

South on Pacific Coast Highway

1

The first moment of awareness came with a gasp. I bolted upright, wondering where, what, how. The sky was a pastel orange in the dry desert heat outside. Was it dawn? Or the hour just before dusk? For that split second, I had no idea. Then I looked over at the woman lying under the sheets next to me and it all came back. Oh god. I hung my head, remembering bits and pieces. It's her place. It's morning and I am so totally screwed.

I rubbed at the throbbing pain in my head and stole another glance at the woman. Her head was turned away from me, the dark, tangled hair not pretty to see. Like the female version of a comb-over, her scalp peeking through in several places. A blonde wig was lying next to her on her nightstand.

Oh god.

I tried to slip out of bed unnoticed but the face came around, peeking from under the pillow. That much was a relief, a touch of Monroe's cherubic innocence to her, though ravaged a bit by sixty years of gravity, grief and heartaches.

I offered the kindest smile I could muster.

"Hi, um..."

I gestured to let her know I was at a loss. She hid her face back in the pillow.

"It's Rhonda."

The words came out muffled. I stared, embarrassed, ashamed. The face came around again.

"So...uh..."

I gestured again. Her face disappeared again. A demonstrative nod followed.

"Okay. Well, look, I'm late and need to get going...um..."

The head nodded again, less demonstrably.

"Okay. Thanks. It was nice...meeting you."

Nothing. No response.

Tormented by what I knew, and did not want to know, I leaned down and kissed Rhonda on the back of the neck. Her hand came up to touch my face.

“I’ll see you again.”

She squeezed my hand without looking. I went out into the dry desert heat, hating the weather, hating my debauchery, and especially hating myself for lying. I’d be drunk again before the night was through and chasing after the next Rhonda.

Hurrying into my Impala, I whipped around in a screech of tires, fearing I had missed old Debs. If so, there went my business. At least a good paycheck of it.

There being no time to shower and exchange my rumpled suit for a fresh one, I grabbed an espresso at a drive thru joint on Coast Highway and raced over to Debbie’s apartment. Seeing her car out front, a wave of relief settled over me. I parked and settled in with my coffee.

I had been hired to keep an eye on Debbie because she had filed for divorce against my client Jake and Jake believed she was strung out on meth. Figured he wouldn’t have to pay her so much alimony if that were the case. I had been chasing Debbie around for a day or so, doing Jake’s dirty work for him. That was my job and I had a license to prove it.

About ten AM, Debbie finally popped out the front door, sporting dark shades and bruises on her arms and looking in roughly the same condition as me. I followed her onto the freeway, headed north. Half an hour later, we were zigzagging through the streets of west Santa Ana. Debbie eventually parked in the driveway of a tan stucco house. It was a grim looking place—wrought iron bars over the doors and windows, the tan stucco bleached nearly white by the sun and the front lawn more or less the color the house should have been. Apparently no one had bothered to water the grass for a couple of years.

With Debbie disappearing inside, I parked down the street and started counting seconds. If you liked smog, tattoos, pit bulls and chain link fences, this was your kind of place. A maze of asphalt streets and power lines radiated out for miles and miles in every direction, wavering in all that hundred-degree heat.

It wasn’t long before a car full of gangbangers cruised by, sizing me up. They came back again, and then another time. I got out my .38 and placed it on the front seat next to me.

The seconds ticked away. The day grew hotter. When I wasn’t otherwise distracted by the threat of a drive-by shooting, I had my eyes on the bleached stucco house. The San Gabriel Mts. were out there on the horizon somewhere. At least I thought they were. It was hard to be certain through all that smog.

When Debbie finally stumbled back out the front door, I grabbed my camera and started clicking off shots of her. She was hanging onto some biker looking trash. They both looked abundantly stoned, and that was news enough

for me. As those two meth freaks motored off deeper into hell, I turned the other way and made a dash down the interstate towards Laurel Lagoon.

Desperately in need of a drink, I settled for a quick hand press on the rumpled suit, did a splash of cologne and headed into the oceanfront bar at the Surf & Sand Hotel. If you were looking to hide away from the world, a lovelier place was pretty hard to find. The shore was right there, the toss of a sand dollar away, all blue and bristling white. Balmy breezes rustled in through the open windows. Seashell dreams whispered all about the shady interior. If that place failed to put a smile in your heart, you probably didn't have a pulse.

I did, offered the bartender a "tally ho" with my drink and turned to take in a summer day at the beach. What a relief. You could not get much farther away from seashell dreams than the west side of Santa Ana, and still be in Orange County.

I tossed down the first drink, ordered another and sat back with the bristling white surf soothing my fried brain cells.

The hours passed. The drinks added up and soon the mystery of twilight was tiptoeing through a late afternoon. I found myself surrounded by an overly cheery happy hour crowd and not much liking it. If anyone got too close I gave them my best version of a brooding, French film gangster and that kept most everyone at bay. I wouldn't have minded one of the dolls giving me a word. The rest of it you could keep.

In all that, Rhonda came back to mind. Christ, if not for the wig business. There was a thought to drive by her place but that idea came up hard against my conscience. If it wasn't going to be all the way, what was the point?

I decided to head downtown and check on things at my office. Pretend to be responsible for a spell, then grab a bottle and head back home.

I parked behind the office building and walked the long way around to the front. A wild summer night was in full swing when I arrived there, the sidewalks packed, people spilling out into the streets. I slipped past the crowd and dashed upstairs, only to be met with a blast of stuffy, sultry air as I opened up the door to my office. A half block up from the beach and there wasn't a breeze in the world.

Very much weary of the hundred degree heat, I began to question the wisdom of abandoning my spot at the Surf & Sand. There was a thought to head right back. Have a few more drinks. Go look for Rhonda.

Instead, I sat down at my desk, haunted by the memories of the old flame. I had been trying to kick her for the better part of five years now, without much success. Beauty like hers and I tended to dream. It was time to get honest about where all those dreams had landed me.

I had been seated there in the dark for a good long spell, watching the kaleidoscope of light and shadows made by passing cars when the phone rang. I glanced at my desk with the usual flicker of hope. Was it her? But no, it never was. It never would be again.

In this case, the caller ID read the Laurel Lagoon Police Department. Detective Whalen, I presumed. I could not imagine anyone else calling me from the police station at that hour and had no interest in talking to him.

About the tenth ring, I decided, what the hell and picked it up.

“Devlin here,” I said with the speakerphone on.

“Michael, it’s Steve....Steve McPherson?”

Perplexed that my old friend would be calling me from the police station, I grabbed the receiver and turned off the speakerphone.

“Hey Steve. What’s going on? I didn’t recognize your voice. And what the hell are you doing, calling me from the police station?”

“Connie’s dead.”

“Oh Jesus no,” I said and slumped back in my chair. “What in the world happened?”

“I don’t know, man. I really don’t know anything right now. The cops said she had been strangled and that they found her body out by Irvine Lake this afternoon. They came by my house to question me a few hours ago.”

“But I still don’t get it. Why are you down at the station?”

“Well, I guess I kind of lost it there when they started questioning me.”

“Yeah? And so what?”

“And so they dragged me in.”

“Well, what do you mean, ‘so they dragged me in?’”

“I mean, they arrested me.”

“What the hell for?”

“Well, shit, Michael, I’m trying to tell you. They started grilling me like I was the one who killed my own wife and I just lost it. The next thing you know I’m face down on the front porch with the cuffs on.”

“Christ. So who was in charge? Detective Whalen, I’m guessing.”

“Yeah, he was the lead cop. Do you know him?”

“Yeah, I know him. He’s a decent enough guy, as far as cops go.”

I sensed Steve cupping the phone.

“He was anything but decent with me. Someone murders my wife and he has to pull that kind of crap on me? I was sitting around watching a ballgame in my boxers. Then I’ve got five cops in my face, giving me the third degree. Then I’m face down on the front porch with all the neighbors out there watching. I was waiting for somebody to order a pizza.”

“God, Steve, I’m so sorry to hear all this. And poor Connie. Jesus. This is just so hard to believe.”

“I know. It’s so totally fucked up, isn’t it? Anyway, I had one call and figured I’d better make it you. If they really think I did this, I’m going to need a good defense attorney and seem to remember that you knew one. Right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know a good defense attorney.”

“So? Suppose you can get in touch with him and get me out of here tonight?”

“Well, no problem with calling Jim. I’ll do that as soon as we hang up but I’m not so sure anyone can spring you until tomorrow morning. Do you know if they actually charged you with something or are they just holding you on suspicion?”

“No, not really.”

I sensed Steve cupping the phone again.

“But I’ll bet you anything that Whalen is going to charge me with resisting arrest. I heard him talking about taking me up to county jail in a little while.”

“All right, hang on. I’d better call Jim right now, but like I said, I don’t know if anyone can get you out of there at this hour. We’ll give it our best shot. That’s all I can promise. If not, we’ll get you out of there sometime tomorrow.”

“I didn’t do it,” Steve said. I heard him break down. “I don’t care if she had filed for divorce and all that. I still loved her. I still do. I never would have hurt a hair on her head.”

“I know, Steve. Hell, we’ve known each other since we were kids.”

I let Steve have a good go at his emotions, relieved that he had proclaimed his innocence without me asking. Did you kill your soon to be ex-wife? Business was business but you hated to pop a question like that on a man, especially one in grief, and especially when he was one of your oldest friends.

“Okay, the cop is gesturing for me to get off. Get in touch with my parents, will you please?”

“Sure. I’ll give them a call as soon as I get in touch with Jim. And I’ll walk up to have a talk with Whalen. See what the hell’s on his mind. You hang in there in the meantime, all right?”

“Yeah. I’m trying.”

“Okay, I’d better call Jim. I’ll see you in a little while.”

“All right.”

“Oh, hey,” I heard Steve saying before I had a chance to hang up.

I brought the phone back up to my ear.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Can you go by and do something about my dog?”

“Dog? When did you get a dog? And what kind is it?”

I had visions of a giant Rottweiler or more pit bulls and dreading the chore.

“It’s a miniature poodle. Connie had one. I thought maybe if I got one too, it would win her heart back....I know...Pretty fucking stupid of me.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Please. I don’t want to leave him up there all alone. He’ll at least need to be fed and let out tonight.”

“Sure, sure. What’s its name?”

“Butch.”

Of course, I thought with a look at the heavens.

“All right. I’ll deal with it.”

“The house key’s inside a fake rock by the front door.”

