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The Lone Palm

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE LONE PALM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Joe Clifford

2008

To: Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Joe Clifford, and entitled The Lone Palm, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Les Standiford

Bruce Harvey

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: February 26, 2008

The thesis of Joe Clifford is approved.

Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean George Walker
University Graduate School

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE LONE PALM

by

Joe Clifford

Florida International University, 2008

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

THE LONE PALM is a noir novel set in a timeless Bay Area city. At nineteen, Colin Specter is a hot-shot crooner at the Lone Palm, a nightclub owned by the Christos' crime family, headed by Cephalus "the Old Man" Christos and his ne'er-do-well son, Gabriel. When Colin falls for Gabriel's girl, a stripper named Zoey, Gabriel orders the singer's vocal cords cut and has him framed for a crime he didn't commit. After seven years in prison, Colin is manipulated into working for his former tormentor. Gabriel is now estranged from his father, who has branched into the world of politics. Working as mob muscle, Colin investigates the Old Man and delves into the whereabouts of his former love. The book draws on the tradition of noir novels like Jim Thompson's *After Dark My Sweet* and Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, with their seedy city streets and shady characters. The novel is divided into three parts, the first and third told in omniscient third person to depict the layered world of the novel, while the longest, central section is told in Colin's first person voice to elucidate the internal struggles and actions he takes on his road to redemption.

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1. PART ONE

Tulane Church
Man About Town
A Weekly Column

June 18th
Pacific Advocate

Hot Licks in Cool Dives

I frequently wonder: where have all the good singers in this city gone? When did maximized volume, formulaic tunes, and fancy footwork become an acceptable substitution for bona fide crooning?

When I drew the assignment of covering the entertainment beat in India Basin, it's safe to say I was less than thrilled. But that's one of the fringe benefits of being jaded, I suppose: the occasional unexpected and pleasant surprise.

Recently, I stumbled upon a singer who has convinced me that the local music scene just might have some life left in her yet. In the shadows of India Basin's gritty streets, I found the genuine article, a man—no, a boy—whose velvety voice, pitch-perfect phrasing, and humble demeanor have reaffirmed my faith in the power of song. His name: Colin Specter.

"Who's Colin Specter?" you ask. Well, right now, he's a nobody. To hear him sing, you'll have to be the adventurous sort. Past the treacherous docks and grisly mills that help paint the Basin its dreary hue there is a little saloon called The Chicken Coop. Its shanty roof and drab façade hardly instill confidence of finding anything worthwhile inside. But believe me, when young Colin Specter takes the stage, you'll feel quite differently.

At ten ticks this past Saturday, a fresh-faced, lanky kid, who couldn't have been more than eighteen (turns out he's nineteen), ambled up to the microphone with nothing but a beat up guitar strapped to his back and a sparkle in his eye. I'm thinking a pup like him doesn't stand a chance in a place like this. But, friends, I tell you the truth when I say that you could've heard a pin drop.

The boy sang for two hours nonstop, and just when you'd think he couldn't do it any better, he would up the ante! From traditional Irish folk numbers to the jumpy, jazzy scats that are all the rage these days, Specter was spectacular. He even did a country number, "Nobody Loves a Boy like His Mama," that had the crowd whistling Dixie, and could've put one Country Joe McGillahy to shame.

As far musical accompaniment, the boy had his guitar, which he plucked and strummed fine. I've heard worse; I've heard better. The song selection was diverse, but that wasn't what so enraptured the crowd. It was the *voice*. And what a voice!

In all my years, I can't recall ever having had the pleasure of hearing anyone better (and, yes, I'm including ol' Blue Eyes himself in there). Specter displayed such command of music's language. With a range that topped out at high C, he showcased a rich, full, and layered timbre, and the young strap knew how to work a room. Class stacked high, with extra showmanship, hold the cheese. A face that belongs in the pictures.

After his set concluded, I sat down with the lad, and a more upstanding

fellow I have yet to meet. There is a lot of talk around the water fountain these days about the state of our Nation's youth, how today's generation is filled with hoodlums and hooligans who refuse to accept responsibility and grow up. Well, to that let me just say, we can only hope more young men like Colin Specter are on the way. (His parents long deceased, the boy shares a one-bedroom apartment with his ailing grandmother, for whom he cares. He told me he only took the singing gig to, get this: "Get Nana her medicine." How's that for upstanding!)

All right, ladies and gentlemen, Tulane Church is stopping here. I'm not one for gushing, and I'm feeling as flush as a schoolgirl during Homecoming Week. But I am going to do something I *never* do: make a guarantee. No, call it a promise. Mark my words: Colin Specter is destined to become a star. So one of these weekends very soon you might want to shell out the coinage and catch a rising comet before the admission price becomes too steep for a working man to afford.

Corruption Junction

Now if you're a regular reader of this column, you know Tulane tries to steer clear of partisan politicking. Hoping to find an honest politician is like looking for four lucky leaves in a field of cow pies. Like my daddy used to say: show me a politician and I'll show you a man who makes his living speaking out both sides of his mouth. I try not to use this column as a pulpit but given recent events I now find it necessary to make a stand. If allegations linking prominent BC officials with North Beach organized

crime heads prove correct, nothing short of a total housecleaning of City Hall will suffice.

In January of last year, our mayor, Wichita Founders, was sworn in on a platform promising...

Four Months Later...

Saturday night and Lone Palm manager Gabriel Christos was expecting a good crowd. Word had gotten out about the new kid singing, creating a buzz about town with those in the know, and leading to increased traffic and liquor sales for the underground North Beach club. This pleased the Old Man.

Gabriel didn't relish giving his father the bad news. He knew the Old Man wouldn't be happy letting his cash cow go.

The Palm, as it was known by its hipper clientele, constituted one of a dozen joints owned by the Christos family, who generally favored the sexier, more illicit enterprises. But while the nightclub may have been the most reputable of these establishments, it was also the toughest to find. Above Chinatown, in the urban hills of the Italian district, the Palm represented a leftover from Prohibition days. To find it you'd need to know where you were going. Tucked away from the main strip, an unmarked concrete door, replete with sliding eye slot, ushered the way inside. You didn't come to the Lone Palm unless you were invited. And the big bruiser standing guard outside made sure only the well-connected got the invite.

Originally a speakeasy for Pacific rum-runners, the club had undergone a profound makeover in the past year. Gabriel had been given carte blanche; it was his baby. With the Old Man's blessing and financial backing, he'd bought up the surrounding real estate, knocked down walls, and added a state of the art sound system, retrofitting the joint with its round, raised stage. Departing from the family's normal racket of girls and party favors, Gabriel had intended to make inroads toward a more

respectable, legitimate path via the nightclub. He'd planned on making bank with the local boy he'd discovered singing for chicken feed down in the Basin.

But things change.

Though the Lone Palm didn't officially open for business for another hour, the club was already bustling. Technicians fiddled with the lighting, soundmen ran checks of the PA, the wait staff and assorted kitchen personnel scurried about, setting places with deep china dishes and silverware, positioning freshly cut pink and white orchids and miniature spelunking lanterns on each table.

Emerging from a back room, Gabriel immediately located the Giant, whose face bore the distinctive marks of disfigurement and third-degree burn scars. In undersized suit and cap, stooped over like a baboon, the Giant plopped down at a table, wheezing, a thyroid condition wreaking havoc with involuntary muscle systems.

Gabriel didn't take a seat. "Where is she?"

The Giant took a deep breath and removed his hat, revealing long wispy hairs straggled over his pate. He motioned to a booth in the far back corner, partly obscured by a cluster of large potted palms, where a strikingly beautiful girl sat, with sassy pageboy and red painted lips, in a silver, spaghetti-strapped halter, gazing vacantly toward the door. She smoked a cigarette in-between gnawing on her bottom lip.

"Where did you find her?"

"With the Mexican queen, in her room at the hotel." The Giant removed a handkerchief and tamped the perspiration from his temples and behind his neck.

"It took you six hours to find her in her *room*?"

“Wasn’t there first time I checked. Musta used the back way in. I left Petersen while I checked out grandma’s in the Basin. He never saw her come in.”

“What’d you find at the grandmother’s place?”

“Said she didn’t know no girl by that name.”

Gabriel sighed. “Of course that’s what she’d *say*. But what did it look like? Inside? Has she been there?”

The Giant shrugged. “Didn’t go inside.”

Gabriel shook his head in disgust.

“What?” the Giant said. “Broad’s about two hundred years old, carting around one of them oxygen tanks hooked up to her beak. She looks ready to drop dead, all bent over and hacking.”

“Which should’ve made getting inside no problem. The Old Man was right about you. For a henchman, Figgs, you aren’t worth shit.”

Gabriel plucked a colorful mint from the bowl on the table, popped it into his mouth and lolled it around with his tongue. “Forget about it,” Gabriel said. “I already know the answer.” He extracted the bill-fold from his breast pocket, peeled off a couple and slapped them on the counter. “Grab some shovels and rope. Be back here at midnight. We got a run to make.”

Figgs slowly rose, donned his hat, and slogged away.

Gabriel went to the bar and called for the skinny Filipino barkeep, who set aside the mixers he’d been stocking.

Gabriel held up two fingers and pointed to the booth where the girl sat. “Bottle of *Grands-Eshezeaux* from the cellar.”

“You’re a hard girl to find, Zoey,” Gabriel said, weaving underneath a leafy frond and slipping into the booth beside her.

Zoey stamped out her cigarette, careful to blow the final ring in the opposite direction. “You didn’t have to send your goons to fetch me.”

“Every time I call the hotel, the Mexican queen says I just missed you. Guess I got bad timing.”

She forced a smirk. “His name is Roberto. And he’s standing by the door, so you don’t have to talk about him like he isn’t here.”

Gabriel shifted his gaze to the front door, where an effeminate, pretty and painted-up Mexican stood, arms crossed and glowering intently, trying to act like a tough big brother.

“Darlin’, you might try a more menacing bodyguard,” Gabriel said with a snort.

“He’s my friend, and he looks out for me. Don’t blame Roberto because you couldn’t call in a timely fashion.” She felt into her purse for another cigarette but stopped. “I had some errands to run.”

The skinny Filipino brought over the *Grands-Eshezeaux*. He set the glasses down in front of Gabriel, and inserted the screw into the vintage burgundy. The Filipino positioned his slight body to gain leverage and, with strained effort, removed the cork. Gabriel held up his hand and the skinny man skittered away.

Gabriel brought the wet end of the cork under his flared nostrils and stiffly inhaled the pungent aroma of currents, blackberries, and the low-keyed but rich, singed nutmeg overtones.

He poured two glasses, rolling the tip to avoid spillage.

“Errands, eh?” he asked. “Like what?”

