure there was someone watching Esperanza at all times.”

Gordon clears his throat again. “And who better to head up the guard detail on one's runaway wife than one's most trusted employee?”

I stare at Gordon. “You.”

He nods, slowly. “Me.”

I realize that I'm sitting forward in my chair. I shouldn't be interested in what this madman is telling me. I should be formulating an escape plan, devising some sort of strategy to contact Omar, something. But I'm completely drawn in to this strange narrative. Shock, exhaustion and revelation have shrunk my universe to the size of an office.

"Rey beat her up quite a bit," says the man once known as Victor Gordon. "Twenty years on top had crowned him a prince in his own mind, able to behave however he chose towards those beneath him, including - perhaps *especially* including - his wife. Twice a month, Esperanza would be covered in new bruises. It was my job to watch her. How could I not notice? Once, Rey dislodged one of her front teeth. It was my job to take her to the dentist and make sure no one asked any questions. How could I not feel bad?"

"Esperanza couldn't talk to Rey. Rey wouldn't listen. But she could talk to me, because I spoke Spanish and I was always around. So over the course of two years, I became her *confidante*. Esperanza told me all about her frustration in Ocean City, her struggle to learn English, her hope for a better life. She talked about how much she missed her home, about the peace and serenity of her family's village, about how she yearned to see her brothers and her nieces. And eventually, after a while, when she trusted me to keep a secret, she began to tell me about Rey - all of his rages, the beatings, the pain, the fear."

Gordon thinks before continuing. The air conditioner hums.

"As you can imagine," he says at last, "all of this created great conflict for me.

On the one hand, I was absolutely devoted to Rey. He was everything I strived to be as a businessman. I admired his money, his manner, his talent for leading those around him. On the other hand, I was a young man, still naive, still thinking that violence should be inflicted by men upon other men, and that women and children should be treated by different standards. I was in a terrible predicament, one that threatened each day to overwhelm me.

“For two years, I lived in this horrible purgatory, maintaining loyalty to my employer while simultaneously becoming more and more sympathetic to his battered bride. Esperanza got pregnant once and had a miscarriage. She was unable to get pregnant again. As you can imagine, this didn’t improve her relationship with her husband.” He pauses. “Then finally, in the Fall of ‘97, something happened that tipped the scales of my allegiance in Esperanza’s favor.”

I venture a guess. “Rey beat her up again?”

Gordon is expressionless. “Yeah. Worse than usual. And then afterwards, she slept with me.”

“Oh.”

He takes a deep breath. “It was the only time. And looking back on it now, I’m even sure how it happened, really. One moment, I was driving her home from the hospital, where she’d needed ten stitches to close a cut on her forehead. She started crying on my shoulder. And the next thing I know, I’ve pulled over the car and we’re in the back seat, holding each other tight, going at it like there’s no tomorrow. And the whole time, I kept thinking about how Rey was going to kill me for doing this. But I couldn’t stop. It felt so right - the feel of her skin on mine, the smell of her hair, the touch

of her lips... And I realized that what I wanted - what I had always wanted, really - was to help this beautiful, broken woman find her way home. I think some part of me had known. But it was right then that I realized how deeply I was in love with Esperanza.”

Gordon rolls his left shoulder, no doubt stiff from keeping the pistol level.

“So what happened?” I ask.

He raises an eyebrow. “We went back to our normal lives, and never talked about that day again. But behind Rey’s back, I made plans for Esperanza to escape from Ocean City. An old acquaintance of mine was making big money at the time by smuggling illegal aliens into the country. It didn’t take much to convince him to take one back home. Esperanza’s departure date was set for December 19. By Christmas, she would be back in Mexico with a new name and a new life. Beyond Rey’s reach for good. Of course, that isn’t quite how things worked out.”

Gordon’s face remains eerily calm. His gun hand remains absolutely still.

“Esperanza was supposed to meet me at the docks. But Rey came home early. That was unusual. Perhaps he had heard rumors, somehow. Who knows? Whatever the reason, he came home early and caught her in the middle of packing her bags, and beat her until she coughed up the whole plan, including my involvement. And then, after he’d heard the whole story, enraged and jealous, he shot her in the head. Simple as that.”

He pauses to let the words sink in.

“I suppose you know the rest,” says Gordon, still showing no expression whatsoever. “Rey was a tough, hard, crazy man, but even he didn’t have the stomach to kill his most trusted friend. So he sent a posse of goons to dump the body and take care of me. Unluckily for the goons, you happened onto the scene and fouled everything up.”