“All right, and you hang in there. We’ll get you out of this mess as soon as we can.”

“Thanks, man. God, I can’t even believe this is happening.”

As soon as the phone went dead, I called my attorney, Jim Harrison. Miniature poodle, I thought while I was dialing. I had a mental picture of one of those Westminster Kennel Club numbers, fur balls on its tail and paws, nervous as a gerbil. What the hell was Steve thinking? What the hell was I going to do with the little monster?

Jim answered after several rings. His Mississippi roots came through his hello; laidback, laconic, like a warm evening breeze on a sultry southern night, whispering through the willows. Being a loner like me, I pictured Jim alone in his easy chair, a brief in his lap. I quickly explained the situation with Steve.

“You know this guy that well?”

“Yeah. I guess he kind of blew it there with the cops this afternoon but he wouldn’t hurt a flea.”

“They’ve said that about more than a few guys with dead bodies buried in their basements.”

“Jim, you want to know if I’d go out on a limb for this guy? I would.”

“All right. Because I don’t want to be out there all by myself.”

“I’m walking up to the station right now to talk with Whalen.”

“I’ll call and make sure they don’t haul your friend up north before we have a chance to talk with him.”

“Thanks, Jim.”

“I’ll see you in a few.”

I was about to call Steve’s parents but decided it best to gather a little more information first. I started to pour myself a quick drink but decided to hold off on that impulse, too. I owed a clear head to somebody. I wasn’t sure who.

Heading out into the hallway, I cringed a bit over the dive office building. The plaster walls were flaking away. The floral carpets were a hundred years old. The old wooden stairs creaked and groaned as I hustled down to the street. The landlord hadn't dropped a dime on the place in over twenty years. Then, he rarely raised the rent and hardly ever came around, and that had been enough of a tradeoff for me.

South on Pacific Coast Highway

2

As I was wading back down to the crowded sidewalk, a pair of twenty-something dolls went strutting past me, headed down towards Coast Highway. I heard one of them whisper to her friend.

“Obsessing.”

They both stole a glance in my direction and giggled. I had already turned up the block the other way but stopped to stare, recalling now what had gotten me started with Rhonda. Piles of perfumed hair and Barbie Doll shoes. I was a sucker for that and red toe nail polish. Any woman, plus-sized, pushing seventy, it did not seem to matter all that much with me.

Thinking to sell my soul for another few hours of happiness, I remembered Steve and turned up the street. A few moments later, I was crossing Beach Lane. The street grew dark around me. The hubbub completely died away. Nothing was moving in the sultry heat now, not even the eucalyptus trees. The only thing restless was my heart. I had known true devotion once, just to hear a woman’s wind chime voice. How in hell did a man trade down from there? I walked along, wishing the two of us had never met.

Towards the top of the block, I came across Caleb, one of Laurel Lagoon’s resident homeless people. Talk about regrets. The poor bastard’s right leg had been amputated above his knee. He was sitting on his usual bench, staring straight ahead, still as a statue. The pant leg was folded up neatly and pinned out of the way. A pair of crutches leaned against the bench next to him. His dark, wavy hair was disheveled, the beard ragged but closely trimmed.

The biblical name seemed fitting enough. I probably would have gone with Ishmael. Whatever else was happening with Caleb, I had never heard him utter a word.

I set a twenty-dollar bill down on the bench next to him, something I had done on several occasions, though he never as much as looked up at me or acknowledged my presence. I only knew the money was gone when I returned.

What a world. Somehow, Caleb had stumbled onto the streets of Laurel Lagoon and there he stayed. All this wealth and you couldn’t find him a prosthetic limb. You couldn’t even put him into a room somewhere. At least

the cops left the poor man alone. Despite all the nouveau rich in Laurel Lagoon, the tradition of bohemian tolerance had persisted down through the years.

Hustling across the intersection at Forest, I came to city hall, this bit of mission revival architecture with a red tile roof. A belfry accented the roofline, right out of Cordoba. Two Hollywood twisted junipers adorned the fire station in front. One stately pepper tree and a handful of eucalyptus shrouded a grassy courtyard to the left. Across the alley to the right, a tiled fountain gurgled at the water department. In Southern California, water departments always smelled of money, lots and lots of money.

The police station occupied the backside of the fire station so I started around in that direction. A couple of news trucks were parked up on the street behind it. The vultures had arrived. One of them, Bernie, was reaching for the wooden door of the station as I walked up. Bernie was the equivalent of a cop at a ballgame. He had secured a cushy beat down at the beach and there was no tearing him away from it.

“You here about the McPherson murder?” he asked me.

“No, I was just feeling lonely tonight.”

“Come on, Devlin. You know something?”

“Not a thing, Bernie.”

“Fine. See if I play ball with you next time you need help.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said.

Bernie opened the door for me and I stepped into a madhouse. Dirk Vanderhof, an online gambling mogul was being feted for a \$100,000 donation he had made to the Policemen’s Association. He and the police chief were holding up a beach towel sized poster of the check for a gaggle of photographers. Vanderhof was all smiles, the chief not so much. You figured the law and order types would have to hold their noses a bit over that one.

I hid well back among the crowd, having little use for Dirk Vanderhof and expecting he felt more or less the same about me. Fortunately, he was too busy hamming it up for the press to notice my entrance. A few moments later, the festivities swept him out the back door. The photographers went the way of the party and things suddenly settled down.

I was left face to face with a petulant looking cadet at the front desk. I had seen this kid trolling for action outside the Boom Boom Room. Now he was apprenticing at the police station. Only in Laurel Lagoon.

“I’m here to see Whalen,” I told him.

He stared with apparent plans to disappoint me. Whalen must have heard my voice and called out from his back office.

“Send him in!”

The young cadet hit the buzzer and the gate opened. I smiled going by. Pat was sitting at his desk. I slumped down in the opposite chair.

Pat had been a lifeguard in town when he was a young man and still somewhat looked the part—his blonde hair cut in a butch, his once boyish face still tanned and pulled taut, though it had acquired a few lines over the years. Setting aside Pat's age and the way he had beefed himself up with the weights, you could easily picture him in a photo dated 1975, goofing off for the chicks with a lifeguard buoy strapped across his chest.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked him.

"They're feting Vanderhof over his hundred grand donation. Did I miss something?"

He hadn't bothered to look up from the file in his hands.

"I'm talking about Steve McPherson."

"Oh that," Pat said, still not looking up. "Well, don't worry yourself. Your bleeding heart attorney just called me."

"So? Spill it. The guy gets a little upset when you accuse him of killing his own wife and you have to haul him in?"

"He got more than a little upset."

"So? What the hell kind of evidence is that?"

Pat finally glanced up from the file in his hands.

"Look, whatever I've got on him, it's none of your business."

"Come on, Pat. My bleeding heart attorney is going to make it his business in a couple of minutes. You may as well tell me now."

The squawk box crackled out front. Pat threw the file down on his desk.

"I'm holding him, that's all."

"Nice work, Pat."

"What?"

"Your bluff. Talking like you were ready to haul Steve up to county jail, and just loud enough for him to hear it. See if that would scare him into saying something you wanted to hear, since you didn't like the sound of what was coming out of his mouth up to that point."

Whalen scoffed.

"His wife was divorcing him and we've already heard from ten different witnesses that he was plenty pissed off about it."

"Hell, with that logic, I've got a couple hundred thousand murder cases you'll need to solve this year. In Orange County alone."

Pat stared.

"Come on, Pat. Admit it. People get divorced all day long without killing each other."

"Yeah? Well this is one case where somebody did get killed, didn't they?"

I heard voices out in front. It was Jim. Whalen looked to the heavens.

“Send him in!” he called out to the petulant cadet.

Jim appeared a moment later, tall and lean, with shaggy hair and a bit slumped over. The detached look on Jim’s face suggested he had just noticed the weight of the world on his shoulders and was deciding the best way to get it back off.

Jim shook my hand, nodded at Whalen and took a seat. A notebook and pen came out.

“All right,” Whalen said. “Let’s get this straight right now. I’ve got nothing solid on the murder yet, but I’ve got all kinds of circumstantial evidence pointing in his direction and he started a scuffle with me and Fowler, so I’m holding him for twenty-four hours. If nothing pans out, I’ll let him go. If it does?”

Whalen gestured.

“Let’s start with whether or not you followed the book,” Jim said.

“Don’t give me that crap.”

They stared at each other.

“Yeah, yeah, I read him his rights. What do you think?”

“I think sometimes the police don’t like to play by the rules.”

Whalen looked to the heavens again and shook his head.

“Have you established the cause of death?”

“Strangulation?”

Jim wrote in his notebook and waited for Whalen to continue.

“Looks like it was some kind of thin rope or cord. I presume that’s what you were wanting to hear. Would you like the name of the manufacturer?”

“The time of death?” Jim asked, ignoring Whalen’s sarcasm.

“Sometime yesterday, late afternoon to early evening. Just when your friend back there has a gap in his story.”

“We’ll see about that,” Jim said. “Any evidence that establishes Steve at the scene of the crime?”

Whalen drummed his fingers.

“This is going to be Giovanni’s case over at the DA’s office. Maybe you’d better direct the rest of your inquiry in his direction.”

“All right,” Jim said. “Get me a copy of the police report and I’ll stop asking you questions.”

“I’ll have one for you in the morning.”

“And just so we’re on the same page here. No more questioning Steve without counsel present and I’ll expect Giovanni to show probable cause within twenty-four hours or you let him go.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Pat said.

“And please don’t go shipping him off to county jail unless you probable cause.”

“You done?”

“With you?” Jim said, standing up. “Yeah, but I’d like to have a word with my client.”

Whalen hesitated and stood up. Jim and I followed Pat back to the holding tanks. Steve stood up from the bench when we walked in, looking scared and lost. His dark hair was showing signs of gray. The once youthful face was looking haggard. Every cheerleader in high school had dreamed of winning Steve’s heart but no one had dreams of winning it now.

Whalen unlocked the cell and we went in.

“Don’t take all night,” he said and locked the door behind us.

I introduced Steve and Jim and sat down. Steve joined me. Jim remained standing. I patted Steve on the knee

“I need to hear it from you right now,” Jim said in a hushed voice. “Did you kill your wife?”

“No,” Steve said without hesitation.

“All right. Have they questioned you?”

“They tried.”

“What did you tell them?”

“I explained what I’ve been doing for the past few days.”