“Y’know, the usual stuff a girl’s gotta do. Clothes to the cleaners, picked up a new outfit for work.”

“New outfit for work? You’re a goddamn stripper, Zoey. You don’t wear clothes.”

“Exotic dancer.”

“Shut up and taste this,” he said, sliding over a glass. “The Old Man bought another estate in Sonoma. Some eccentric, nut-ball actor. Found Jesus or something, renounced the pictures and the high life. We got three cases of this stuff.”

Zoey timidly brought the wine to her lips and took a sip.

“What’d’ya think?” Gabriel asked, frowning his high-sloped brow.

“It’s good.”

“*Good?* Sweetheart, *Clos de Latricières* is *good*. *Château Le Bon* is *good*. I’d say this is a little better than *good*. You know what a bottle of this goes for?”

“No.”

Gabriel scoffed and spread an arm over the back of the booth. “You staying for the kid’s show?” He drank his wine but didn’t look at her.

“You know I can’t, silly. I gotta work tonight.”

“That’s right,” he said softly. Gabriel pulled back and inspected her svelte legs crossed under the table, the short skirt riding high, moving his eyes over bare midriff and the exposed, soft flesh of a low cut neckline.

“Pass along my regrets to Colin,” she said, collecting her handbag.

Zoey started to slide out of the booth but he grabbed her arm. “Tell him yourself. He’s downstairs. I’m sure he’d love to see you. You know the way, right?”

Down in a remote corner of the club, Colin Specter sat in his tiny dressing room, a converted storage closet across the hall from an out-of-service men’s room. On a short trainer’s table, his gold sequined dinner jacket folded on his lap, Colin was doing warm up exercises for his throat, snapping forefinger hard against Adam’s apple, running through scales, starting with a bassy baritone and ending with falsetto tinkles. It didn’t take much to get going. He’d been singing his whole life. That effort was about to pay off. If only he could smooth out a few ruffles first.

One week earlier, in the wee hours following his Saturday night gig, Colin had been approached by a big time record man as he hit California Street. Marty Tennenbaum, Mirage Recording Artists, offering an irresistible deal—LA, where he’d be set up with the works: spread on the beach, top notch musicians, fat signing bonus. No expense would be spared. Promotions. Big city tours. Name in lights.

Colin didn’t need any time to mull it over. Over drinks at Little Buddha, he signed on the dotted line.

Everything remained hush-hush, of course. Because if certain players knew all the details, feelings might be hurt, cool heads lost. After all, Gabriel had invested a great deal in him. He discovered Colin, performing at that dive in the Basin, had set him up with the boys in the band, gotten the word out. Without Gabriel, a deal like this never would’ve been possible in the first place. But this was business, and Gabriel was a reasonable man. Colin would own up after tonight’s set.

The bigger problem was Zoey.

Colin checked his watch, an oversized silver affair, coincidentally engraved with his exact initials, C.L.S. So he purchased it, along with the ring, when he went to the jewelers earlier in the afternoon, using the advance the record man had laid on him, before meeting Zoey at the Vagabond Hotel. Taking a nice girl like her to a dump like the Vagabond, it made the beautiful thing they had seem dirty. The stench of curry, the sloe-eyed innkeeper, the emaciated cats left to roam the lobby, all of it, dirty.

But they wouldn't have to keep it a secret much longer.

It had been a wonderful day, magical and unforgettable, the sort a man can draw on when maybe, years down the road, times aren't so sweet. The sky had been a perfect swirl of vanilla, tangerine, and cotton candy. A cool breeze scuttled over the water.

He and Zoey abandoned downtown in favor of out-of-the-way shops, the less populated boulevards, obscure boutiques and eateries. They watched the seals belly-flop into the bay along the North Waterfront, and he fed her fresh fruits, mango, honeydew, and papaya, which he'd bought from a vendor's cart.

Then, over burgers and sodas at Pier 23, with big steamers pulling into port and sounding their horns, as the sun sank into the sea, he'd sprung the news. His big idea. Getting married. The record man. The move to LA. As they spoke, he told her, Nana's at home packing her bags.

She said she was frightened, how dangerous it would be. Colin tried to assuage those fears. He had it all figured out. He'd go the club tonight and tell Gabriel about the record deal. He owned Gabriel that much. She said it was too risky. He said to trust him. The rock sparkled in the sun. He kissed her hard. Then she said yes.

In his spacious basement office, the Old Man sat in the big comfy chair behind his long mahogany desk, silently eyeing his son.

The walls were painted white, everything accented in Grecian blue in honor of the fatherland. A fishbowl filled with cashews sat cradled in his lap, his meaty fists wrapped around, smearing the glass with greasy fingerprints. The Old Man pinched his sausage fingers through the opening, fished around, and extracted a plump, salty kernel. He popped it in his waiting mouth.

“Got these dicks breathing down my neck after that latest fuck-up of yours,” the Old Man finally said, chomping on his nut, stopping occasionally to try to clear his beefy throat, which because of his considerable girth wasn’t easy to do.

“I’m sorry,” Gabriel said. “But I got it all worked out.”

“Boy, I don’t like taking a bath on a shipment that big.” The Old Man coughed but it sounded more like a pig’s squeal. He pinched his face, gumming out a bloated, pale pink tongue. “And there’s no way it’ll be traced back here?”

“Already put in the call to the precinct. The Sandman assured me, just needs the patsy and the whole thing goes away.”

“I don’t know what you were thinking, boy. Sometimes you’re as stupid as your whore of a mama.” The Old Man scowled, wiped the backs of his fingers on his shirt, shook his huge round head and his jowls waggled. “Why the kid? We got half a dozen guys we could offer up. Thought you were fond of him?”

“I am.”

“Thought we were going to make a little cash with this cow.”

“Things change.”

The Old Man belched, a steamy stink of beef jerky, roasted nuts, and Triple Sec.

“You can’t change his mind?”

“He’s already signed the contract.”

“Ungrateful prick.” The Old Man leaned back in his chair. He interlocked his doughy digits, grunted, wiggled and strained, like he had to squeeze out one last thought.

“OK,” he finally spat, “I want this done right.”

A rabbit knock sounded on the dressing room door, but before Colin could respond Zoey ducked inside, quickly shutting it behind her.

“I told you coming here tonight was bad idea,” she said.

“Hello to you, too.” Colin hopped off the trainer’s table, but she held him at bay with a stern look and stiff finger.

Zoey cracked open the door and looked outside. Murray, the hunchback, sloshed a mop. The guy was forever lurking in the shadows. But everybody knew Murray was deaf and harmless. She shut the door.

“Listen to me. I can only stay a minute. You need to get out of here. *Now*. Something is up. I can feel it.”

“Slow down, Zo’.” He started to walk toward her, to put his arms around her, but she backed away.

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with, Collie.”

“I’m not a kid. I’m going to square up with Gabriel after the show. You got him all wrong. He may act like a tough guy but we’re friends. Everything’s going to be peaches, darlin’, you’ll see.”

She implored him with her eyes.

“He doesn’t know a thing about us,” Colin said, as he slid on his dinner jacket and checked his look in the mirror. “If you’re worried, go back to my nana’s and wait for me there. As soon as my show’s over—”

The door pushed open. Gabriel hadn’t bothered to knock.

“I see you found our little songbird,” he said to Zoey.

The dressing room light, a single bulb on a string, dangled from the ceiling. The room grew hot. No one spoke.

“It’s as quiet as a funeral in here,” Gabriel said, eyes roving, mouth down-turned and sour. “Let’s liven this party up!” He smacked his hands together and faced Colin. “Looking a little flustered there, kid.”

“Pre-show jitters.”

“Zoey, you best get a move on,” Gabriel said, stepping aside and ushering her out the door. “Don’t want to keep those deep pockets at the Lusty Lady waiting. Besides, me and Collie got some talking to do, *mano y mano*.”

“That means ‘hand and hand,’” Zoey said.

“What?”

“*Mano y mano*. You’re trying to say ‘man to man,’ right? But that doesn’t mean man to man. It means hand and hand.”

“Shut up, Zoey. I know what it means. I gotta talk to Collie. So, *adios*.”

She spun on her heel to leave but Gabriel grabbed her by the waist, holding her in place. He pointed to his cheek. She dutifully leaned over and kissed him, and he ran his

fingers up the back of her leg, letting them linger beneath soft elastic and freshly laundered cotton.

He let her go, and she hurried out the room.

“Women,” Gabriel said, forcing a laugh.

“You wanted to talk to me about something?”

“Nothing, really. Just haven’t spoken much lately. You been like a ghost around here this past week. Everything OK? How’s your nana doing?”

“She’s OK. I mean, besides her being a lunger and all.”

“Place’s gonna be packed tonight. I told you. Word’s getting out. Soon you’ll be able to afford the best doctors in town, patch her up proper.”

Colin cast his eyes askance. He shuffled his feet, twiddled with a button on his dinner jacket.

“What is it, kid? Got something on your mind?”

“No,” Colin mumbled. “I mean...” He looked up at Gabriel. “Just how much I appreciate all you’ve done for me. How grateful I am. Nana, too. You’ve been a real pal.”

Gabriel extended a stiff arm and clasped a hand firmly behind the boy’s slender neck, pulling him closer until their heads butted. “You can tell me all about it later. Now get up there and get those Jew boys plugged in before we got a riot on our hands.” He smiled big, flashing recent, expensive dental work.

Colin brushed past him and out into the darkened hallway. He stopped and turned around. “You gonna catch the set?”

“You bet’cha. Never miss a number.”

Colin slowly moved toward the stairs.

Gabriel poked his head out the door. “Collie?”

“Yeah?”

“Give it a little extra juice tonight, OK?”

Colin squinted, his friend’s face swallowed by the basement’s blackness.

“Y’know, like it was the last show of your life,” Gabriel said.

Colin nodded, and then disappeared up the well.

As always, Colin would be backed up by the three-piece band affectionately dubbed the Wandering Jews, a nod to their legendary nomadic travels: Henry “Ham-hands” Hawkins on skins ’n’ board; Detroit “Stinky” Mosley on the upright bass guitar; Langley “Liverlips” Langley on the horn. Career musicians, they’d seen the world, from the Mississippi Delta to Tangiers and beyond. But they wouldn’t be making the trip down to sunny southern California, despite how hard Colin had fought to take them along. Well, maybe he could’ve fought harder, but that was the cutthroat music business.

While the Jews tuned their respective instruments, Colin parted the backstage curtains and made for the payphone affixed to the brick wall. Digging through his pockets, he extracted some coins, hurriedly pushing one into the slot. He punched his home number. The phone rang a long time before his grandmother finally picked up.