He looks ruefully at his nub hand. “Unluckily for me, I didn’t realize what was going on. And after I watched my hand explode, the rest of the night is blackness.

“I woke up the next day in the hospital. With Rey Vazquez trying to find me, I knew I was a dead man if I stayed in town. So I went out a bathroom window - not easy to do on morphine, by the way - acquired a passport, and flew to Spain that afternoon.”

“Spain?”

He shrugs. “An impulse decision. I figured I already knew the language. But it turned out well. I went to college in Madrid, worked as a bouncer, studied business. I learned as much as I could about leadership skills, English, and public speaking. I made plans for my own empire” - he gestures with his nub to the walls and ceiling - “*this* empire. And a year ago, when I finally felt ready, I came back to Ocean City and spent six months clawing my way through the criminal beurocracy until I finally found myself alone in a room with Rey one last time.”

Gordon’s face changes subtly, his emotionless mask becoming a sadistic grin. “The official story is that Rey died in a boating accident.”

I grimace. “And what really happened?” I ask, not sure if I want to know the answer.

“Let’s just say,” says Gordon cheerfully, “that I started by cutting his achilles tendons with a machete and giving him a ten count to crawl away.”

I don’t push for details.

“So now,” Gordon continues, “I own the drug trade in Ocean City, and I’m expanding rapidly. I hadn’t intended to engage Harry Mazetti outright for a while longer, but thanks to your unintentional intervention, that’s out of the way. And with my

newfound advantage in manpower, it's only a matter of time until the sex business belongs exclusively to me, as well." Gordon raises an eyebrow. "Unfortunately for you, Mr. Lyons, that's where this narrative ends. I hope you enjoyed it."

His finger tightens on the pistol's trigger.

"I don't understand," I say.

Gordon pauses. His finger slackens. "Don't understand what?"

"How can you murder someone like Sheri Pao so casually? An innocent woman, a woman you loved, was killed. And you respond by killing other innocent women? That doesn't seem logical."

Gordon startles me by laughing out loud. "Don't you *see*?" he says, eyes wide. "What Rey did taught me the truth."

"No. I don't see."

"Rey killing Esperanza showed me that morals have no bearing on life," Gordon says agitatedly. "Every human being's fate is ultimately random. Even someone who's never hurt another person" - again, he absentmindedly touches the tattoo on his neck - "can be hurt themselves. And in a world where one's actions are ultimately meaningless, morality has no practical use. The only way to procure security is to exert control over as many people as possible. Rey understood that. And I understand it now."

All this doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me. Must be that university education talking.

Gordon rises from his seat as he continues. "Living your life according to a code dictated by something other than logic is meaningless, Mr. Lyons. I was in love with a girl, I made a decision based on emotion, and she was ruthlessly murdered. You

stumbled into a situation where you perceived wrongdoing, you decided to intervene out of some outsized sense of self-righteousness, and you ended up wounded and divorced. Ten years later, another so-called heroic decision is about to get you killed. How can you possibly continue to believe that morality is applicable in the real world?"

"Must be the hopeless romantic in me."

"No." Gordon sneers. "It's because you're weak and foolish. Were you in my situation, you would avoid hurting people you perceived as innocent. And eventually, that tendency would cost you your life. Because the world is not a merciful place."

I shake my head. "You're wrong. No one is completely merciless. Not even you."

Gordon knits his brow.

"You showed me mercy," I say. "I've been nosing around your affairs for five days now. You said it yourself, earlier. You should have killed me already. Instead, you chose to try and scare me off. You practically bent over backwards to avoid killing me, and why? All because I saved your life a decade ago. That's not a logical decision."

He's momentarily stymied.

"Let Claire live," I say. "It's the right choice. What do you think Esperanza would want you to do?"

The room is quiet. I hold my breath.

But then Gordon slowly shakes his head and sets his lips into a grim line. "Very nice attempt, Mr. Lyons. But incorrect. I'm more of a man now than I was then. I am exactly what I need to be to survive." He tenses his trigger finger again. "Be sure and tell me how merciful this bullet feels as it blows through the back of your skull."

But I don't give him the chance. Summoning my last bit of strength, I push off the desk with my feet, rolling my chair backwards towards the door. Gordon's first shot is wide right. I tumble from the chair and roll towards Rocket's inert form. Gordon's second shot embeds itself in the carpet inches behind me.