“Which was?”

“Work, mostly. I had a beer with a buddy of mine on the way home last night.”

“Where?”

“At Hennessey’s. We caught part of a ballgame. I went home early today.”

“What time did you leave work yesterday?”

“Around four.”

“What time did you meet your buddy at Hennessey’s?”

“Around seven.”

“What did you do in between?”

“Nothing. I drove around a bit. Took a walk down at the beach.”

“Anybody see you? Did you stop to buy something? Anything that might have left a record of your whereabouts?”

“No...Not that I can think of.”

Jim looked at me and back at Steve.

“What?” Steve said.

“They’ve pinned the time of your wife’s death yesterday, late afternoon, early evening. Just when you seem to have a gap in your story.”

“I didn’t kill her.”

Steve hung his head in his hands.

“I thought you were going to bring me a defense attorney, Michael. Not another cop.”

“He’s only trying to help you, Steve. If your story doesn’t hold water with us, how do you think it’s going to look when you’re up there on a witness stand?”

Steve looked up through his tears.

“Shit, I’m sorry. They’ve been questioning me for the last two hours like I killed my own wife and I had nothing to do with it.”

“All right, let’s get back to the facts,” Jim said. “Have you had any kind of contact with your wife in recent weeks?”

“No. She won’t even talk to me...I mean she wouldn’t...”

Steve inhaled deeply and looked down.

“Anything I should know that you’re not telling me?”

“No. Not that I can think of.”

“Any idea who might have done this?”

Steve looked over at me and back at Jim.

“No, not really but a name came up in conversation with my friend Tim recently. The one I had a beer with. You ever heard of a guy named Dirk Vanderhof?”

Jim and I glanced at each other. Jim looked back at Steve.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of him. So, what do you know?”

“Well, he was part of this crowd we hung out with coming out of college. I haven’t seen him for years but I was talking with Tim a few weeks back. His wife and Connie were close friends and I guess Tim overheard Vanderhof’s name come up when the two of them were talking on the phone.”

“And that’s it?” Jim said.

“Yeah. I honestly don’t know anything else. You can ask Tim but I’m pretty sure that’s all he knows. I guess maybe his wife would know more.”

“What’s your buddy’s last name?”

“Durant.”

“All right,” Jim said. “I’ll look into it. Now if Whalen and the DA don’t have anything to charge you with within the next twenty-four hours, I’ll file a writ of habeas corpus. But if they want to play rough, this could drag on until Monday. Either way they have to come up with something or let you go. If they do charge you with murder, I’ll see what I can do about getting the judge to grant you bail. If we’re lucky enough to get it, it’s going to be a lot. Probably as high as a million. You’ll need that much in collateral and ten per cent in cash. Any way you can come up with it?”

“With the help of my parents, yeah, probably.”

“All right. I’ll look into that too. In the meantime, if they try to question you again, you tell them you want to talk with your attorney.”

Steve nodded. Jim was studying him.

“You know this is going to cost you some money.”

“I know,” Steve said.

“No need to discuss that now, but just so you’re ready.”

“I trust you.”

Steve looked at me and back at Jim.

“If Michael recommends you, that’s good enough for me.”

“All right.”

Jim reached out his hand and Steve shook it.

“Oh, have they fed you?”

“No.”

“All right. I’ll have them send in something. Hang in there. Hopefully we’ll have you back out on the streets by tomorrow night.”

I stood up with Steve and gave him a hug.

“Sorry, old friend.”

“I know,” he said. “Jesus, poor Connie.”

“I know, I know.”

“Aw Jesus,” Steve said.

I gave him another hug.

“Thanks. Thanks for your help, Michael. You too, Jim.”

Jim called for Whalen.

“Hey,” Steve said. “Did you take care of Butch?”

“No, I haven’t had time to drive up there yet, but I will. I promise.”

“Thanks.”

Whalen appeared and let us out. He had a look for Steve, like he didn’t trust the ground Steve walked on.

Jim and I followed Whalen back to his office. Whalen sat down. I did too. Jim remained standing.

“Please call me if you’re going to charge him,” Jim said.

“You’ll be the first to know.”

“And please get him some food. The man hasn’t eaten since lunch.”

“I’ll see about bringing in a gourmet chef.”

“A burger and some fries from the Cottage will do.”

“Anything else? A massage and a movie?”

“I know you’re just trying to do your job. Pat. And I’m just trying to do mine.”

Whalen gestured to say he wasn’t all that moved by the détente.

Back out onto the street, Jim and I were swarmed by reporters. We pushed through their barrage of questions and ducked into Jim's car. He made a U-turn on Third Street and drove up until we were safely out of the hubbub before he parked.

"Sorry about Steve losing it back there," I said.

"It's all right. If he's being falsely accused, he'd better be pissed. I'd be more concerned if he wasn't."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right on that one."

"What about Vanderhof? What do you make of his name coming up?"

"You mean aside from the fact that Vanderhof's wife is divorcing him and I happen to be the guy who's been following him around for his wife's attorney the past few months?"

"Yeah, aside from that."

"I don't know. Coincidence? Connie and this friend's wife happened to have noticed his name in the news recently? He's had his fair share of coverage. I saw him at the police station just before you showed up. He was dropping off his \$100,000 check to the Policemen's Association. Man of the year, they're calling him."

"What's your point?" Jim said.

I looked over at him.

"I don't know. I hate the son of a bitch for having so much money?"

Jim smiled.

"But as to Connie and Vanderhof, I never saw them together. For what that's worth."

"All right," Jim said. "You want me to send somebody else to chase after him?"

"No, hell. I'm already all dressed up for the occasion and they'd only get in my way."

Jim patted me on the shoulder.

"Go home and get some sleep. You look like hell. Anyway, there's nothing more either one of us can do for tonight."

"Yeah, as soon as I deal with the Butch the miniature poodle."

"What's that all about?"

I explained.

"Well, there's a sign of true devotion," Jim said.

"Or the sign of a complete fool."

"You're getting cynical in your old age."

"Yeah, maybe I am. Well, keep me posted. I'll be in my office tomorrow morning. Hopefully somebody will darken my door dangling trinkets. Depending on how that goes, and the weather, I'll either be there, out on the

road with the air-conditioning blasting or hiding out at the Surf & Sand. I'll have my regular cell phone with me either way."

I got out of Jim's car and waded back down towards my office. The minute I crossed Beach, the sidewalks were jam packed with bodies again. I passed a couple speaking Farsi over ice cream cones in front of the art gallery next to my office door. That was Laurel Lagoon on a summer night. They should have put up a sign out on Coast Highway.

Little Tehran.

Back at my desk, I looked up Steve's parents and called them. His old man answered. He took the news pretty well, all things considered. I didn't expect it to go so well with Steve's mother. I mentioned the matter of bail, then Butch. The old man was ready to put up the house as collateral, if need be, but he didn't know what to say about Butch. Steve's folks lived down in North County San Diego. They were old and didn't drive much at night these days. I told the old man I'd take care of the poodle for the time being and got off.

Christ. What was I going to do with a poodle? In Laurel Lagoon? I may as well be toting around a purse.

I turned off the lamp and kicked my feet back up on my desk. A car went by, sending another kaleidoscope of geometric patterns across my ceiling and walls. I got lost in them. There was some sort of ancient, unspoken feeling they evoked.

Giving in to a misguided notion, I flipped on a Coleman Hawkins CD. *It Never Entered My Mind* started to play. I hung my head and let the melody beat me up. The old memories cut hard and deep—that first kiss, our first night out on the town—the pain of all that still sweeter than anything else I had ever known.

Why had it come to this? Better yet, why did I keep beating myself up? The woman was gone. Why couldn't I let it go?

I had no answers but Solomon would have been proud of me. The heart of a wise man was in mourning, not mirth. So he had said. But all I had of wisdom was to regret the happiness I once held in my hands.

Unable to take another bar of the song, I reached to turn it off. Best to go up and take care of old Butch. I locked the door on my way out, went down to my car and pulled onto Coast Highway, headed south. Steve lived up in the hills on that end of town. I heard Butch barking away as I fished the key out of the fake rock. He went ballistic as I opened the door and stepped inside, like one of those yappy dogs you see locked up in a Cadillac at the supermarket. To Steve's credit, he had skipped the Westminster Kennel Club hairdo. Butch looked more like an overgrown piece of Berber carpet, apricot colored.

"It's okay, Butch," I said and squatted down to his level.

He sat down, still wary, but no longer barking.

“It’s okay, Butch,” I said again. “Come here. Come here.”

He eventually slunk over, tail down like he anticipated a beating. Within moments, he was on his back, paws up in the air, in a state of ecstasy as I scratched his belly. He was awfully cute.

I looked around for Butch’s leash, food and feeding bowls. Butch kept a watchful eye on the entire enterprise. Back out at my Impala, I opened the passenger door and he jumped right up on the seat. A forlorn look followed. A thought occurred to me and I went back inside the house, Butch still shadowing my every move. Out in the garage, I found a tall doggie seat in Steve’s car. Back out at my car, and with the doggie seat installed, Butch jumped right in. We went down the road, Butch eagerly watching the world go by, and with Steve seemingly a thing of the past.

Back at the house, I fed Butch, let him outside to go potty, put some water out and made him a makeshift bed on the floor with some old towels. Before crawling into bed, I poured myself a couple of stiff ones from a bottle of bourbon—straight, no chaser. Butch stared on curiously as I leaned over the kitchen counter, taking the punch, the punch made worse by a realization that it had done nothing to change the underlying feelings.

When I finally crawled into the bed, Butch jumped right up there with me.

“No, no, Butch,” I said and set him back on the towels.

“This is your place. You’ve got the floor tonight, buddy.”

I crawled back into bed with Butch staring at me from ground level, inconsolable, the mouth straight across, like some Sesame Street character—on a bad day.

The little bugger was gunning for an Academy award. He certainly had my vote. After thirty seconds of that, I gave in.

“All right, goddamn it. Come on.”

Butch jumped right up and lay down at my feet.

Christ. This is not the way I had pictured my life turning out.

I lay there thinking about Connie’s murder, trying to put two and two together but it was too damned late. My brain was mush. I promised to give them all hell in the morning and turned off the lamp.

South on Pacific Coast Highway

3

I stepped back into my office the next morning at a little past nine. The temperature was pushing a hundred degrees again and it was sultry heat—what they referred to as *monsoonal* conditions these days—humid weather that drifted up from the Mexican border from time to time, mixed with a blast of desert heat and then you had a bit of hell on your hands.