“Nana, it’s me. Zoey’s going to be stopping by. I need you to look after her.”

There was a long pause as the old woman fumbled for her cigarettes. “Colin, what’s going on?” she said, with the strike of a match and deep inhale, her voice a faint croak smothered in a sea of smoke.

“What do you mean?”

“A big tall fella come to the door this afternoon asking for your lady friend.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“Just what you said to say anyone come asking questions: that I don’t know nobody by that name. But he didn’t seem happy about it. Surly thing. Very rude. Kept trying to stick his ugly mug past me, like he didn’t believe me. He stinked like fish guts.”

“You did good, Nana.”

The old woman began to whine. “I don’t see why we have to move.”

“Trust me, you’re going to love it down there. Besides, LA’s practically in the mountains. The air will be good for your emphysema.”

“But who’s gonna feed Mr. Jangles?”

“Mr. Jangles is a stray. He’ll find a dumpster.”

His grandmother coughed, a chest rattling fit.

The MC came over the PA.

“Nana, I have to go. Keep an eye on Zoey. We leave tonight. Remember: only what we can carry. It’s a long bus ride.”

The chubby thump of the bass and sandpaper roll of the drums. The bellow of a saxophone and the spattering of applause.

“Welcome to the Lone Palm. We’re pleased you could join us tonight.”

Back upstairs, in the main room, Gabriel leaned against the bar.

What a crowd. Big shots, fat cats, high rollers with long-legged pretties in full length taffeta gowns by their side. Pricey bottles of champagne and cured meats on ice.

Gabriel surveyed his kingdom: concentric circles of checkered tables and booths, the soft lighting shining down from high above, like the kind used for '40's starlets, all framed by the dense forestry of live, potted palm trees, their full, lush fronds giving the nightclub its exotic flavor.

It should've been paradise.

Which was why their betrayal hurt so bad.

Colin and Zoey's deception had affected his ability to conduct business. Had his head been in the right place, the police never could've connected a thing back to the family. A stupid mistake. But he had spoken with the Sandman, had gotten the go-ahead from the Old Man. He could make it all go away. It only meant cutting some losses.

Have we got a show for you tonight!

A hand tugged at Gabriel's sleeve.

Gabriel looked down to find a very drunk Wilson Persimmons, city selectman. Persimmons dipped a stout finger into his rum, stuck it in his mouth and sucked exuberantly, extracting it with a loud, slurping pop.

Persimmons hiccupped. "So, level with me, Gabriel. I've known you and the Old Man a long time. Who's this hotshot singer everyone's talking about? A voice better than Sinatra? dance moves better than Stumpy Brown? *and* is better looking than Chick Margarite?" Persimmons guffawed. "C'mon! You're putting me on."

"Afraid not, Percy," Gabriel answered.

"Aw, I'll believe it when I see it."

"And you're about to."

The lights dimmed. A high-powered spotlight switched on. Colin Specter emerged from behind the curtain. Whistles, cat calls, and ecstatic applause flooded the room. His gold sequined dinner jacket lit up, twinkling like stars.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, put your hands together for Colin Specter and his Wandering Jews!”

There is, perhaps, no sadder fate for a man than not knowing where he belongs.

Colin Specter might not have known many things. But he knew where he belonged.

When onstage, he held a room hostage. You couldn't look away. With each hip gyration and pearly crescendo, dinner forks lay dormant, soup spoons rested in lobster bisque, cocktails went untouched. You followed him wherever he went, wherever he wanted to take you, without hesitation and without second guessing. Because he wanted it that way. You trusted him.

Later on, after the club thinned out, maybe you'd try to pinpoint the exact source of the allure, why you felt so moved. But you'd have a tough time. The voice? Spot on, rich and honeyed, pitch impeccable, yummy tone sweet like caramelized sugar, clear as the starriest, cleanest Alaskan night. But lots of folks have pretty voices. His phrasing? Equally flawless; he knew where to break words, what syllables to drag out or truncate, how to tremolo straight through to your heart. And the boy could dance. And the boy was pretty. Deep, big green eyes like polished jade stones, thick jet black hair coiffed high into matinee idol pomp, soft tanned skin, and lips perfectly balanced between snarl

and pout, with just enough femininity to offset the chiseled masculine features. Your first impression would be that he was a man's man. If only he wasn't still a boy.

Still, none of these qualities, on their own or even added together, could explain their effect, the sum of considerable charms. Logically, scientifically, mathematically, it didn't add up. But one thing was for certain: if you experienced his show, you walked away touched.

It was well past midnight when the show concluded. Colin wiped the sweat from the back of his neck and chucked the towel into an aluminum pail in the corner of his dressing room. A chill wind from the overhead ventilation system washed over him. Following a gig, Gabriel encouraged him to press palms, "schmoozing," he called it, and Colin was usually happy to oblige. They'd make the rounds together, yucking it up with the players. Gabriel seemed to get a bang out of introducing him, like the star athlete, kid brother he'd helped train.

But not tonight.

Because somewhere between Zoey's frantic visit, Gabriel's steely eyes and cryptic tongue, and a sizzling rendition of "Goodbye Kitty," a little bird had positioned herself on his shoulder. And, now, here in this claustrophobic dressing room, she warbled an off-key tune.

Best send a postcard.

Balling up his dinner jacket and stowing it in his gym bag with the jar of conk, hairbrush, and worn dime-store detective novel, Colin re-rolled the cuffs of his chinos, gave a quick spit shine to his wingtips, and took a last look around. With all the glamour

upstairs who'd ever suspect it? He, the main attraction, forced to change in this glorified toilet.

He'd creep out the back way.

Colin cracked the door and stole a glance up the well, making sure the hunchback wasn't around. Up above, the push of heels, high and soft, scuffled across the dance floor, as coats were collected, cards passed, and taxis jockeyed for the privilege of delivery to fine Pacific Heights' homes.

Backing away, he knocked into Murray's bucket and mop, sloshing rancid water on his shoes. Cursing under his breath, he propped the mop against the wall, and scooted down the dark hall.

The rum-runners had had a secret escape route, a getaway carved through the brick and mortar of basement walls should the Feds ever get wise and show up one evening unexpected. The tunnels were elaborately designed to obfuscate pursuers, but if navigated correctly they brought a man to a crossroads, one path leading to what was once a booze storage vault, the other to a faux sewer grate in a back alley off Saroyan.

One night, shortly after Colin signed on, Gabriel launched into an entertaining and inebriated pirates' tale about it, leading a swaggering expedition, just he and Colin, into the bowels of the Lone Palm. It was their secret, like sworn brothers with a blood-pact hideout. Colin now navigated these underground trenches via the mental map he'd made.

Past the keg stacks, a tin sign advertising aged, oak barrel bourbon hung. It was impossible to read in the darkness, but if felt for one could locate a knot in the concrete. This wasn't a big knot, the size of a pebble. A few inches to the left of that knot, there was a switch, less than a centimeter in diameter, which could be tripped using an ordinary

pen tip, and a door four feet high and wide would pop open. This led to the rum runners' route.

Colin secured the bag under his arm and ducked down. On hands and knees, feeling the coarse walls like a blind man, rodents frittering over his calves and insteps, he crawled away.

Overhead, the pitter-patter of feet and din of conversation, the high-pitched whistles for taxis grew softer, more distant, until they disappeared completely, leaving the tunnel as silent as a tomb.

After having to backtrack three wrong turns, Colin finally saw a light. Fifty yards ahead, streetlight splashed down. He moved toward the light and freedom waiting.

Scraping his knees and back, he arrived at the end. He turned best he could in the confined space, and gave a mock salute. So long and farewell. Nothing personal.

Thanks for the memories.

He popped the grate, climbed out, and found Gabriel waiting.

Gabriel offered a ride home. He didn't call attention to Colin's peculiar exit route, the cobwebs entangled in his hair or the scuff marks on his knees. There was no point in refusing or accepting the ride. Colin wasn't being asked.

The car headed south.

In the cool car, Colin felt his skin grow clammy. He chuckled uneasily. He tried to start a conversation about the show, the club, about the brighter days on the horizon.

Gabriel's steady gaze remained fixed on the back roads he took out of town.

Soon another car tailed them.

Bay City has lovely architecture and landscaping. The monoliths towers, the splendid parks and trolleys, the sweeping hills and spread out villages, the fiesta lights of the Mission and quaint seafarer homes of Bernal Heights. Even the poorer, pastel-colored duplexes of the Basin look pretty from afar. These traits define Bay City; they are welcoming sights. But they can also lull a man into a false sense of security, make him forget how cold and mean a city can be. And as he moves beyond the city limits, past the rail yards and causeways, past the Point and Cow Palace, things turn ugly fast.

High dirt mounds and gravel pits replaced the bridges. Overhead walkways and fauna gave way to ramshackle sheds and farming shacks. Abandoned car parts peppered the side of dirt roads. And as the heavy machinery came into view, the compactors and bulldozers, the chains draped like nooses from tall cranes, rumors ceased being rumors.

What were you thinking, boy? Sure, it was peanuts, but it paid the bills, kept Nana stocked with Pall Malls and banana nut muffins. *It wasn't my fault.* Gabriel had wooed him like a pro. So had the record man. *Stop thinking.* Gabriel was his friend. One man to another. *Zoey was right: you shouldn't have gone there tonight.* Colin didn't want to disrupt the routine. *The routine has been disrupted.* If he hadn't shown up, Gabriel would have known something was up. *It's safe to say he knows now.* Colin wanted to do the right thing, be a man. *And how's that working out for you, kid?*

The gulls and buzzards swirled overhead, dive-bombing into neighboring trash yards and ascending into the moonlit sky with entrail prizes stowed in their beaks. The smell of the marina. The far off chug of a southbound Southern Pacific. A freighter's belly growling through the fog. The peninsula docks.

Industrial City: where nobody comes looking for a man who's gone missing.

Over the whipping wind of the bay, Colin cracked, spilled, pleaded with Gabriel that he'd always meant to cut him in; he'd never think of just splitting town. Did he look like a fool? Ha! They had a handshake contract, and if Colin Specter is good for anything it's his word. Everyone who knew him could vouch for that. He spoke of friendship and honor, of being brothers.

Gabriel never even looked at him.

This is about more than just the contract.

He knows about Zoey.

Zoey. The cut of her chestnut locks, shaggy bangs framing apple cheeks, those lush lips and hips, the way she looked at him when he gave her the ring, how she always seemed to be dancing even when she was standing still, the milky taste of her mouth in the morning and ballerina curl of her nape, the way she cried on his shoulder after confessing the sordid details of a troubled past, and how they walked through the city till dawn that first morning, arm in arm, and, then, at the diner, when conversation turned to a normal life of little houses, vegetable gardens, and kids, they sat slurping vanilla malteds and wolfing down scrambled eggs and flapjacks, and they'd been so happy—*and what was that song playing on the jukebox?*—that's right, Tommy Pitts and the Short Dogs, "All I Need is Bourbon if You Take Away My Baby"—and at that moment he knew she was the one, and he was young and he was going places and these things couldn't be taken from him.