I reach my hand deep into Rocket's enormous left pocket, close my fingers around the cool butt of the sawed-off shotgun still resting there, and raise the weapon in one smooth motion towards the desk. For a split second, Gordon and I stare into one another's eyes the same way we did on those stormy docks ten years ago. Time stands still. I take a deep breath.

And perhaps it's because he's not as quick with his left hand as he was with his right. Perhaps he's frozen with surprise at me producing a shotgun from thin air. But for whatever reason, Gordon hesitates for just a beat longer than he should, his finger on the trigger, the barrel of his gun aimed directly at my head. I look at his face. His jaw is set, but his eyes are conflicted.

I think about Claire. I think about Sheri Pao. I think about Jenny.

I pull the trigger.

The blast blows a hole the size of a fist in the middle of Gordon's massive chest. I'm in piss poor shooting position, and the big gun's recoil dislocates my elbow. I howl in pain as Gordon stumbles against the far end of the room, eyes empty, then slowly sinks. A thick trail of blood follows him down the wall to the floor.

Gordon drops the gun. With his good hand, he slowly and tremblingly touches the tattoo on his neck. And then his hand flops to his side and he's gone.

My ears are ringing from the series of explosions. I set the shotgun on the floor

and, gritting my teeth, pop my elbow roughly back into place. To my right, Jerry moans.

“Hey, paleface.” His voice is weak and uncertain.

I crawl towards him. “Don’t move, Jerry.”

“Don’t worry. Not planning on it.” Jerry opens his eyes and blinks painfully in the light. “What the hell happened, man?”

“You got clobbered with a fire extinguisher.”

Jerry exhales slowly. “With a what?”

“A fire extinguisher.”

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

Jerry glances around the room, then flicks his eyes in my direction. “How’d everything shake out?”

“Mad Max is dead. Mazetti’s crew is decimated. I’d say that there’s a serious power vacuum in the city right now. Someone with proper funding - say, a cool million from Tom Peterson - could probably step right in and take over, don’t you think?”

Jerry closes his eyes again. Despite his pain, he’s smiling. “Word.”

I glance back at Rocket. The big man is still breathing.

“Rocket got shot,” I say. “He needs to get to a hospital as soon as -”

It’s just then that the doorknob turns. In all the excitement, I’ve forgotten that we’re not out of the woods yet. Gordon’s men are still out there in the factory. Clarence is still out there. Of course, they would have heard the gunshots. How could I be so stupid?

Leaving my sentence unfinished, I scramble towards the sawed-off. But before I

can so much as grab at the wooden stock of the gun, the door swings open and the threshold is filled by the scarred man's silhouette. Except the scarred man seems bigger, somehow. And darker. And balder. What?...

"Omar?"

Omar smiles at me. He's in uniform, service weapon in hand. "Pete. What the hell you got yourself into here?"

"I, uh... But... How?"

Omar shrugs. "Got a tip from the proprietor of a certain business across the street that a certain lowlife P.I. was shooting the shit outta this building and getting his customers all riled up. Even though dispatch said to let it alone, this property belonged to the army, a few of us rebel types thought it would be worth checkin' out." He winks at me. "I think our means'll most likely be justified by the ends."

"What about... There's this guy named Clarence..."

"We got him. He was busy stuffing bodies into various pieces of unpleasant machinery." Omar looks around, noticing the dead man behind the desk, taking stock of each of our various wounds. "You okay, man?"

I allow my muscles to relax at long last, and lie back, flat on the floor, and close my eyes. My whole body aches with a potent cocktail of exhaustion and expired adrenaline. My face is caked in dried blood. My elbow burns. My suit smells like a landfill.

"Yeah," I say. "I think I'm finally okay now." I chuckle. "It's hard to believe this all started with a fucking missing dog."

"A what?" says Jerry.

EPILOGUE

DECEMBER 19, 2007

“Puppies?” Jenny asks. “I thought you were gonna get him neutered.”

“I was going to, for a couple years, right after you moved out. But then I realized I just didn’t have the heart for it.” I take a sip of the coffee and raise my eyebrows.

“That’s a grim procedure for a man to inflict on another man, y’know.”

“Granted. But what’s going to happen to all the puppies? How many were there?”

“Eight.”

“That’s an awful lot.”

I shrug. “Well, Rachel seems dead set on taking care of all of them. They’ll probably move into the governor’s mansion along with everybody else. If there’s one thing the woman can do right, it’s take care of dogs.”

Jenny smiles. “Kind of scary to think of our state being run by a guy who’s surrounded by tiny Boomers. Imagine what’ll happen when the phone rings.”