Miserable from the heat and the booze and with the cotton shirt feeling like wool on my back, I contemplated another tactical retreat to the Surf & Sand Hotel. There was a glance at the liquor cabinet behind me. A bit of the hair of the dog that bit me. I noticed Butch over there staring at me. Goddamn him. Goddamn the booze. The stuff was starting to kill me.

In lieu of a drink, I grabbed the USB cable for my camera. Jake owed me money for that mission up to gangbanger land the previous day and I needed money. While the photos were uploading onto my computer, I reached for the phone and gave him a call.

“It’s Devlin,” I said when he answered.

“Did you get the photos of her?”

“Yeah, staggering out the front door with some biker trash.”

“Fucking bitch.”

I let him stew. If you hated the old flame, that probably meant you still loved her too, so of course it had to be killing Jake inside, this idea that she was doing another man. I assumed that would be true in spades if it involved some badass biker.

“But nothing of her inside,” Jake said.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. I’m lucky I wasn’t on the wrong end of a drive-by shooting.”

“Shit,” he said.

“Look, I ID’d this biker character and he’s got a rap sheet a mile long, including a meth lab bust so these photos of them together is enough to prove intent. She didn’t drive up there to get her nails done. With her history, let her try to explain this away to a judge.”

“All right. What do I owe you?”

“Eight hundred, minus the retainer.”

“Shit.”

“Look, I followed her around for two days and you already knew my rates.”

“All right. Send me the photos and I’ll send you a check.”

“No, Jake. You come down here with a check and I’ll hand you the photos.”

“Come on, man. You’ve already got my retainer. I’m good for the rest. Just attach them to an e-mail and I’ll put a check in the mail today.”

I smelled a rat but did as he had asked.

“All right. They’re on their way. Please don’t fuck me around.”

“Don’t worry about a thing, brother. I’ll take care of you.”

I got off the phone, plenty worried. Fucking other people around had become a career goal for a lot of people in this world and I had no proof that Jake saw life any differently. I added his invoice to a growing stack of unpaid bills and leaned back in my chair. There was a glance at the pink-brown smog gathering out near Catalina Island, then over at Butch. He was lying on the floor, panting away. I tried to unglue the cotton shirt from my back one more time and that got Butch’s attention, but just the eyes.

What the hell was I going to do with the little bugger? I figured our relationship had a shelf life of about two or three days.

With a look back out at the coast, I felt a sudden urge to head down south to my trailer in Baja. Once you got past all the garbage blown up against the border fence, and the clutter of Ensenada seventy miles farther south, the road jackknifed up into the coastal mountains and the journey took you back a hundred years in time. Vineyards carpeted the high valleys. Ramshackle farms dotted the hillsides here and there, slapped together with corrugated sheet metal, cardboard and old camper shells. After fifty miles or so of loping through oak and sycamore-shrouded mountain passes, the road headed back down towards the coast along a rolling salt plain. The Sea of Cortez was to your back, just to the other side of a mountain range running north and south down the spine of the peninsula and every afternoon, without fail, the high winds blew down from that direction like a venturi, turning the Pacific into a regatta; white caps and gulls and surf breaking as far as the eye could see. My heart had grown lost in the imagery when the phone rang. I saw Jim’s name on my caller ID and reached for the phone.

“Yeah, Jim.”

“The DA just charged Steve with murder one.”

“What the hell for?”

“Apparently a couple of Connie’s friends saw Steve stalking her around.”

“Oh, goddamn it.”

“You know about this?”

“Yeah, I caught him following her around at one point. He had hired me when she first filed for divorce, but the minute this stalking business came to light, I read him the riot act and that was that.”

“I don’t like the smell of it.”

“I’m telling you, Jim. I’ve known the man since we were kids. All through school, I never so much as saw him get into a fight. You never thought of Steve and violence in the same sentence.”

“I’m trusting your instincts here, my friend, and stalking your wife alone isn’t much to go on. It may just be a play of hand so Whalen and the DA can keep Steve behind bars for another seventy-two hours but he’s headed to OCJ and there’s nothing I can do about it now. Not until they arraign him. I’ll press to get that done today, but it will probably take until Monday now.”

“All right. Did you have a chance to talk with this Tim Durant yet?”

“Spoke with him an hour ago. As best he could tell, Connie was chirping away about Vanderhof’s wealth and good looks on the phone that day. Did she know him? Was she seeing him? Tim couldn’t say, one way or the other.”

“And his wife?”

“She’s at work. I haven’t had a chance to question her yet.”

“All right. Thanks, Jim. Is Steve still up there at the police station?”

“Yeah, Whalen said it would be another hour or so before they could run him up north.”

“Thanks. I’ll give Whalen a call.”

I had Whalen on the phone a minute later.

“Don’t even try,” he said before I could open my mouth.

“Come on, Pat. You got a murder weapon? A witness? Some DNA?”

“I’ve got probable cause and that’s good enough for me right now.”

“Shit, once you and the DA get a hard on like this, the good lord himself could come back to testify and it wouldn’t change your minds.”

“You done?”

“Yeah, but I just wish you’d be reasonable for once. The man’s not going anywhere. Why the hell do you have to make his life miserable until you’re sure?”

“It’s done, Devlin, so why don’t you get back to your husbands and wives stabbing each other in the back business.”

I was about to give Whalen a piece of my mind but the phone was already dead.

Bastard, I thought. Had to be a wise guy. Everybody had to be a wise guy these days. My mind went off on a shooting spree in response.

While I was still giving the world hell, the phone rang again. This time the caller ID read Cliff Black, a prospective client who had called me while on a business trip to Seattle three days earlier, claiming his wife was in some sort of trouble. The idea was for me to follow the doll around town, only don't let her know I was there. A big red flag had gone up right there. If not for me needing the money, I would have passed on the job. I needed another marriage going south like I needed another hole in the head.

I went ahead and answered the phone. Cliff and I exchanged hellos.

"I arrived back into town last night and found my wife was missing."

"Missing..."

"Well, she's not here."

"When was the last time you spoke with her?"

"Three days ago."

"Hmm. And you have no idea where she is."

"No."

"Hmm."

"Please, Mr. Devlin. I need to talk with you in person about what I mentioned in our last conversation."

"What time we're you thinking?"

"Right now, if that's possible."

"How long will it take you to get here?"

"Oh, roughly fifteen minutes."

"All right. I'll wait."

"I'll head out the door as soon as we're off."

I leaned back in my chair and looked out the window. Whalen was probably right. I was just a nickel and dime operator, with a specialty in husbands and wives stabbing each other in the back. From what Cliff had described to me on the phone from Seattle, it certainly sounded as if Mrs. Black was having an affair. Probably Cliff thought so, too. If she was in so much trouble, why were we being coy about me tailing her around?

According to Cliff, the whole thing had started when his wife took an unexpected business trip to Phoenix the previous week. She came home late that same night, explained away her foul mood by saying a client was running her around and went off to bed without another word.

Over the next several days, Cliff became aware of Mrs. Black making hushed phone calls from their home office, the door conveniently closed. Sensing that something was wrong, Cliff decided to call me from his business trip to Seattle. One of my former clients had referred him along.

Having related the aforementioned scenario, Cliff wanted to know what I thought. I told him it wasn't much to go on. It wasn't, but I had declined to

reveal my real hunch, about Mrs. Black having an affair, or to confess that I was tired of being in the husbands and wives stabbing each other in the back business. After all the years, and all the jilted lovers, I was developing a real aversion to infidelity. I had seen one too many visions of marital bliss blown all to hell, and to me, Cliff sure sounded like one more jilted lover.

Ignoring my reluctance on the phone that day, Cliff had pressed on. Before leaving on his business trip, he had stumbled across some information, something his wife appeared to have scribbled absentmindedly on her desk calendar while talking on the phone. It involved a very powerful individual and suggested to Cliff that his wife really was in danger. I had asked Cliff to go into more detail. He had declined to do so over the phone. As soon as he returned from Seattle in a few days, he would stop by my office and explain everything in person. All he asked was that I keep an eye on his wife until he returned.

“I really, really love her” Cliff had assured me before we hung up. “Perhaps you can understand why I’d be so concerned.”

“Sure, sure,” I had told him.

What were you going to do when someone hit you with the “I really, really love her” card? Chances were, the woman’s heart had moved on, but accept the fact? Like every other dumb fool in this world, this one included, it appeared that Cliff was not ready to let go, at least not without a struggle. Faced with the obvious, few men ever were. We were more inclined to do a Kabuki dance with our thoughts late at night. If only I had done this. If only I had done that. Surely I can make autumn leaves return to their trees.

Given my abundant reservations, I had gotten off the call with Cliff that day thinking, well, let’s just leave things as they are until he returns from Seattle. But then his deposit check had arrived in the mail, and honor being what it is, I blew twenty-five bucks on Audrey’s background check, learning, among other things, that she had graduated from USC, class of '85, had acquired an MBA from Pepperdine, had done a ten year stint with a Fortune 500 company and now ran a private consulting firm with a go getter named Rick Duncan. They had a cozy little office up the coast. I smelled afternoon sex all over his back office.

Setting that suspicion aside, I went ahead with a call up to their consulting firm the following morning. Audrey answered and I immediately liked the voice, though with reservations. It was sweet. It was melodic but way too corporate for my tastes.

I gave her a line about being a potential client and we talked. While we did, someone shouted out in the background. I assumed it to be her partner, Rick Duncan. There was the sound of the phone being cupped in Audrey’s delicate little hand and her muffled voice.

“Sorry,” she said in coming back. “That was my business associate. He wasn’t aware of me being on the phone.”

I let both of them off the hook for their sloppy professionalism. What did I care? My primary question had been answered. Sex or no sex, everything seemed to be peachy in Audrey’s world. I made a discreet exit from the phone call and was now waiting for Cliff to arrive at my office. The fifteen minutes went by, then another fifteen minutes and still no sign of Cliff.

I did not mind people being late, but call me. My time was as valuable as yours was. Apparently some folks disagreed.

While seated there, I heard the sound of children’s laughter echoing up from the beach and spun around in that direction, greeted with the images of summertime down at the shore—umbrellas and beach towels, ice chests and sun tan lotion, a crowd of carefree souls down there frolicking around in the surf. If not for Steve’s problems, and this unwelcome appointment with Cliff, I would have headed down to the shore myself. Take a stroll along the boardwalk. Pull my loafers off and stick my toes in the surf for a little while.