Who can explain the ways of the human heart?

It's beyond the laws of God and Man.

The moon's shimmering light skipped off the bay. Big birds returned from Angel Island, ready to scavenge an early morning meal from trash piles. But it was Sunday and no trucks would be making a deposit today.

Pickings might be slim, boys.

Gabriel rested against his open car door. He peered over his shoulder at the scared, skinny boy sandwiched between two pug-nosed brutes in the back of a Lincoln twenty yards away at the water's edge.

The Giant stood stooped beside him, following his gaze.

A stiff wind blew in, carrying the ungodly stench of rotting rubbish and waste water from surrounding Industrial City garbage dumps.

"The Sandman will be here soon," Gabriel said, looking now toward the dark road leading into the marina. He took a deep breath, spat on his palms, and smoothed his hair in place. He reached into his breast pocket and retrieved the switch blade. He slipped it to Figs. "You know what to do."

The big blade lay heavily in the Giant's fleshy palm.

Gabriel stole another quick glance behind him, before dropping into the driver's seat and slamming his door. He punched the car in gear and spun off, spitting clouds of dust and exhaust into the bright, clean moonlight.

The Giant rotated the blade's handle between his impossibly long fingers, like a magician rolling a quarter. "Such a pretty voice, too," he said to no one in particular, as he slowly turned and lumbered back toward the water's edge.

Swirling debris washed over his plodding feet, and the big birds continued to circle overhead.

Local Singer Nabbed in Record Drug Bust

Police Detective Commended for Bravery

Tulane Church, *Oracle* Crime Beat
Monday, October 29th

In what Bay City officials are calling “one of the biggest busts” in city history, authorities seized an unspecified amount of heroin at an Industrial City dock yesterday morning.

Police arrested Colin Leopold Specter, 19, local singer and India Basin native, at the Oyster Point Marina following an ordeal that left the singer critically wounded.

“Specter has been taken to BC General to recover,” police detective Mark Sandman said. “After which, he will be tried to the fullest extent of the law.”

Three weeks ago, police tracked what they believed to be a shipment of heroin in Bay City Bay. During a heavy fog and strong headwind, they lost sight of the vessel in the bay’s notoriously choppy waters. The boat was later discovered marooned on the rocks of Baker Beach, where material inside tied it to the Lone Palm, a North Beach club where the singer was employed.

Working on a hunch that Specter, feeling the heat, might attempt to make off with his sizeable stash, Sandman tailed the singer when his Saturday night performance concluded.

“I followed Specter to The Vagabond [an Industrial City Hotel],” Det. Sandman said. “He emerged shortly with two suitcases, which we later found filled with heroin, and headed to Oyster Point, where we presume he planned to steal a boat and make his getaway.

Det. Sandman, heroically working alone, attempted to apprehend Specter as

he entered the marina. Specter took off for the water. In a cruel twist of fate, the singer’s vocal cords were severed when he dove and landed on jagged rock.

In addition to the throat injury, Specter suffered multiple face lacerations and a broken leg.

“We expect the patient to recover,” Dr. Murdock, BC attending physician, said. “However, he will likely be scarred for life, walk with a limp, and certainly never sing again.” Although with time, the doctor added, Specter should regain the ability to speak.

“We are all shocked,” said Lone Palm Manager Gabriel Christos. “Maybe now we can put these allegations against my family to rest.”

The Christos family, which owns several North Beach strip clubs and adult entertainment shops, has long been rumored to be tied to organized crime, and has been the target of several recent investigations.

Authorities, however, are adamant that this latest incident is the act of Specter alone.

“Absolutely not,” Det. Sandman replied when asked if Specter could have been carrying out orders for the Christos family. “He’s our man.”

A raid of Specter’s home produced a large sum of cash and jewelry receipts.

When reached, Ada Specter, the alleged perpetrator’s grandmother and sole surviving family member, had no comment.

Arraignment will be set once Specter is deemed able to stand trial.

Dear Colin,

I'm sorry it's taken me so long to get in touch with you but the police have you locked in that room like a common criminal but if you're reading this letter then Roberto was able to sneak it in. I know you didn't do those things they are saying in the papers. We can still be together as long as we love each other everything will be OK and I love you and I know you love me. There isn't a jury in the world that could convict a sweet guy like you. All they'd have to do is look in those pretty eyes and they'd see you couldn't have done the things they're saying you did. No one would believe it! I just know you're gonna be out real soon and then if you want we can go ahead and do all those things we talked about, like going to Paris and buying a house and getting jobs. I'm so sorry you have to be there. I would do anything to get you out of this mess. It doesn't matter if you can't sing no more. I can get a job waiting tables or something and you can find something to do. Don't worry about me going back to old ways, I'd never go back to living the way I was. You showed me that I was somebody better. I can never thank you enough. I might've wasted my whole life living like that. You have to stay strong and keep believing. Don't lose your faith. There is still goodness in this world. You showed me that. Don't forget that now. I will wait for you to write me back and tell me what to do.

Love,
Zoey

Dear Zoey,

How did things get so crazy? I guess you saw it all along. Don't feel bad because I wouldn't listen. Sometimes I can be so pigheaded. Of course, you know I had nothing to do with what they're saying I did in the papers. I'm going to fight these charges. The state has assigned me a public defender. He listened to my version of the story, and he said he believes me. But he also said they have fingerprints, receipts, seized money, docking slips, and eye witnesses, and that the Christos family is pretty much untouchable. I'm not going to go into detail about that night at the marina. The stuff that happened down there isn't something a lady should have to hear. Let's just say they gave me quite the working over. Everything they're saying about the injuries I sustained is correct. The worst part, Zoey, is I realized what you'd been saying about Gabriel was the truth and I tried to leave before anything terrible happened. I realized too late is all.

Forever and Always,
Colin

Obituaries

SPECTER, Ada Specter (Conchito), 73, passed away Thursday, January 3rd in Bay City. Memorial services are pending.

Lone Palm Troubadour Sentenced

Tulane Church, *Oracle* Crime Beat
Friday, January 4th

Colin Specter, the young singer whose case has gained local notoriety and whom media pundits have dubbed “the Lone Palm Troubadour,” was sentenced Thursday to ten years in San Quentin.

Specter, 20, was arrested October 28th last year on suspicion of transporting narcotics to an Industrial City dock. During an escape attempt he was gravely injured and has only recently regained the ability to speak.

Specter was able to enter a barely audible “guilty” plea on his own.

“It is sad to see a man so young, with so much talent, standing before me today,” Judge Ackerman said. “It is the hope of this court that you use this time to reevaluate where your life is headed.”

As part of the plea bargaining agreement, the prosecution petitioned the court for leniency. The original charges, including drug trafficking and mayhem, could’ve carried a maximum sentence of twenty-five years.

As he was escorted out in handcuffs by bailiffs, Specter, whose face is visibly scarred, gazed back at the courtroom doors before hanging his head.

Specter will be taken to the San Quentin Prison Infirmary, where he will be evaluated by ward personnel before being released into the prison’s general population.

2. PART TWO

Chapter One

Saturday morning, facing the back brick wall, I was wrapping up my morning pull-ups using the bed-bar I'd rigged in my cell, when I heard the tier guard, O'Reilly, stop outside the cell door. You learn early to distinguish the subtlety of sounds on the inside.

"Big day's almost here, eh, Specter?"

I'd already bagged the few items I'd be taking with me when I was released on Monday.

I grunted, and kept count inside my head. 198...199...

"You never stop, do you? Hard to believe you're the same scrappy kid who came in here all those years ago. What you up to now?" He meant my weight.

I continued the pull-ups with one hand, holding up the back of two, five, and five with the other.

"255 pounds? Jesus!"

A churning mechanical sound and the master lock disengaged. I dropped from the bar and grabbed a towel. I dried my long hair, face, and torso, wrapping it behind my neck the way a boxer would.

"You got a visitor," O'Reilly said.

I hadn't had a visitor in the seven years I'd been there. "Who?" I growled.

"How should I know? Put a shirt on and find out yourself."

"It's not visiting hours."

“I just do what I’m told.”

As we walked the length of the tier, the monkeys screeched in their cages, clasped onto bars, frantically looking for bananas. When I walked past, they shut up. I hadn’t made a lot of friends during my stay.

Through the high barred windows, you could see the tops of the turrets, the machine gunners and guard dogs, encased by tall barbed-wired, concrete walls.

“Something I been meaning to ask you, Specter,” O’Reilly said as we descended the stairs, “now that your stay with us is almost up.”

“What’s that?”

“Just a little history lesson, I suppose. See, when new recruits come in, us guards place wagers, y’know, how long the new fish’ll last. Now, normally, a boy like you—you were so young and skinny—he’s fresh fish. But so far as I know, no one so much as laid a finger on you. I lost quite a few bones over that one.” He tapped me on the shoulder. “Don’t suppose you want to tell your pal Officer O’Reilly how you weren’t sold for a deck of playing cards that first night?”

I didn’t. But it wasn’t much of a mystery. Call it, *If a Fish Wants to Survive*, a trick of the trade passed on by the old timers in the prison infirmary who take pity on the scared new kid. First night in general population, the Fish targets the biggest, nastiest-looking Mick and goes to town on him with a pillowcase and some stones from the yard. A quick, convincing, and crippling hit. Do the job right and no one rats. Makes no sense, and so no one gets fingered. They leave you alone after that. “Crazy” trumps “tough” every time.

“Didn’t think so,” O’Reilly said softly, as I turned back around.

We crossed the empty yard into the visitor's building. O'Reilly unlocked the door and walked away.

As it wasn't normal visiting hours, the room was empty. I took a seat at the window, peering through the two inch thick glass. I pulled the pack of Camels from my issued-blue shirt pocket, struck a match, and lighted one.

Who would want to see me now? Two days before my release? It's crazy, I know, it had been so long, but I'd be lying if I said that somewhere, deep down where my heart used to be, a part of me wasn't hoping it would be her.

The door swung open and a guard on the other side ushered my guest in.

He was dressed to the nines, snazzy midnight blue button down. A bit upscale for corrections' facility attire. But of course slick guy that he was, he knew that. He always did dress to impress. He looked the same as the last time I'd seen him. Same smooth olive skin, designer suit style and slicked black hair. Same assuredness in his countenance. Only this time he wasn't handing me over to his goons to do his dirty work.