“Bedlam.”

“To say the least.” Jenny toys with an empty sugar packet. “Did you vote for him?”

“Who? Peterson?”

“Yeah.”

I shake my head. “No. I don’t think he’s a bad guy. But I saw firsthand the scope his poor decisions can have.”

“Me neither,” she says.

We’re finally meeting up for coffee in the Starbucks at the airport. Jenny’s flight back to Denver leaves in forty-five minutes. It’s been three years since we’ve seen one another in person. Jenny has a few wrinkles around the eyes that I don’t remember, and one streak of gray in her golden hair. Somehow, age has made her even more beautiful.

“What about Rocket?” she asks.

“What about him?”

“Is he okay?” She holds her coffee with both hands.

“Yeah, he’s okay. He was in the hospital for a week or so. But he’s such a big guy, I guess the bullet just didn’t make it deep enough to hit anything important.”

“The way you describe him makes him seem pretty lovable, for a heartless thug.”

“He is.”

“He is what?” says Jenny. “Lovable, or a heartless thug?”

“Both.”

“And what about Jerry?” she asks.

“Living the high life.”

“And Harry Whatshisname?”

“Mazetti?”

“Yeah, him.”

“He’s holed up in Vegas, I think. Or San Diego.” I gulp the coffee, which tastes like percolated dishwater. “Once he realized how badly things were crumbling around him, he got the hell out of Dodge.”

“Oh. Good.”

We're quiet for a while. The airport is playing canned Christmas music. Starbucks is decorated with silver foil snowflakes and snowmen that play Christmas carols when you wave your hand in front of them. Ho ho ho. Outside, it's sixty five degrees and sunny.

After a while, Jenny speaks. "I'm glad you told me about all this."

"I thought you deserved to know the full story. Now that I actually remember the full story."

She nods. "It's interesting, the similarities between you and this Victor Gordon. Both of you were shot on the same night. Both of you lost the woman you loved. But you responded to the adversity by becoming a stronger person, and he just sank deeper into the abyss."

"I had a few rough years there," I say.

"True." Jenny sips the coffee. "But you didn't become a murderous psychopath. Instead, you kept trying to do what was right, even when doing so had cost you so much already." She brings her eyebrows together. "Victor was right, you know. He made the logical choice. But you made the right one, and that makes you the better person in the end."

"I hope so."

Jenny reaches across the table and touches my hand. "You didn't want to kill him, did you?"

I shake my head.

She lets it go.

Around us, people swirl and eddy, oblivious dancers in the intricate ballet of

holiday commerce. Families on their way to meet relatives for the holidays. College students headed home after finals. Executives headed to and fro, chatting on their cell phones. I have a cell phone now. When it rings, it plays the Notre Dame fight song. I keep it on a clip on my belt, just beside my brand-new chrome-plated .500. The gun was a gift from Rocket.

“It’s easier to deal with now,” says Jenny at last. “Now that I know, I mean. Before, when you could’ve been shot by anyone, I couldn’t handle it. There was too much left to the imagination. Now... It’s better, somehow. Like the matter is closed.”

“What does that mean for us?” I ask.

She shakes her head slowly. “I’m not sure. But I’ll be back to visit Mom again in a few months. Maybe we could... y’know, get some more coffee.”

“From somewhere other than Starbucks?”

“I like Starbucks.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Jen, it tastes like percolated dishwasher.”

She laughs. “Fine. Coffee from somewhere other than Starbucks.”

“Or dinner?”

“Don’t get cocky.” Jenny glances at her watch. “Oops, I have to go. Security takes forever.” She rises to her feet and pulls her boarding pass out of her back pocket.

“It was good to see you again, Pete.”

“You, too.”

“Say his to Boomer from Mommy.”

“Boomer? You mean that little rat that lives in my house?”

“That little *daddy* rat that lives in your house, you mean.”

“Ah, yes,” I say. “Him.”

Jenny smiles, glances around her as if she’s afraid someone is watching, then leans forward and kisses me on the cheek.

“Bye, Pete. See you soon.”

There’s a lump in my throat. “Bye, Jen.”

I sit at the Starbucks table beneath the silver snowflakes in the air-conditioned mall and watch her disappear into the crowd. I think about Victor Gordon for a while. And then, when I’m done thinking about Victor Gordon, I drink the last of my terrible coffee and leave.

The ride back home is uneventful. “London Calling,” by the Clash comes on the radio.

I sing along. And after a while, I feel better.