I was lost in my daydreams when a silhouette materialized outside my frosted glass door. I sat up and prepared to look professional but it was only my neighbor Betty from down the hall. She cracked the door open and poked her head in.

I waved for her to make the complete entrance. She did.

"I heard you talking earlier and thought maybe you were still on the phone."

"Just talking to myself."

Betty laughed. Both her voice and laughter were gravelly from all the cigarettes. Her aura was tinged with gray from all the smoke.

“Oh my god!” she said, noticing Butch. “He’s adorable!”

Butch went right over and let out with a coyote howl, a couple of them in a row, the mouth in a big “O”, the front paws bouncing up off the floor with each one.

Betty and I laughed.

“What brought this on?” she asked.

“The poodle or the howl?”

“Both.”

“The howl, I don’t know. It’s the first I’ve heard of it. The poodle? You know, when in Laurel Lagoon...”

She laughed again.

“What’s her name?”

“His name. Butch.”

I explained the situation.

“Aw, I’ll take care of him for you.”

“You will?”

“Sure. You need a nice little home, don’t you, Butchie?”

He was on his back now, paws up, all love and kisses.

Betty’s husband Leonard went by out in the hallway.

“Look,” Betty said. “One of Michael’s clients got arrested so Michael’s watching his dog. I’m taking him home.”

Leonard nodded without a smile and continued down the hall. He and Betty had come out from Jersey the previous year, Italians, the last name right out of the mob. Together they ran an online cosmetic supply business. Betty handled the phones. Leonard handled collections. She was the dame. He was the goodfella with the oversized reading glasses hanging from a gold chain around his neck. Their specialties were hair products and a line of ponytails. Betty was sixty something trying to look forty with her stretch slacks, Barbie Doll shoes and an empire-waist blouse. She had a figure. I’d give her that. I was still trying to decide if the blonde hair piled up on her head was real or not. The do was somewhere between Phyllis Diller and Farrah Fawcett. Probably a little more on the Diller side of things.

“So what’s on your mind?” I asked her. “Besides Butch.”

“Oh, about the landlord. What do you say we hit him up for a bit of air-conditioning? This heat is starting to drive me mad.”

“We’d have better luck trying to find a couple of natives to fan us.”

She laughed again. The look on her face suggested I might be ready to bill her for the joke.

“You’re a real character. Why don’t you give him a call?”

“Why don’t you?” I said.

“You’re no fun.”

“It’s no fun asking Pat to make improvements to this building. Look at the place. Besides, he’ll just raise the rents. Is that what you want?”

There was another tap on the door and this time the mailman came in. He was dark-haired, mulatto looking, with a blue bandana tied around his head.

“Here’s your native with the palm fronds,” I said to Betty.

There was more laughter on Betty’s part. The mailman smiled warily, sensing he had been made the object of a punch line but not knowing which one.

“Hot one,” he said and reached out with my mail.

“Hot one,” I said. “Betty here needs someone to fan her. Ten to four, if you’re looking for extra work.”

With another wary smile, the mailman did a double take on Butch and went out the door. I turned back to Betty.

“You were saying?”

“Okay, I’ll just have Leonard call the landlord.”

“Now you’re talking. Sic the Italians after him.”

“Thanks for nothing,” she said. “Come on, Butchie.”

“Here, you may as well take his bowls.”

Butch did his howl and trotted after Betty as if I had never even existed. I watched them disappear, feeling as if my life had veered way too close to a bad sitcom. Betty and the old man lived next door. I was the neighbor who stopped by for a glass of cheap cabernet and an episode of CSI now and then. Betty had Butch in her lap and a Bellagio sofa. Her ashtray was always filled with cigarette butts. I had other places to go but could never seem to get back out the front door. We were a movie within a movie, life imitating art.

I slumped down in my chair and turned the small fan on my desk more directly at my face.

Tough break for those two. They had sold their home in Hackensack, expecting to find orange trees and a Mediterranean climate. Instead, they had been greeted with monsoons. At least in Jersey they had four seasons.

The phone rang and I saw it was my mortgage broker. I reached for the phone, my heart filled with hope. My finances were in shambles, clients not paying their bills. A few years back I had been sitting on top of the world, money in the bank, tons of equity in my home. Now the ship was going down. This had to be the Coast Guard pulling up...or else.

“Sorry,” the broker said. “But they turned you down.”

“I’ve got equity,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, but not that much and you missed a payment.”

“I took out a loan to take care of my dying parents.”

“They don’t give a shit about your noble intentions. They only care about the bottom line.”

“Goddamn it,” I said and got up to kick the desk. “Those self-righteous, bloodsucking bastards. Screw us all and wave as we’re going down.”

“That’s about it, but at least you’re not alone. They’re being pricks to most everyone.

“Oh, well, that makes me feel a hell of a lot better about things.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the way it is. You want me to keep trying?”

“No, screw it. I’m done with the bastards. Send me a bill if you have to.”

He declined. I got off, staring at skid row.

South on Pacific Coast Highway

4

Seated back in my chair, I started thumbing through the invoices stacked up on my desk. Half a dozen clients and not one of them paying their bills, save for Mrs. Vanderhof. Then, with all of her money, she could have purchased the Dakotas and had enough change left over to make a bid on the Marianas.

Christ, what a world. Her soon to be ex-husband had set up an online gambling casino in China a few years back. A bit of proprietary software, a nod from the communist party, the flip of a switch and, bingo, he was a multi billionaire a few months later. Meanwhile, I was an itinerant Irish minstrel, and going broke for being so. Fifty years old and my heart was still over the hill somewhere.

With my back to the wall, I made several calls but it was the same BS everywhere I turned. Everyone was tapped out. And those were the nice ones. The real pricks didn't even bother to answer my calls.

I glanced up at the clock, mad at myself for the poor decisions I had made in life and deciding to take it out on Cliff Black. The bastard was nearly an hour late. He could take his goddamned failing marriage and shove it.

With maybe twenty minutes at best before they hauled Steve up to county jail, I pushed back from my desk and was headed for the door when a woman's scream tore apart the sultry morning. I rushed back across the office and poked my head out the window.

A man wearing all black was sprawled out on the sidewalk directly below me. A pool of blood was gathering next to his chest. In keeping with the nature of fluids, the blood had already started to search for lower ground.

In that instant, I was out my door and racing down the hallway. I hustled down the old wooden stairs and went charging out of the front door in a similar fashion. A crowd of people had gathered around the body, but mostly at a safe distance. Only a Mexican busboy from Mark's across the street had dared to kneel down near the man. He stood up when he saw me coming. I knelt down in his place.

Best to find a priest, I thought with a closer look at the man's chest. He appeared to have taken one close to the heart. Blood had turned the front of

his shirt into a pool of red paint. On a hospital gurney, he might have lived. Lying on a public sidewalk, I gave him two, maybe three minutes before he joined the dearly departed.

Holding his hand, I wondered who in their right mind would be sporting a black coat, a black shirt and black pants in the middle of a heat wave. Never mind the gray streak dyed into his once perfectly coifed black hair. The guy looked like he belonged at a celebrity impersonator's convention. He should have been schlepping photos of himself on the Vegas Strip for twenty bucks and a kiss, not gunned down on the sidewalks of Laurel Lagoon on a blisteringly hot summer day.

Then it dawned on me. This is Cliff Black. Some luck. A potential payday and he gets plugged twenty feet from my office door. I leaned down closer and whispered to him.

“Cliff?”

His eyes came around and looked at me, leaden but trying to say something.

“I'm Michael Devlin. What happened?”

He spoke in a raspy, inaudible whisper. I put my ear up closer to his mouth.

“My wife,” he said. “Audrey...she's knows the...”

His breath gave way to a rattle. I leaned in closer and whispered again.

“Your wife knows what? Who shot you?”

I felt his body heave ever so slightly and pulled back to look at his face. The mouth was open. The eyes were dead. I closed the eyelids. There was a gasp from the crowd as I did. A man pushed through everyone else on the sidewalk. He was wearing the collar.

“I'm the pastor from the Presbyterian Church. Someone up the street said a man had been shot.”

I stood up and turned the last rights over to him. He saw the blood.

“Oh dear God,” he said and knelt in prayer.

Just then, two squad cars came barreling the wrong way down the one-way street, sirens blaring. A moment later, I had Detective Whalen in my face. He had a quick look at the last rights in progress and looked back at me.

“You know this guy?”

“No,” I said.

“Did you see what happened?”

“No.”

“Do you know anything?”

“I know whoever plugged him must have used a silencer.”

“So, no shots rang out.”

“Nope, just a woman's scream.”

“Do you know which woman?”

“Nope,” I said.

He came closer.

“And you didn’t plug him yourself.”

“No, but maybe Steve did.”

“Don’t get smart with me, Devlin.”

“Well, open your eyes, Pat. Something bigger is going on here.”

“You know what your problem is, Devlin? You think too much. Now get out of here before I cook up something to charge you with.”

“What about Steve?”

“What about him?”

“Is he still up at the station?”

“Nope. He’s on his way to the rough house. Not to worry, though. Nice white boy like that? Those Mexicans up there will take real good care of him.”

“Jesus, Pat. No one will ever accuse you of wearing your heart on your sleeve.”

He offered me a cheap smile and moved on to the business of dead bodies. I had a look around at the crowd. Most of my neighbors from upstairs had come down to gawk. Leonard, our resident mob boss was among them. I looked up and saw Betty poking her head out from their office window. The cops were busy rolling out caution tape. As they pushed everyone back, I trudged upstairs to my office. Betty peeked out into the hallway before I had a chance to disappear inside. She was holding Butch.

“Is he dead?”

“Yeah.”

“God, how awful.”

I nodded. With the crime family name, I figured she and Leonard had seen their share of dead bodies, but maybe not.

Inside my office, I grabbed a moist towel and cleaned the blood from my hands.

Well, hell, I thought, sitting back at my desk. What a lousy way to start the morning. Watch a man lose his life, and here I had been hoping to cash his check.

I wondered who was going to tell Cliff’s wife, Audrey. By the looks of Cliff, I now had visions of Audrey with dyed black hair, tattoos and body piercings everywhere.

I turned the fan back in my face and considered Cliff’s words. “My wife Audrey...she knows the...” She knows what? Who shot him? Or whatever it was that Cliff had been reluctant to discuss with me over the phone?