"Gabriel Christos," I growled.

He picked up the phone, and I did the same.

"It's good to see you, Collie." He pulled back, chuckling under his breath. "I see the stories are true."

"You've got a lot of nerve."

"That isn't necessary. I'm here as a friend."

"Friend? Sure. I hear in certain Slovak nations slitting someone's throat and tossing his body in a river is a form of courtship." I leaned forward, put my mug right up

against the glass, pulled the long hair out of my eyes so he could get a good look. “That it, Gabby, you sweet on ol’ Collie?” I puckered a kiss.

Gabriel did his best to look compassionate but couldn’t hide his disgust.

“We both lost something dear to us that night,” he said, swallowing. “It’s time to move forward.”

“Move forward? Tell that to my grandmother you snuffed out.”

“‘Snuffed out?’ Jesus, you sound like some bad B-movie gangster. I was sorry to hear about your nana—really, I was—but I didn’t have anything to do with that. She was a sick, old woman. Her only boy was up on serious criminal charges—it was probably too much for the old bird.”

“Save it. Your cop pal filled me in—in-between putting cigarettes out on my arm—what would happen, and to whom, should I get the inkling to talk.”

“Talk? And who were you gonna tell? No, we were never worried you’d talk.”

“Can it! He followed your lead. What was his name? Fat ass pig with the chronic halitosis. Big hero in the papers. Detective Sandman?”

“Actually, that’s Police Chief Sandman now.”

“Wonderful news. I’ll be sure to send some daisies.”

So he hadn’t been worried I’d spill? Maybe not. What difference would it have made? I couldn’t take the chance they might harm Zoey, and besides, I learned a long time ago that Gabriel and the Old Man had every Bay City DA, reporter, and cop in pocket anyway. And certainly nobody cared about the truth now.

“Why don’t you get to it then?” I said, hoarsely. I wasn’t used to speaking so much and the strain wore like swallowing razor blades.

He upturned his palms, a truce offering, like the last seven years had been one big misunderstanding. “I’m here to offer you a job.”

I wasn’t in the mood for jokes; I pushed myself up, stood tall and let him see what happens to the body of a man who’s been locked underground with animals, forced to scavenge for scraps to stay alive, a man who’s had nothing to do but lift weights and lose hope and grow mean. I was a twenty-year-old kid then. I wasn’t a kid anymore.

“It’s a good thing you’re on the other side of that glass,” I said.

“You owe it to yourself to hear me out.”

“Tell you what. Meet me in the parking lot on Monday; we can talk all about it.”

“A lot has changed since you been away. The Old Man isn’t thinking straight. He’s allowed his mind to be poisoned against his own kind. I’ve branched out on my own. I could use a man like you—”

“A man like me? That’s a good one, G. A maimed, former lounge lizard henchman—” Then I caught a look in his eyes, one that almost passed for tender, remorseful even, and for a moment I thought I got it. I tilted my head to the side.

“Feeling a little guilty there, pal?”

“Guilty?” he repeated with a snort. “C’mon, you must’ve figured it out by now.”

“What?”

“That what I feel now or thought then doesn’t make a damn bit of difference. I’m no Boy Scout, I know that, but if you’re looking to settle a score, I’m not your guy.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Old Man, Collie. The Old Man called the shots in those days. Nothing went down without his say so. You know that. Sure, I felt betrayed, and yeah I was mad.

But whatever hotheaded ideas I had, the Old Man issued the order. A shipment got pinched and *he* made the call to offer you up. He wanted an example made of you. End of story. I did what I was told to do. The Old Man used me just like he used you, and then he threw both of us away. Like we were garbage. It pains me to say this—he’s my father—but we have the same enemy now, you and me. The Old Man operates in a different world these days. He wants to distance himself from the past. You are a loose end. The Old Man doesn’t like loose ends. When he hears you are out, he’ll take care of that. You won’t survive on your own.”

“Thanks for looking out for me, *brother*. But I’ll take my chances. Now get the fuck out of here before I bust this glass and tear your throat out.”

“You know how to reach me if you change your mind.”

“Trust me, you won’t find me at the Lone Palm anytime soon.”

“It’s not called the Lone Palm anymore.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what you’re calling it. Just get lost.”

He started to hang up the phone but I smacked mine against the glass to stop him. He brought the receiver back to his ear slowly.

“What happened to her?”

His head slung low and he wouldn’t look me in the eye. “She never danced for me after that night. I haven’t seen her since. That’s the truth.”

Through all the years and the heartache.

“And you’re wrong about me, Collie,” he said. “I’d never have hurt Zoey. I loved her.”

Chapter Two

First thing Monday morning, the bus from Quentin dropped me off at the office of Derek Fenster, my PO.

Fenster dealt out of a coat room in a tiny beige building in an alley behind the Bryant Street jailhouse, next door to a twenty-four hour bail bondsman. How convenient. The room stank like donuts and cheap lime deodorant. Nothing rivals the dreariness of the State pencil pusher. A bunch of sad, little kid drawings were pinned up, spackled with obnoxious color schemes, green-crayoned dogs, banana houses, humongous heads on fire, too much sky. How does a joker like this get to go home to a wife and kids every night?

I shifted in my seat, trying to loosen the joints of the discount-rack suit I'd been handed upon release. My old clothes didn't fit anymore.

I'd be meeting with Fenster twice a month for the next three years, during which time I was still considered property of the State, unable to travel without a note from my mommy. Fenster told me to think of him as an all-seeing, all-knowing babysitter. If I tried to swipe a cookie before dinner, he'd be waiting inside the jar with a one-way ticket back to the pen.

He was an older guy, pushing the half century mark, blockheaded, dimple-chinned, salt and peppered at the temples, and I immediately didn't like him or the fact that the only thing keeping me on the outside was staying in his good graces.

We talked about the job he'd arranged for me.

"How are you with your hands?" he asked.

I told him I hadn't had a girl in seven years, how'd he think I was?

"That's funny. A man needs to keep his sense of humor. Borkowski and Son Consolidated. Just follow Market till you hit water. Big warehouse. Can't miss it."

I asked when I started.

"Soon as you leave here. We don't like you boys to get idle hands." He passed along the address on a square of paper. "Pays minimum to start. Mostly unloading fish freighters. Occasionally you might get to operate a forklift. Nothing too complicated. I'm not going to lie to you. It's backbreaking work." He looked me over. "Man built like you should have no trouble."

I stuck the address in my suit coat pocket, along with the manila envelope they'd handed over before putting me on the bus. An entire lifetime whittled down to a 5 x 8 envelope. An old love letter, my watch, a faded jewelry store receipt.

Fenster's face turned dour. "Now, Colin, they've hired you having been given full disclosure."

He asked if I knew what he meant by that.

I told him, yeah, I knew what he meant.

He said any trouble would reflect badly on the parole board. They wouldn't like that.

I said there wouldn't be any trouble.

He said that's what he liked to hear.

"They've sent along the money from your inside jobs," Fenster said, "which I'll be holding onto. There'll be a room waiting for you at the *Casa Loma* Hotel when your

shift ends tonight. It's on the corner of Sixth and Mission. Just give them your name and sign the register."

Then he doled out some meal money and bus tokens.

On my way to work, I spent my lunch money on some bourbon. Bay City at that time of year, early January's slow, wet crawl, can be a cold place.

"OK, *muchachas*," Borkowski barked. "Lower her down and get to work." He curled his stubby finger at me. Cut off mid-knuckle, it looked like a puppy tail stump twitching. "Not you, Specter. I got something else for you."

I took a swig of black coffee, which I'd bought from the roach coach, and popped a hardboiled egg, which I'd peeled and was keeping stored in my breast pocket for a mid-morning snack, into my mouth, whole. I chewed fast.

I wanted to like this Borkowski; I did. I figured I'd be in his employ for a while so I ought to do my best to get along, but already he was rubbing me the wrong way. I don't like being shouted at, and I find nothing more disconcerting than little men in positions of authority. I'd had my fill of trustee mentality on the inside.

When I first arrived, I hadn't been asked to fill out any paperwork, just ordered to keep out of the way. I'd spent the first hour on my new job standing around in drizzling rain, listening to the Mexican dockhands, all of whom were barely working age, jabber while I read the comics in the day's *Bay City Oracle*. Being a *bollilo*, I guess the Mexicans figured I didn't know what they were saying. But there are a lot of those boys in the can, and I'd picked up enough Spanish during my stay to get the gist of their

conversation. A few comments about my appearance aside, mostly they talked about what a *chupapinga* this Borkowski was.

I folded the paper and stuck it in a pocket, and made my way over.

“Juan, take your *pulgar* out of your ass!” Borkowski shouted. “*Hija de puta!* Raul, grab a gaff hook, quit sweet-talking *su novio*, and help latch the bale!”

A crane lowered a crosshatched basket, fat with cold fish, from the ship’s hull. Sheets of icy green seawater cascaded with weeds and crustacean shells and other bits of assorted ocean refuse. The load thudded on the wood dock, rattling the length of the pier and rousing the sleepy seals next door. Dirty fish water doused the men, who cursed *en Español*.

“Yeah, boss?” I said.

“Don’t got no papers for you to be up here, Specter. That’s a no go. Shipping inspector comes snooping ’round, that’s a stiff fine I can’t afford.”

“They told me everything was all set,” I said.

“Well, they *told* you wrong.” Borkowski sneered, oozing tobacco saliva. He wiped the dribble from his chin with the back of his sleeve. “Don’t worry, I got plenty else to keep you busy.” He thumbed inside the warehouse. “Shitter’s clogged. Plunger’s back there somewhere. Fix it.” He started down the dock toward the Mexicans.

His path was intercepted by a strapping lad. Dressed in farmer’s overalls, the big boy pulled on a sucker. Mama must’ve been a hefty gal, because this had to be the “Son” of the outfit, as only the seed of Borkowski could produce such a gem.

The big boy bent and whispered something, and both men burst out laughing, square yellow chompers hee-hawing.

Then Borkowski, seeing I hadn't moved, spun around, arms akimbo. "You hear what I said, Specter?"

"Yeah, I heard what you said," I growled, bulling forward. "Only I was told I'd be working on the docks, unloading freighters outdoors, not scrubbing toilets."

He turned to his son, jabbed a thumb my way. "You believe this, Henry? Some jailbird is gonna tell *me* what *he's* gonna do." He spat a brown loogy at my feet, and then shifted his package, an obvious ploy to establish dominance. I'd have said he read it in *National Geographic* while perusing for native tit, only he didn't strike me as the sort who could read. "Tell you what, Specter, you don't like it, go home. I'll put in a call to your PO, tell him you're being difficult and to send over someone else. How's that sound, hotshot?"