Filled with reservations about this case from the start, I had never thought to dig into Cliff’s identity but went online and did so now. His name popped

up on a Facebook search. That was him all right, the guy lying dead on the sidewalk. A picture of Audrey was on his wall, but instead of Elvira, it was a beautiful redhead. The image of her kicked me right in the gut. I had a thing for beautiful redheads. I had loved one deeply not all that long ago. In fact, the truth was, I still loved her now. Staring at the face, I fell far, far down into a tangle of ancient emotions.

All too aware of where this path was leading me, I closed my laptop and considered how to return Cliff's deposit check. That led to a movie playing out in my head. A call made to Audrey, explaining about the check, an invitation from her to stop by and drop it off in person, me expressing my condolences out on the front porch, Audrey inviting me inside for a cup of tea, she in black and me being careful not to stare too much at her long, red hair or pale white skin as we chatted. My movie then conveniently faded to the two of us frittering away a quiet afternoon behind closed bedroom doors.

Christ, I thought and reached for the phone. At least I had Cliff's check to pole vault me over my questionable motives.

A moment later, my pal Kenny answered his phone. Kenny had a second story office directly across from mine. I looked over and saw his dimpled face smiling back at me. We could have hit each other with well-aimed tortillas, if there had been an inclination to do so.

Kenny had come out of college with a fine arts degree, a career path that had failed to pay his bills, so he put his minor in software engineering to work and somehow drifted into the people search business. I liked using him over the big names online. It was more personal. Plus he was good.

"I take it you can see the dead man lying down there on the sidewalk."

"Bummer," Kenny said.

"Yeah, well remember Audrey?"

"Yeah, from last week."

"Yeah, well that's her husband and I'm on a mission now to find Audrey before the cops do."

"You think she did it?" Kenny said.

"I don't know, but my guts are telling me that something doesn't add up here. I've got Cliff up on Facebook."

"Just a second," he said. "Okay, I've got him too. Wow, some get up. Just like he's wearing right now. What's with the gray streak dyed in his hair?"

"It was big in Hollywood some years back. Probably a bit before your time."

"I guess so."

"Yeah. I suspect it was part of his professional persona. It says here he was an industrial photographer, but his real passion was portraiture."

“The frustrated artist,” Kenny said.

“Aren’t we all...”

“Hey, Audrey looks a lot like your old flame.”

“Shut up and get to work.”

Kenny laughed, which could have been mistaken for a man clearing his throat, or an act of self-deprecation, or both.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’ll send you an e-mail as soon as I have some info.”

While I waited, I thumbed through the photos on Cliff’s wall, including several of his marriage to Audrey. She was wearing white, he a black tux. It looked like a big crowd. The ceremony had taken place about three years back. Why Audrey had fallen for a guy channeling ‘50s matinee idols was beyond me to explain. As romances went, it did appear to have its flaws, but who was I to say? I had spent half a lifetime looking for the right gal, only to see my best shot drop kicked off a cliff. What did I know about handicapping romances?

I jotted down the names of various friends and family members listed on the Facebook page and got back to staring at Audrey. God, the red hair and turned up nose. I knew it was in my best interest to bail out of this thing right now but my heart had other ideas. Plus there was my hunch. Something told me Connie and Cliff’s murders were connected.

The phone rang. It was Kenny.

“I found her social security number and hacked into her credit cards. She checked out of a hotel in downtown San Diego about two hours ago.”

“Just enough time to drive up here and shoot her husband.”

“Pretty suspicious, huh?”

“Yeah, seems like a bit of a stretch, but she had just enough time and I’m not very fond of coincidences.”

“Yeah. So what now?”

“Kimosabe.”

Kenny laughed.

“Well, keep tracking her. Let’s see where she lands next. And send me a bill, even though I can’t pay it right now.”

Kenny did his laugh again and hung up.

Aware of renewed buzz down on the sidewalk, I looked out. Apparently the forensics folks had finished with poking around at Cliff. A sheet was being spread over him. The cops had wasted a few rolls of caution tape trying to keep the crowd at bay.

I sat back and considered again how to return the check. I certainly owed Audrey an explanation. Cliff had been concerned about his wife and she would no doubt find the entry in his checkbook.

I stared at her beautiful face. Damn this thing with redheads, anyway.

I was hanging there on my cross of former bliss and new hopes when the phone rang. With a glance, I saw it was Mr. Vanderhof.

Mr. Billion Dollars, I liked to call him. I grabbed the phone.

“Fancy that, Mr. Vanderhof. I was just thinking about you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, but I’ll get over it. What’s on your mind?”

“I’ve got a job for you.”

“And that would be?”

“Meet me at the English Cottage in half an hour and I’ll tell you.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Ethics. You may be a bit unfamiliar with that term, but here’s how it works. You settle with your wife. Then we can talk. Until then I don’t meet you anywhere outside of a courtroom.”

“Don’t tell me you lack the balls to meet me in a quiet bar somewhere.”

“I lack a penchant for folly. That’s what I lack. Besides, I have a couple of murders to solve. You know anything about murder?”

There was silence.

“No. Why would you ask?”

“Just fishing.”

“Sorry,” he said after a moment of silence. “That’s one subject I don’t know anything about.”

“Okay then. End of conversation. Give me a call as soon as Mrs. Vanderhof owns half your fortune.”

Vanderhof started to say something more but I dropped the receiver in its cradle and spun around in my chair. There was one more attempt to unglue the blue, cotton shirt from my back.

Vanderhof playing dumb, when Steve had known him back in the day. Something didn’t smell right.

In the course of investigating Vanderhof for his wife’s divorce attorney, I had unearthed everything from a statutory rape charge to backdated stock options. The statutory rape business had involved a sixteen-year-old girl. A few drinks late one night, a joint, a bit of extracurricular activity in his bedroom Jacuzzi and, boom, he was in big trouble.

“That was nothing but a bit of fun,” he had told the district attorney when I brought his dalliance to light. Called me a slimy, groveling piece of shit for exposing him. That was no way to start a friendship. A grand jury was still trying to sort things out.

Then there was Mrs. Vanderhof, the silky blonde. She was enough to make men forget about all the beautiful redheads in this world, but with her

convertible Bentley and the teacup Yorkie in her purse, there were times when I found it easier to side with her fool of a husband. Then, it was hard to feel sorry for either one of them. All that money, a mansion the size of a concert hall and all they could wring from it was a penchant to stab each other in the back.

About the only thing that engendered sympathy for the Vanderhofs was their missing daughter. Someone had abducted her as a toddler about fifteen years back. Several ransom notes had followed, then nothing, not another word. That was a hard one to take. Hell, for all I knew, the grief of it was what had driven the couple apart.

I had a look back down at the sidewalk. Cliff was gone, and most of the cops along with him. A swarm of reporters had taken their place. I said a word of sympathy for the dead and got back to Cliff's final utterance.

Audrey...she knows the...

Audrey knows the...what?

I had my hunch, but it involved nothing more than circumstantial evidence. All I had for facts was a man's purported devotion.

"I really, really love my wife," Cliff had said. "Perhaps you can understand why I'd be so concerned."

Yeah. I understood all right. Every time a lady tossed my heart away, there was an impulse to grab hold of her as she wandered down the road of life, to plead with her, to make the joy we once knew come back to life. It just rarely did.

The way I saw it, Cliff was the lucky one. One shot in the heart and he was on a fast track to Nirvana, his troubles over.

I decided to grab a sandwich down the block and left the windows open to the heat, hoping it wouldn't be so hot upon my return.

Using the back door of the building, I expected to avoid the swarm of reporters, but no such luck. The alley in both directions was lined with news trucks. Vultures. They'd pick the bones off this carcass and disappear the minute someone was shot down the road.

A cop had positioned his squad car in the library parking lot directly across from my back door. I received a nod from him going by. My focus was on making the next block before Bernie or any of his cronies noticed my escape.

South on Pacific Coast Highway

5

I slipped back into my office fifteen minutes later, the heat even more oppressive than when I had gone out. Seated at my desk, I watched the same Mexican busboy now setting up tables over at Mark's. The sidewalk was still damp from where he had hosed it off earlier in the morning. People were crammed together along the storefronts out near Coast Highway and up by Beach Street, but yellow caution tape had made a neat line around the scene of the crime. The cops had also cleared the street of cars, save for their own.

I heard a car horn honk. Someone was trying to pull in from the highway and getting pissed about the inconvenience. A uniformed cop walked out and read him the riot act. One of Whalen's underlings was still down there taking testimony from anybody who thought they might have something to add to the plot. Reporters followed directly in his wake.

I glanced up at the dry hills wavering in the heat behind town, then back at the gawkers. Life went on. A sense of disbelief permeated the summer morning. I leaned back in my chair, tormented by the heat, two murders and a handful of memories I could not seem to forget.

Just as the memories were doing another lap in my head, I heard footsteps marching up the stairs. They marched down the hallway and my door flew open. I had Whalen in my face. His pal Fowler had tagged along for the ride. Fowler was the new kid on the block, baby-faced, with dark hair, his whole persona pregnant with arrogance, hair oil and a stick of chewing gum. You might have guessed from Fowler's smile that the two of them had stopped by for a college prank, but one look at Pat and I knew otherwise.

"I heard you and Mr. Black were sharing secrets before he kicked the bucket."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So let's hear what he had to say."

"He said 'my wife, she knows the...' We never got any further than that. I presume he was going to say 'she knows the way that I loved her.'"

"Don't get cute with me."

“I’m not. You want me to make up something, I will, but that’s what the man said.”

Pat shook his head.

“What?” I said.

“You’re always holding back on me, Devlin, and I don’t like it.”

“Aw hell, Pat. I had just witnessed a man lose his life. Forgive me for being a bit distracted.”

He started for the door.

“Hey,” I said. “Have you been able to locate Cliff’s wife yet?”

Pat paused.

“What do you care?”

“Just thinking of Cliff. She was the last thing on his mind.”

“No, I haven’t been able to reach her and apparently no one else has for the past three days. And don’t go sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong,” Pat added before heading out the door.

Fowler tried the same tough guy look before disappearing but he was about twenty years of gravitas and some acting lessons shy of the proper effect. I offered him an Italian salute and got back to juggling the various pieces of two murders in my mind. Cliff had suspected Audrey of being in trouble. She goes missing for three days, then checks out of a hotel down in San Diego two hours before her husband is plugged. Something didn’t add up.

The phone rang again, breaking me from my thoughts. It was Jim Harrison.

“What do you know, Jim?”

“I couldn’t get the arraignment scheduled until Monday. And the judge won’t talk bail with me until then.”

“All right. I’ll have to drive up and visit Steve over the weekend.”

“By the way, you know anything about the shooting downtown?”

“Surely you jest, Jim. The man was sprawled out here right below my office windows. A prospective client, no less. I was ready to place his deposit check in the bank.”

I explained everything Cliff had told me and what I had seen.

“Any hunches,” Jim asked me.

Haven’t a clue at this point.”

“Well, keep me posted, and let’s go grab a steak one of these nights.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

“You always say that. Then I never hear from you until you’re in trouble again.”

“Okay, I’ll give you a call soon.”

“Hey,” I said before hanging up.

“Yeah,” Jim said.

“Get a message through to Steve. My neighbor Betty is looking after his dog Butch. He’s in heaven. He seems to have a thing for ladies with smoky voices.”

Jim promised he would and we got off. I sat there in the listless heat, faced with the contradiction of my life. I figured our only hope as a society was to act in a tribal fashion— that this BS about us being rugged individualists was just that, a bunch of BS, a myth that had us headed for the fall of Rome—yet I never called my friends anymore and was forever thinking to run off to my place down in Baja. I was about as tribal as a grizzly bear.

My attention came back to the list of names I had written down from Cliff’s profile. Here was your chance to pitch in, buddy. A friend needed you. You had the rest of your life to escape from the world.

Promising myself I would head down south of the border next week, I opened my laptop and started digging around online. Audrey’s business came first so I gave her office a call. When no one answered, I dug up some numbers for Audrey’s family. Her mother was next in line. She answered and said she had just learned the news about Cliff. I explained that Cliff was an old friend and there was something personal I needed to share with Audrey.

“Of course, under the circumstances, there’s no rush. Just ask Audrey to give me a call whenever she feels up to it.”

“I will,” Mom said, sniffing away. “My God, this is all so terrible. And now I can’t even find my own daughter. I haven’t heard from her in almost three days. You don’t think she’s in trouble too, do you?”

“No, no. I have no reason to think that.”

I offered a few more reassuring words, left my phone number and hung up.

I had the numbers for Audrey’s three sisters and started down the list. With the first two, I got no answer. It was the middle of the afternoon. Maybe they were out having fun in the summer sun. Maybe they were on their way over to join the grieving party at Mom’s place.

Audrey's youngest sister Diane was the last one in line, and with her I finally caught someone at home.

"Who are you?" she said when I told her I was looking for Audrey. The sound of her kids could be heard yelling in the background.

"My name’s Michael.”

I gave her the same line I had given Mom.

The yelling and screaming reached a new crescendo in the background. I became aware of the phone being cupped and heard the muffled sound of Diane scolding her kids. Then she was back.

"Sorry about that," she said. "Well, if you're looking for Audrey, I'm afraid I can't help. Everybody in our family's been looking for her. By the way, how did you get my number?"

"It was in the white pages online."

"Oh. Well I'll have to do something about that."

"Well, sorry for the intrusion and what I have to tell Audrey isn't all that urgent, in and of itself. It's just something in Cliff's personal affairs that she's bound to stumble over, so it would be best if I relayed the particulars to her personally. Do you think she'll give you a call?"

"I doubt it. We're not that close. She hasn't stopped by my place for years, other than for the holidays."

"Well, again, I'm terribly sorry about Cliff and this can certainly wait until things settle down a bit."

"I'll definitely pass along the message, once we hear from her."

"Thanks."

"Sorry I can't be of more help but I really need to go. I was about to call my niece Sylvia when you phoned. She has a fortune telling business down in Doheny Beach and I've been waiting all morning for her shop to open."

Diane had mentioned her niece's fortune teller shop like she was referring to a strip joint on the road to hell. I offered my condolences one more time, left my number, rang off and immediately went in search of Sylvia's phone number on the Internet. I knew her place. I had been passing by the neon sign out on Coast Highway for many years. When the number came up, I called. When no one answered, I left a message. Nothing about Audrey this time. I was just a man looking to have his fortune read. It was a line, but fitting enough.

With a glance at my watch, I saw it was a little past noon. The phone rang a moment later. It was Kenny again.

"Have you read the news today?"

"Oh boy," I said.

Kenny did his laugh.

"I'm sending you a link. This story just broke."

A moment later, his e-mail arrived. I clicked on the link and quickly scrolled through an article about Magellan Ltd., Audrey's consulting firm. She and her partner Rick were mentioned as the owners. According to anonymous sources, the Feds believed that a shipment of small arms they had helped broker actually contained some illicit technology. No word yet on the exact nature of that technology or the ultimate destination of the shipping container, but speculation centered on the Middle East somewhere.

Meanwhile, a Saudi arms merchant involved with the deal had escaped to the wild backstreets of Abu Dhabi and an FBI agent turned bad was sitting in jail right then, getting used to steel bars and florescent lights. The Feds were still ransacking LA harbor in search of the shipping container. Towards the end of the article, there was mention of Vanderhof being one of Magellan Ltd.'s former clients.

"I wish I was back on Orion," I said.

"What do you mean?" Kenny said.

I told him about my recurring dream. I had come here from a distant star by way of spaceship but had missed the ride back. Every day at dusk, I had this haunting image. My wife was cooking me dinner, waiting for my return home. Of course, I would never be back now, having missed the spaceship.

"Mind you," I said. "Things were perfect back on Orion."

"Of course," Kenny said.

"Unlike here."

Kenny laughed.

"Well, listen, Kenny. About this article. I want you to look into something for me."

I explained my thoughts.

"See what you can find out. And let me know the minute Audrey starts banging her credit cards again."

"Will do."

I got off and leaned back in my chair, armed with just enough facts to drive a man crazy. Cliff's wife gets herself into a legal mess and goes on the run. Okay, but how did that have anything to do with Cliff being plugged? And how did Cliff being plugged have anything to do with Connie having been strangled out by Irvine Lake the other day? I hadn't a clue.

The idea of dirty business going down in Orange County had always been so hard for me to imagine. There was nothing more sinister going on behind all those shopping malls, well-manicured lawns and water slide parks than a few extra-marital affairs, right?

Christ, how naïve of me. A high tech corridor shot right down the backbone of the valley east of Laurel Lagoon, commencing amidst the crisscross of power lines and barrios to the north and terminating into the brick driveway of Mr. Billion Dollars' tony, gate-guarded estate, a corridor of wealth that divided the mountains from the sea and in some places had a view of them both. Taking into consideration all the money at stake, the inherent greed of humanity and the shady deals for which our local government officials had been famous over the years, why would I assume there to be anything but a lot of foul play involved?

That was what happened when you lived a sheltered life in the once sleepy little beach town of Laurel Lagoon for too long, a slave to your long lost liberal arts education and misplaced beliefs. I went to bed every night thinking this world of ours was a fundamentally decent place, and that most everyone in it was worthy of being trusted. I had no idea how to square those assumptions with five thousand years of human history. People kept stabbing each other in the back. That seemed to be mankind's enduring legacy.

I folded up my laptop. Jesus. Of all the billions of galaxies, and all the countless worlds, I had to get stuck in this one.

My daydreams wandered back to that afternoon tryst with Audrey. While lost in those thoughts, I heard footsteps cautiously coming up the wooden stairs. I heard them approach slowly down the hallway. A silhouette went past my office. A moment later, whoever it was returned and stopped outside my door. Very quietly, and without moving another muscle, I opened the top drawer to my desk and placed my hand on the .38. The silhouette was stationary on the other side of the glass.

It was a man. I knew that much. He was dark haired, robust around the midsection and sporting a mustache. He seemed to be looking straight at me.

Finally, whoever it was turned and started back down the hallway towards the stairs. His footsteps went down to the ground level. The back door opened and closed. I dashed out into the hallway and peeked from the fire escape window but the man had disappeared.

I was sitting back down at my desk when the phone rang again. It was Kenny.

"She just banged a card at the Doheny Beach Resort."

"Just enough time to drive from here down to there."

"She's very coincidental."

"Yeah she is, but this one doesn't make any sense."

"How's that?"

"If you knew your husband was dead, why check into a hotel barely five miles away? Why not drive home? Or head for the border?"

"That's why you're the detective."

"Shit. Any idiot could have figured that out."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Do you happen to know what she's driving?"

"A white Mercedes SUV. Want the license plate number?"

"Yeah."

I jotted it down, thanked him, grabbed my laptop and headed out the door.

The northbound lanes heading into town on Coast Highway were bumper to bumper. A thousand souls, medicated on talk radio, Kenny G and rap, and none of them looking too happy about it.

Every time I saw this lemming march, I found myself wondering. Why not take a few days off? A few months. Think things over. Try to figure out how we had gotten ourselves into such a hurry. But no. Someone somewhere had decided we needed to go about life with our hair on fire.

I turned left when the light changed, headed south, hit the air-conditioner and flipped on some Latin jazz. The traffic was fairly light in that direction. My trailer down in Baja was calling to me again. I owned a five-acre parcel of hillside property. The coastline curved out forty miles to a point looking south. There had always been a thought to build a proper hacienda down there. A five hour drive and it was the end of the world.

Then the last time I had driven down to Todos Santos popped into my thoughts. When you headed from there down towards Cabo, it was open coastline for fifty miles, the road wandering up and down along the bristling white surf, the pace as lazy as a Mexican siesta, not a care in the world.

With my mind looking for an escape, Jack Oliver suddenly popped into my thoughts. Jack was the grizzled old veteran who had taught me the craft of spying as a young man fresh out of college. Stay out of your head, he used to say. Keep your eye on the little things. Watch cars. Count telephone poles. Note every tree and shrub. Over and over, the same mantra, which had basically gone in one ear and right out the other. The truth was, I had practiced such discipline little back then and not all that much from then going forward. Like today. Rather than, keep my eyes on the road, I was daydreaming about redheads and a Mexican siesta.

Arriving to the parking lot of the Doheny Beach Resort, I tucked away my errant dreams and went in search of Audrey's white Mercedes. I spotted it on the first lap. I also spotted trouble—two men sitting in a white van. They were parked several rows back and had their rig pointed straight at Audrey's. A magnetic sign said they were contractors for a local cable company. Both of them eyed me as I drove by.