The smarmy runt couldn't have been more than five-four. I contemplated drop-kicking him into the bay. With such concentrated mass and strong headwind, maybe I could punt him all the way to Angel Island.

"Henry?"

"Yeah, Pop?"

"Will you look up Mr. Fenster's telephone number on my desk and get him on the line, please?"

"Sure thing, Pop," the seed of Borkowski clucked.

"Never mind, Hank," I said. "I'm going."

"Goddamn right you're going. Ungrateful, jailbird cocksucker..."

I brushed past him into the warehouse.

The stench of curry wafting up from the hotel lobby was making me nauseated. A pair of ugly gray pigeons, undernourished and diseased-looking, had been camped on the fire escape since I'd checked into my room a little after six; they chattered away, hopping between the raindrops. I was burned out on conversation, having talked more in the last few days than I had in the preceding seven years.

The doctors were right. My severed vocal cords healed and, sure, I could speak. But I wouldn't call it pretty. I liked the way my last cellmate, Dexter, phrased it. He said, "C, you bark like a dog that been up all night gargling on 180 proof and broken glass." Stupid kid, but I liked him. He was serving a four-year stint for stealing a penguin out of the city zoo. He said he wanted to give the bird to his girl for her birthday. "She likes dem penguins." Poor lovesick bastard. Who do you think turned him in?

I took a gander at my new home. Nursery blue wallpaper, rotting yellow and brown like lifelong tobacco stains, curling around the edges and peppered with graffiti. A bureau minus three drawers, infested with bugs and butane scars. Carpet worn out in fat swathes. Blood spackles on the ceiling. A sink for a toilet. Hotels like the *Casa Loma* don't come furnished with in-room bathrooms. The can is down the hall and usually plugged by some junkie. So you piss in sinks. Lovely.

I'd pawned my watch after work and picked up a fifth of bourbon. I'd developed a taste for the fire water on the inside. Most folks think you can't find stuff like that in prison, but trust me, anything you can find on the outside, you can find in there, too.

At the present moment, I was sinking under alcohol's sedentary persuasion and the ramifications of an ill-conceived existence, which only brings a man down, begging the tough questions.

You hear cats in the slammer talking all the time about the wonderful things they're going to do once they get out, the restaurants and the girls and the never-ending parties, and you know it's all bullshit because most of those Joes are never seeing the light of day, but still you allow yourself to get sucked up in it, imagining the first taste of free air and your favorite pie. But you know what? That strawberry-rhubarb pie doesn't taste half as sweet as you remember it, and air doesn't have *any* flavor, and you realize for all the lousiness of the pen, at least you could count on a few things. You had three hots and a cot. You had your routine, and if you kept your nose clean, nobody bothered you. You lulled yourself into a trance, a walking coma, and so you weren't really cognizant of all the pain. So far out here, in the so-called real world, I'd felt nothing but the pain. There was no home for me here, no girl, nothing I could feel passionate about. A crummy job on the docks and this fleabag dump, that's what waited for me. And the State said I couldn't leave.

I bent forward and scooped my Camels off the floor. Two left. Checked the scratch in my pockets. It wouldn't last long. I hit the bottle.

I hadn't seen the sun since I'd been out, a low pressure front from the north stalling over the city, bringing a steady, misty rain. Rainy season for Bay City. A search light panned past and flooded the room. It drew me to the window and I caught my reflection in its glint.

Over the years, I'd done my best to avoid mirrors. Not that that was much of a problem in the joint; correctional institutions are not known for their sensitivity toward personal hygiene. But there were ways, if you wanted to see what you looked like. Sink basins. Tin trays. Shower heads. Punks with smuggled compacts. At first, I went through this phase where I pitied myself. I'd take a good look, see what they'd done to me and get all weepy. You don't last long in the can thinking like that.

I turned in disgust and took a drag.

I tipped back the rapidly dwindling fifth of Jim Beam, scratched my belly and sank further into the fraying chair, which reeked of green bean vomit. Besides some spring coils passed off as a mattress and that goddamn dresser, it served as the only furniture in the hellhole.

The hotel where they'd arranged residence, the *Casa Loma*, was strictly the skids. The State has an ongoing contract with only the most deplorable and virtually uninhabitable. Ex-con comfort-of-living isn't exactly a top priority. Plus, having all the jailbirds in one place makes it easier for the cops during sweeps' week.

Feet pitter-pattered along the sidewalk, the day shift ending under a dark sky. Automobiles screeched and skidded on their way to somewhere important, busybody noises clamoring up three stories, and all the while those goddamn birds on the fire escape kept yapping. Every time I'd shoo them off, they'd come right back.

Seven years to come up with a plan, and what was I doing? Locking myself back down.

I kicked the crap on the floor, and the *Bay City Oracle* I'd stuffed into my coat pocket fell out, and an article caught my eye. An old, familiar name. Daddy Dearest.

Cephalus Christos Wins Humanitarian Award for Research Center of Children's Hospital.

I snatched it up and read.

It was quite the heartwarming story. Several years back, the Old Man had conceived of a children's hospital to treat those teeming unfortunates who never stood a chance, the abandoned, abused, and sick children folks like to pay special attention to in election years. Apparently, helping sick kids was now the Old Man's passion. What the article failed to mention was why anyone would want to associate a children's hospital with a man of Cephalus Christos's tarnished reputation. It made no sense, either, why the Old Man would suddenly turn tail and leave behind the lucrative criminal world, which according to Gabriel he had, for something like this feel-good, nonprofit project. The hospital, named the Meltemi Children's Hospital after some infamous Grecian dry, northern winds, was built with a view of the North Bay Bridge to boot. The quote of how the Old Man just wanted the chance to "give a little something back to the city that had given him so much" made me laugh out loud.

And now some research center was drawing raves, and the city was handing out humanitarian awards to the inhumane.

How nice.

Good for him. Best of luck. Hell, maybe he really had turned over a new leaf. I didn't give a damn. It wasn't my fight.

A knock sounded on my door.

Gabriel wouldn't be stupid enough to come here.

I crossed softly and jerked the door open fast, fist cocked and ready for anything.

But it wasn't Gabriel.

Faded yellow light bled from down the hall. A wizened, old man in mismatched attire, mustard rain slicker and plaid trousers, with gray bushy locks poking out of a porkpie hat, peered up and stared into my eyes. He smiled wide. "Sure have grown."

"Excuse me?"

"Name's Tulane," he said, offering a tiny hand. I didn't return the favor. "Mind if I come in?" He didn't wait for an answer before breezing past and sliding off his goofy slicker. "Colin Specter," he said. "I met you once, wrote a story about you."

"Did it have a happy ending?"

"It wasn't *that kind* of story. I logged hours for a small weekly back then." He cleared some clutter off the bed and hopped up.

"Sure, make yourself at home."

"You were singing weekends off Bracken. What was the name of the place? The Hen House? No, that's not right. Something like that, though—oh, wait, I remember now: The Chicken Coop. Had quite the voice on you. What did I write? It'll come to me. I have a very good memory." He tapped his crown. "Ah, yes," he said, clearing his throat, "I found the genuine article, a man whose velvety voice, pitch-perfect phrasing, and humble demeanor have reaffirmed my faith in the power of song."

"That's poetry, but I don't sing anymore, Church."

"I admit I wasn't much... So you *do* know who I am."

I knew perfectly well who Tulane Church was. Everybody in Bay City did. Once upon a time, he'd been an icon in these parts. Man About Town. Then ace reporter for

the big boys. Tulane's One Way. Tulane Goddamn Church. I'd been looking at twenty-five in the clink if found guilty, of course I read the papers. The bastard covered my trial. Coverage? More like hand-fed, tickertape propaganda. I always assumed he'd been on the Christos' payroll, the way he printed their cockamamie version as verbatim.

"How'd you find me?" I asked.

"Wasn't too difficult, actually. Every recently released offender has to be registered, and I still have an ally or two in these parts."

"What do you want?" I swiped the bourbon off the radiator and guzzled it down, falling back into the chair.

"Tell me, what are you doing with yourself now that you're a free man?"

"Listen, pal, I don't know what gives you license to barge in here, getting all personal, but I'm not in a talking mood, and even if I was, trust me, you'd be the last person I'd engage."

"I see," he said.

"No, I don't think you do." The bourbon had gone straight to my noodle and, suddenly washing over me, made me lightheaded and swoozy.

This guy wasn't touring the skids at this time of night for his health. He had something to pitch, and here it came.

"In all my years of journalism," he said, "I have only one regret. Do you know what that is?"

"Do I care?"

"That I hung an innocent boy out to dry, sold him out, printed lies as fact when I should've known better. A new job, old prejudices, I thought you were just another kid

who'd taken the easy road. Knowing how talented you were only made me angrier. You were guilty by association in my book, and I let my hatred of Cephalus Christos cloud my judgment." He slid over, stretching his short arm as far as it would go and placing his hand on mine, as sincere as a man can be. "For what it's worth, Colin, I am sorry. Truly sorry for what happened to you and for not doing anything to help when I had the chance."

"OK, little fella," I said, scooting him off, "Santa wants you to be a good little elf. Go on, get. The children need their toys." I hiccupped.

"I don't write for the papers anymore."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"So you followed the story while you were—"

"Incarcerated for a crime I didn't commit? Maybe I heard something about it."

Like I said, I knew plenty about this Church. I'd followed his fall with keen, almost gleeful interest. It was nice seeing someone else get burned for a change.

It wasn't long after I'd been sent up. It was quite the scandal around Bay City when it happened. Front page news. One of Bay City's golden boys going head-to-head with the North Beach Mafioso. Just the sort of thing that sells newspapers. I had an in with a guard who'd slip me the dailies from time to time. Tulane was a hotshot writer at the *Oracle* by then, and he had it in for the Old Man.

Following a long investigation, a grand jury had convened to decide the fate of the Old Man, and Tulane claimed to have the final nail for the coffin, some source who was going to testify. He printed a big story about it. But the source never materialized,

and the Old Man got off. Then the paper fired Church. It didn't make any difference to me. I didn't like either one of them.

“We have a lot in common, you and me,” Church said.

“And what's that?”

“I think it should be obvious.”

“Maybe it is. And maybe it isn't.”

“We both had something unjustly taken from us by a certain family.”

“Wrong. You only lost a job.”

“Yes, it is true that you've had the far tougher row to hoe. But the real question is, what are you prepared to do about it now?”

I fired up my last cig, inhaled deeply, and blew out slow rings, one after the other after the other. I studied the burning ember, fire meets paper, sizzle and ash. Fire, an element so simple and beautifully designed.

“I can help you,” he said.

“Don't want your help.”

The floodlight panned past again and a mouse skittered across the floor.

“Maybe this is a bad time,” he said. “Why don't you come by my place—perhaps we can talk some more?” He extracted a business card, passing it to me. “I'm usually around.”

I took the card, wiped my mouth with it and then dropped it on the floor. I went back to studying the tip of my cigarette.

Tulane slipped off the bed and donned his porkpie. “I guess I had you wrong, Colin.”

“Appears that way.”

“When I walked in tonight, I thought I saw something in your eyes.”

“You don’t say.”

“The look of a man who still has something to prove.”

“Must be somebody else’s eyes you’re thinking of.”

“No, I’m quite sure they were yours. And they yearned for another chance.”

I looked him dead on. “Mr. Church, you look in my eyes and I’m afraid you’re only going to see one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“A dead man.”

Chapter Three

I'd made it through the week. Without a penny in pocket, I showed up for work on Friday, ready to get paid. The dough from the watch I'd pawned, along with Fenster's meal money, had run dry with the last bottle. Without means for a drink, I'd have to grunt and labor for the next eight hours sober before I could buy any relief.

So I got cracking.

Poison sweated from every pore, my teeth ached and my back began to bark. Cotton-mouthed and sleep deprived, I didn't complain, didn't so much as say "boo." Four times that day I had to get in the water. Four. Artic cold and slimy. Combing the filthy floor to retrieve everything from a gaff hook to a sneaker. By the end of the day I was coated with thick oily sludge and toxic waste. But I didn't complain. It was payday. It wouldn't be much of a payday, I knew that, but it'd be enough for some smokes, a few burgers, and if I budgeted correctly, to stay fairly well lubricated to do it all over again.

It might sound funny but I actually felt a tinge of pride for having earned something. Yeah, it was a shit job, no-brain, all brawn, something a trained monkey could do. And granted I wasn't moving up any corporate ladders, and I wasn't fooling myself into believing there'd be enough feed to squirrel away a few kernels for that mansion on the hill someday, but what I was making was mine, and I'd worked damned hard for it.

Despite the hangover, I gave it my all. While the Mexicans horse-played and threw empty tamale husks at one another, I hauled down load after load, fish slime in my hair alongside the bits of dehydrated jellyfish carcasses and oyster shells and God knows

what else, but I didn't care, because the more garbage heaped down upon me, the faster and harder I worked, until I developed such a rhythm, the work itself played like an afterthought. Joggers call it a "runner's high." Musicians call it being "in the groove." I don't know what term dock workers have for it, but whatever it's called, I had it.

At one point the Mexicans began cursing at me to slow down, that I was making them look bad. I didn't care. It wasn't something I was doing for them, or for Borkowski; I did it for me. My own hands. The fruits of my own labor. And it felt good.

I personally packed twenty-eight crates that day. By myself. The most I'd seen done previously, with everyone's working, was sixteen, the whole week I'd been there. That day, I handled the whole show, save of course for the "special" cargo Borkowski only trusted to his jackass kid. Who knows what made those crates so special. There was more than fish in there, though, that was for damn sure.

Maybe setting a record for salmon and halibut packing doesn't seem like anything a man ought to boast about. Still, I took a lot of pride in seeing those crates pile up. A few times Borkowski stuck his sour puss out to see what all the commotion was. I didn't expect commendation, but he certainly couldn't complain about my effort. More money for him. Maybe now he'd get off my back.

Five o'clock and I stood in line with the Mexicans. I filed last out of habit, waiting patiently while the line crawled, Borkowski making chit-chat, chomping on a sloppy cigar. The Mexicans spoke of tequila and *carne asada* feasts, horny *muchachas* who were waiting on them to call. A lot of that kind of dirty talk filled the room, the

lowbrow variety, but I didn't let it bother me. I wasn't there to make friends or pass judgment. I was there to work. And I had worked. Now came time I got paid.

Once the Mexicans had left, Borkowski slapped down what I thought was a joke. So I waited for the punch line.

“What are you waiting for?” he said. “Pick up your pay and get out of here. I got things to do.”

Borkowski cashed the checks, a public service rendered for the lowly dock worker without a bank account, removing all applicable taxes himself. Handler's fees notwithstanding, it didn't take an accountant to add up I was being short-changed.

His goofball kid rocked back on the legs of a folding metal chair, overalls too tight, highwaters riding up, yuck-yucking. His hands interlocked over his broad chest, Henry smirked, a lolly puffing out his left cheek. He tried to give me the eye, let me know that if Papa was the brains of the outfit, Sonny boy here was the muscle.

“What's this, Borkowski?” I said.

He turned to his boy. “See the smart fellers they send me?”

His boy cluck-clucked.

Borkowski pointed with his amputated digit at the piddly sum, and like I was retarded said, extra slowly, “That is your pay for the week. Now pick it up and scram.”

His boy cluck-clucked some more.

“I know what it's *supposed* to be”—I fingered the coins and measly couple bills—“but that isn't enough. Forty hours at minimum wage works out to—”

“Works out to whatever I say it works out to.” Borkowski sniggered. “You still don’t get it, do you, Specter? *I* decide what you get paid around here, or if you get paid at all.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Can’t I?”

My blood began to run hot. I tried to suppress it by taking the higher, intellectual road and reasoning with the man. “I’m sure if we talk about this with Fenster, he’ll—”

“He’ll what? Take a convict’s word over me and my boy’s? Hardworking, upstanding family, runs a respectable business, law-abiding members of the community?” He curled his lip, looked at me like I was pus-filled herpe. “You got some nerve, you know that? You show up here, drunk, surly, you don’t listen, act like your doing me a goddamn favor when you finally decide to work. You ain’t been nothin’ but a pain in my ass since you got here. Now you want to tell me how to keep my books?”

He eyeballed me and I eyeballed him back, and from my guts to the top of my skull, I felt the hunger gnashing, clawing at my insides to get out.

Borkowski flashed a phony grin. He reached under his desk and pulled out a tin box. Flipping back the lid, he feigned surprise. “Uh-oh, Henry, looks like somebody’s been stealing from petty cash. Hmm, let me think. Anyone work here who’s got a criminal record?”

Henry giggled. “Yup, Pop, now that I thinks about it, there is this one feller—”

“Well, Henry, I like to give a man a second chance. So maybe if this jailbird cocksucker doesn’t cause me no more headaches today, picks up his fucking pay and gets

out of here so I can go home, I'll look the other way and won't call the authorities. *This* time.”

He and Henry shared a hearty chuckle over their little joke. I got it, too. So I laughed with them. One week maybe I get paid. One week maybe I don't. One week maybe they ask for all the money in my pockets. But I was still expected to work, and if I did, kept quiet and didn't piss off the Bossman, maybe I'sa stay outta the clink, Massah. So we all laughed good and hard. It was a funny joke. I just couldn't decide what was funnier: that they had obviously successfully run this ruse before, or that they honestly didn't think I'd do anything about it.

I wrapped a meaty fist around Borkowski's throat. As I expected, his boy leapt to his defense. Reaching behind me, Henry interlocked his arms inside mine, trying to break my grip. He might've thought himself a tough guy who had the jump on me, but I ended such misguided notions quickly. I jerked my arms down, and snapped both his at the elbow. They hung flaccid as overcooked spaghetti. I spun and socked him in the gut, followed by an uppercut, and he went down.

Borkowski, who had fallen over his chair, now scooted back into a corner and, like a baby with a rattler, shook his grubby fist, in which he held a tiny pointed pocket knife.

I crouched down. “Little boys shouldn't play with sharp objects. Could poke an eye out.” I swatted the knife away and lifted him up. I shook the dirty, sweaty hair from my eyes and let the bastard get an eyeful.

As expected, he recoiled with fear.

I sneered. “Did you really think that I was going to be *your* bitch, you stupid, penny-pinching Polack? That I’m going to come down here, day after day, bend over and take it from a munchkin like you?” I snapped a stiff finger against his testicles and he cried. “See this mug, you shit-heel. I’ve had it out with men a lot tougher than you. Now if they couldn’t handle me, what makes you think a pipsqueak runt like you can?”

“Y-you c-crazy s-son-of-a-bitch. I-I’ll c-call—”

I cracked my head against his melon and out he went, tongue lolling, body limp over the desk.

I emptied his pockets and counted out my pay. My exact pay and not a penny more.

A few blocks away, and what I’d done hit me. That had been my problem in the slammer. I’d stay out of people’s way and, for the most part, they’d stay out of mine, but sooner or later, some wiseass with something to prove would start a row and I’d have to teach him a lesson. Inside, that didn’t constitute a problem. Inmates police themselves. As long as you didn’t start a riot, two guys duking it out wasn’t cause for a fuss. Out here was a different story.

It wasn’t the money. So Borkowski tried to lowball me, big deal. I should’ve expected as much from a weasel like him. I could’ve taken what he laid out and gone and taken my chances with Fenster. I’m sure I wouldn’t be the first ex-con to get shrifted.

But those two galoots laughing at me?

So I'd lost it, and now I found myself in heap of trouble. *You can't go beating up people on the outside, Collie.* If you don't have a record, maybe you can, but I had a record, and Borkowski was right about one thing: he could tell the cops anything and they'd take his word over mine—and that was if I *hadn't* done anything wrong. But a newly paroled ex-con whipping two business owners unconscious, that spelled trouble. I had to think fast.

The way I saw it, I had two choices: I could run, and without much scratch and too many road blocks, how far would I get? Or Plan B: I could try to find an ally, someone who could and would be willing to help. And so far as I knew, only one man had offered it who had the clout to keep me from going back to jail.

And as luck would have it, he was the same man who sent me there in the first place.

Chapter Four

I did my best to blend in with the evening foot patrol. These are the tips you pick up in the can. Put a bunch of criminals together and, besides the bemoaning of unjust fates and the looking ahead to brighter pastures, you hear a lot of professional posing about the tricks of the trade.

When the heat is on, most jokers will do the same thing: try to get out of sight as fast as possible. But sometimes the safest place to be in a riot is in the street. Half the clowns you meet in the pen are there because they either booked at the first sight of a cop, or were found driving a stolen car hell bent for the edge of town or holed up in their girlfriend's attic. Cop sees *anyone* run, he's going to chase. The fuzz sees a muscle car speeding through the high wheat plains, he grows suspicious, flips on the lights, and makes a stop. And the first place they'll always check is your girl's.

The Financial District was locking up shop for the day, the sidewalks overflowing with jacks of various trades, florists, printers, bicyclist messengers, stock brokers. I didn't run or even walk briskly. Just lifted my collar, ducked down, and plowed ahead with the rest of the cattle onto Market Street.