I put my money on them being Dick and Tom, a couple of Feds. Dick was sitting behind the wheel, an older, military type, square-jawed, with his graying hair in a crew cut. Tom had a long face, with bulbous eyes and thinning hair, done in a comb over. You pictured him being the comedian of the two.

I shook my head at their preposterous appearance. A pair of overalls. Hell, they couldn't even get the blue-collar thing right. The wrong gear and not a smudge of dirt on them anywhere. It looked like their Linen Finders outfits had just been unwrapped.

I noticed a partition with a door closing off the back of the van as I went by. Whatever they were sporting back there, it was not for public view.

To make sure I wasn't playing a bit part in their movie, I picked a slot at the back end of the parking lot, marched off into the hotel grounds and snuck back to my car in a way that Dick and Tom could not have seen.

They sat there keeping an eye out for Audrey. I sat there keeping an eye on everyone. Having a thought, I looked back to make sure no one was keeping an eye on me.

Half an hour later, Audrey hurried out in a clip clop of high heels, her piles of red hair swaying this way and that. She had a latte in one hand and appeared to be in a great rush. If she had just learned of her husband's death, it had not filled her with grief. She seemed to be more perturbed than anything.

I heard the beep of her entry lock and watched as Audrey climbed in, backed out and quickly headed for the streets. The boys in the van were right behind her. I waited for the two vehicles to exit the parking lot before joining the pursuit.

By the time I had pulled onto Coast Highway, Audrey and the cable van were a quarter mile ahead and headed north. I lapped a couple of drivers and blew a red light trying to catch up with them. Audrey kept breaking various traffic laws on her way up the coast. The two Feds did the same. I blew several more red lights and pissed off a number of drivers keeping up.

In this manner, the four of us meandered up and down the bluffs north of Laurel Lagoon, left behind that stretch of open coastline for the bumper-to-bumper traffic of Corona del Mar and were soon flying past the Balboa Bay Club.

When Audrey took Newport Boulevard onto the peninsula, everyone followed. When she pulled into a rough and tumble shipyard along the gritty, backside of the harbor, I quickly pulled across the street into an office parking lot, perplexed. This was where you might expect to find the captain of a shrimp trawler paying a visit, not a doll in high heels. Dick and Tom had gone past the entrance to the shipyard and parked at the curb. I jockeyed my car behind an SUV, where I could stay out of sight and keep an eye on them.

While Tom remained in the shotgun seat, his eye on the shipyard entrance from an open window, Dick disappeared into the back. It wasn't hard to imagine the fortress of electronic gear back there. If I were right about that, any conversation within a few hundred feet of that van and those boys would be listening in on it.

I sat there watching and fishing for answers. Audrey's husband was dead, so why this? Maybe she didn't know yet. When your husband was shot dead, you went home to the family and grieved and Audrey had not appeared to be

in any state of grief. As to why these two clowns were tailing her around, I had no idea. There were the logical reasons, based on the newspaper article. Audrey and dirty business were mixed up together and the Feds were holding back on arresting her, hoping she would lead them to bigger fish. Beyond that, and lacking more information, all I had were a handful of wild notions.

I knew one thing for certain. The three of them definitely had my attention.

With the SUV partially blocking me from view, I went around to my trunk and rifled through the surplus of stage props and disguises—not the least bit worried about Audrey picking me out of a line up but those two Feds had seen my face up close.

Having grabbed what I needed to change appearances, I closed the trunk and climbed into the passenger seat. Off came my pants and shirt. On went the new ones. The whole while, I kept glancing over in the direction of the street, concerned that Dick and Tom and Audrey might run off without me.

With the change of clothes complete, I turned the mirror on myself, donned a mustache and added a floppy hat with some dark glasses. It was Tom Selleck does *Serpico*—or maybe the other way around. Either way, I felt certain those two Feds would never recognize me.

With all that done and the car locked up, I crossed the street and started down towards the shipyard entrance like I didn't have a care in the world. Tom immediately pinned me in the passenger side mirror, but his look was one of annoyed curiosity more than anything else. I could see he didn't know me from Adam. I was just one more slick cat in an Armani jacket, with too much time and money on my hands.

I turned from the sidewalk down towards the shipyard and pretended not to notice Tom in the van. Even as I slipped past the sliding wrought iron gate and entered the haphazard world of the shipyard, I kept my focus straight ahead.

Inside the shipyard, I headed for the clapboard office. The business of grinding, welding and getting things done went on all around me. The scent of burnt carborundum blades filled the air. Several workers glanced over as I navigated the puddles of oily water. Their reception was what you would have expected for a guy wearing Bruno Magli loafers.

The inside of the office looked to have been painted a light gray color at some point in the past, but soot and years of neglect had brought it closer to a charcoal shade. A disheveled and seriously overweight man in his sixties got up from his desk with a grunt and walked over to the counter. This was a man who had ceased caring about his appearance a long time ago. His gut was spilling over his belt buckle. The buttons of his plaid shirt were about to pop

loose. His face had not seen a razor blade in a couple of days. What little remained of the hair on his head was in disarray.

With a dexterous move of his lips and tongue, he repositioned a spent cigar to one side of his mouth and nodded the chin of his oversized face in my direction.

"What can I do for you?"

"Phil," I told him and held out my hand.

"Jack," he said and offered me his calloused paw, but not before he had wiped at his pant leg with it.

"So what can I do for you?"

"I wondered. Do you fix motors?"

"You mean do we repair ship engines?"

"Yeah, that."

"What kind you got?"

"Perkins, 135 horse."

"An old one, eh?"

I nodded.

"What's it running?"

"A Gulfstar 44."

"Yeah? Helluva boat."

I nodded again.

"Well, it's not that we don't have room," he said with a nod of his chin out towards the yard. "Or that we couldn't do it, but you'd be lost like a show dog in a back alley full of mongrels around here. Hell, I'd be worried to death about getting a smudge on her."

Jack gave my attire the once over while he grabbed a pen. I watched him scribble something down onto a pad of paper.

"Here's the names and numbers of two shipyards in town. They specialize in that sort of thing. They may even be able to fix it in the boat."

I took the piece of paper from Jack, feeling a bit like a jilted lover.

"If one of these operations can't help you, they'll know who can."

The whole time Jack and I were talking, I was keeping an eye out for some sign of Audrey, but nothing. About to leave, I heard the sound of her voice coming through a partially opened office door behind the counter.

"You bastard," she had said. "Look at the mess I'm in now. They shot Cliff and they're probably going to shoot me next."

"Now, calm down, doll," a man's voice said in return. "I'm not going to let anyone hurt you."

"Yeah, right," Audrey said. "You're the one who got me into this situation."

At this, an unseen hand closed the door the rest of the way.

"I told you not to worry, doll," the man said again, his voice more muffled now. "Nobody's going to hurt you. I've got this under control."

"Yeah, right. And stop calling me doll. It sounds like we're boyfriend and girlfriend."

Jack and I stood there staring at each other.

"Well, best get back to work," he said as if we had just heard two people discussing the weather.

"Yeah, guess I'll give this other outfit a try."

Jack lumbered back over towards his desk. I started towards the door and stopped.

"Say, you wouldn't happen to have a john around here I could use?"

Jack looked up from his desk.

"It's out of order."

The two of us were left staring at each other, with Jack having lied and me thinking, it won't do any good to remind him that he had. Sure as hell it would lead to more trouble.

There being no reason left for me to hang around, I went out the door and started across the yard. The thought of slipping around to the backside of the office occurred to me, but the office was hard up against a chain link fence and half the shipyard was watching. My best shot was to trudge back up to the street, retrace my steps along the sidewalk and see what I could find from next door.

Tom was still watching as I retraced my path up to the sidewalk. He didn't appear to be fond of me and the feeling was mutual, but neither one of us said a word.

I turned left towards the next business front. It was a boat broker with a marine supply outfit, and the only way around to the backside was through the front door. That left a restaurant next door to the boat broker. It wasn't open for business yet but I knew from experience that the big wooden doors would be unlocked for deliveries. Going in, I found a hostess and a handful of waitresses busily preparing for the lunch crowd. The hostess allowed me to use the bathroom on the basis of a kind word and my charming smile.

When she went upstairs to the office, I slipped out a side door and found my way to the backside of the shipyard office. I had not been there two minutes, straining to hear more of Audrey's conversation when I suddenly had my right cheek and ear crushed against the chain link fence. Blood quickly trickled down into the corner of my mouth. The taste of it was strangely sweet and did not seem to fit with the feeling of nausea in my gut. Some goon had

my left arm pinned up behind my back; so high, I could have scratched the back of my head, had I wanted to do so.

It was Tom, and when he peeled me back from the fence, I was staring at Dick.

"Look at this," Dick said to Tom. "He thinks he's Serpico."

Dick knocked the pork pie hat from my head.

"And now he's Tom Selleck."

Tom chuckled as Dick tore the mustache from above my lip.

"And now he's not."

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I said.

In response, Tom cinched my arm up a bit tighter.

"What the fuck do I think I'm doing?" Dick said. "Well, first thing I want to make sure I know more than you do."

"Then you're in good shape, because I don't know a goddamned thing."

"He doesn't know a goddamned thing," Dick said to Tom. Dick nodded and Tom cinched me up again for good measure.

"You know," Dick said. "You had me fooled pretty good back there. And I don't like being fooled. If it wasn't for you getting nosy, I might not have made you at all. Which brings me back to where we started. Who are you and why the hell are you poking around here?"

"No one and nothing that concerns you." Dick flinched as if I had insulted him and quickly had my wallet in his hand.

"A private dick," he said to Tom, then to me. "So what? You got a tail on the doll?"

"I don't know anything about any dolls."

"Yeah, sure you don't. But let me give you a fair warning. Get off the case. You don't know what the hell you're dealing with here."

Dick nodded at Tom, who let me go. I licked at the blood in the corner of my mouth.

"You understand?" Dick asked me. He handed me my wallet.

"I understand it's a free country."

"Yeah? Well it's not as free as you think."

They started across the asphalt towards the back of the restaurant. I looked up and saw the hostess staring down from a second story window. Dick turned back once before going inside.

"Get off the case, gumshoe. Before you find yourself in a whole lot of trouble."

"Gumshoe," Tom said with a smile. "Gumshoe," he repeated as if he liked the sound of it and followed Dick through the door.