I didn't know how long till Borkowski and Son came to or the extent of the damage I'd done. I wasn't paranoid that an APB was going to be sent out for a jailbird getting a little slap-happy. A call would simply be placed to the police, who would be waiting patiently for me at my hotel room. Still, it made sense to get to a payphone and make that call as quickly as possible. I found a booth on the corner of New Montgomery.

Gabriel didn't act surprised that I called or when I said I needed to see him right away. He simply told me they'd be expecting me. He didn't need to give me directions because I knew the place well.

The Lone Palm was no longer the Lone Palm but the Kitten Club, and there was nothing secret about finding your way inside anymore. Flashing red and white lights, replete with the blistering outline of a naked girl straddling a martini stick, heralded entry, and even the greenest cowpoke from Nebraska could've figured out what they were selling now. But just in case, all the pleasures waiting inside were carefully spelled out in small, single syllable words.

Jungle rhythms slithered from the PA. A few dozen slovenly saps were dispersed throughout the electric pink and blue room, bills clenched in their teeth, lifting their shirts and jiggling their fat, hairy tummies. The ones who weren't double fisting cocktails or yipping like rabid raccoons were passed out in their beer.

Where I used to sing now sported plenty of skin: three separate stages, each with its own hussy, fireman's pole, and vacation-land theme. The ladies showcased their individual talents: the cute blonde in the nun's habit and fishnets could've been a spiritual advisor in another life, the raven-haired vixen done up like Poca-hot-ass a marine biologist, but don't ask me about the redhead. Let's just say, I wouldn't bank on getting to the moon anytime soon with her behind the wheel.

Where the backstage had been, there were now pool tables. I thought I might know some of the players. They stole perfunctory glances my way before returning to

their sticks and balls. They were nice tables, rosy felt and studded slots, with glitzy overhead cue racks.

Seven years ago I might've expressed dismay at such a scene, how the happiest times of my life had been perverted into something so distasteful. Desperation and loneliness pervaded the room, heavy as the coat of cigarette smoke, sour alcohol, and sweating sex that hung in the air. My skin felt greasy as soon as I walked in the joint, and if I dropped a quarter I sure as hell wasn't bending down to pick it up.

Pulling up to the bar, I realized there was one remaining memento from the old days. Not all the palm trees had been removed. In a nice touch, a single one had been left alone. In a back corner, it flourished unruly, its overgrown, frowzy fronds jerking down like mad tentacles. In the gaudy new décor, it stood hideously out of place, left alone like that elephant in the room nobody wants to talk about.

I barked the barkeep over, a slick punk with waxed pompadour and gigolo ambitions.

“Bourbon,” I growled.

I slapped my money on the counter. He brought and I pounded. I held her up for a refill.

A cocktail waitress brushed past me and wedged behind my back. “Gin and tonic,” she said with a southern twang. I cast a sideways glance, starting with the mocha ankles and sequin pumps, and then up behind the curl of the knee, stopping just below the hemline of her glittering violet skirt.

The barkeep brought my refill, and I huddled over it.

I felt the waitress eyeing me, and I curled my shoulders.

The fresh scrub of soap. A woman, and I was hungry.

She strutted away with her drink on a tray, and I watched her backside sway.

What was this one's story? Did she leave behind a strung out mother across the water?

Did she have a boy who loved her? How was she killing the pain tonight?

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and turned to find my old friend the Giant. Maybe Figgs didn't recognize me, or maybe he wasn't in the mood for any heartfelt reunions.

Either way, I didn't let it hurt my feelings.

"Follow me," the Giant said. How could anyone forget that voice? One of those deep-welled, goiter voices, like the sounds of speech emanated from the hell of his bowels. Nobody would confuse Figgs with a handsome man: butterfly-stitch tracks peppering his face; a left eye half an inch higher than the right; nose like a Picasso; purple burn tissue ravaging half his dome. At over seven feet, the man was a certifiable freak show.

Stepping aside, the Giant treated my presence like that of just another bastard nephew coming to Thanksgiving dinner. I recognized a couple of the other old timers guarding passage to the basement. I thought the one was named Petersen. He had a red furry down, like kicked up carpet fuzz, barely covering his crown, a clown ravaged by Benzedrine. You don't forget a face like his.

Looks like the whole gang's here. Happy Homecoming to Me.

At the bottom of the well, we passed a couple showgirls in tight skirts and fishnets, nothing but pasties covering their breasts. As I passed, they looked my way.

They'd soon change their tune if they got close enough.

The Giant slogged me down the hallway toward the office that had once belonged to the Old Man. From Gabriel's pitch at the joint, I got the distinct impression the big boy wasn't hanging around much these days.

I'd never been in the Old Man's office while in the employ of the Palm. Far as I knew, no one who worked at the club had. Besides Gabriel. It was a running joke with the wait staff and hired help. We'd hang out in the kitchen or meat locker, dealing cards or rolling dice, spinning stories about what took place in "the cave."

I didn't see much of the Old Man back then. He rarely ventured out of his den in the daylight, and anytime I did spy him, it was always from afar. Because my sets tended to end late, I'd often be among the last to leave, and if I were to see him it was usually then, in the wee hours.

What stayed with me all these years, besides his always wearing white, was the unique way in which he moved. Because of his immense corpulence, the Old Man was forced to straddle when he walked, slabs of thigh bowed as much as physicality would permit in order to leave room for the massive, distended belly that slung far below his groin region, like a milk udder engorged and ready to pop.

Figgs ushered me inside the office, where Gabriel waited.

Over the years, one thing I garnered about Gabriel's relationship with the Old Man: Gabby liked to fancy himself the more culturally elevated of the two. The contemporary layout was an attempt at high class, as if it'd been ordered from a Culture-to-Go catalogue: miniaturized fountain statue in the style of classical Greek antiquity, water spitting from a tit and overflowing to a basin waiting below; wet bar with built-in poker table; silver wine rack in the shape of two serpents, and you knew it only housed

the good stuff. He had impressionist reprints covering the walls. The predominant color scheme, burgundy and gold. That was Gabriel, always trying to prove he belonged to a better world while still reaping the privileged, if amoral, birthright of the old one.

Gabriel spread his arms, a welcome for the lost black sheep returning to the fold. I wasn't viewing the reunion in quite the same terms. I needed help. And he could—and would—give it to me.

He told the Giant to go away but not too far, to “stick around upstairs” because they “might have a run to make,” whatever that meant.

When the door closed, Gabriel told me to have a seat. He went to the wine rack. “Looks like you could use a drink.”

Like he was reading my mind.

I took the chair in front of his desk, feeling more like I was at a job interview than underground in some titty bar.

Gabriel scoured his stock, in search of that particular item designed to impress. When he found it, he slipped the bottle from its ring, like a doctor birthing a fragile baby, studying its label, furrowing his brow and nodding to himself. He poured out a thick wine and passed me a glass.

I sniffed it. “Got anything stronger?”

“Try that, Collie. It's retsina. A Greek wine. Very good stock. Distinct hints of candied vanilla, hazelnuts, and oak. You'll like it.”

I swallowed some. It tasted like warm piss squeezed through a dirty old sock. Hell, it was alcohol. I gulped the rest fast. He filled me back up with a smile.

Behind his desk, he reclined with his hands behind his head, a big grin plastered on his grille. "So, how have things been?"

"We can cut the pleasantries. I'm in trouble."

He laughed. "I'd say you're in more than trouble. You caused quite the wreck down on the docks this afternoon."

"You heard about that?"

"The Sandman phoned me just before you did. You broke Henry Borkowski's arms pretty bad. He's down at BC General right now. They're not sure if they can save them both. Borkowski got off easier. Just a bloodied nose and concussion." Gabriel shook his head, chuckling. "What's gotten into you? Used to be such a mild mannered kid." He said all this glibly but with clear admiration.

"They had it coming."

"That I don't doubt. I know Borkowski. He's a scum sucker, a real penny-pinching sonofabitch. Him and his half-wit kid. What he do? Give you the short-shrift? No surprise. Still, a clock-puncher can't go around whacking skulls and breaking arms."

"Can you help me or not?"

He bent forward and caught my eye, and pointed a quick finger, like a used car salesman offering the deal of the millennium. "Sure. I can help you."

"I didn't come here to grovel, Gabriel. You mentioned a job. As luck would have it, I now find myself in need of one. But I'm on parole. I have a PO. I'm not interested in taking on the BCPD."

"I said it's taken care of."

OK, I said, I'd sign on, but first I had some questions. "Why me? You must have two dozen other guys working for you."

Gabriel smirked, before bringing the palmed retsina to his lips.

"I'm not complaining," I said. "You want to give me your money, I'll be happy to take it. Just a practical question, is all."

"Perhaps you're overlooking the obvious. I consider you a friend."

"Try again."

He half-closed an eye, the size-up. "All right. Maybe I heard some stories."

"What kind of stories?"

"Stories about how a little boy isn't so little anymore, about how he's turned himself into some sort of wrecking machine, done seven hard years at Quentin without so much as a scratch, come out three times the size he went in, and I'm thinking that maybe this wrecking machine can be convinced we want the same thing."

"Which is?"

"Vengeance. We got the same ax to grind, you and me: the Old Man."

"I'm not in the vengeance racket," I said. "If I was, you wouldn't be sitting here."

"Who do you think told me about the record contract? About you and Zoey?"

Who do you think made the call to offer you up? I loved you like a brother. I wanted us to go places—together. I poured my heart into making the Lone Palm something special, and that pissed the Old Man off. I wanted to leave his crooked world behind. He wanted me under his thumb. I can't take back what happened that night, but you have to believe me: I was to hand you off on a shipment gone bad. That was it. Taking away your voice was never part of the equation."

I snickered. “Then I suppose it’s lucky for you your boys beat me so badly I don’t remember anything but waking to Sandman slapping on the cuffs.”

“You should know, nothing’s been the same for me since that night either.”

Gabriel removed a silver case from his breast pocket, and offered me a hand-wrapped, brown cigarillo. “We were friends once,” he said.

“Once,” I said, taking the cigarillo.

“Fair enough. But you ought to acknowledge the big picture.”

“Namely?”

“That I never moved a muscle unless the Old Man said it was OK—and you know that’s a fact. Since you’ve been gone, the Old Man has only gotten bigger, grown more ruthless, become more untouchable. He’s wrangled control of the *Oracle*. His corrupt past? Like it never happened. All the dirt’s been dumped on me.”

“You boys always controlled the press.”

“This is different. He’s doing it legit now, bought it, fair and clean.”

“The *Oracle*? Who’d sell your father a newspaper?”

“You recall that shit with that reporter—what was his name?”

“Tulane Church.”

“Yeah, that’s him. After the grand jury wouldn’t indict, the Old Man came out firing, blaming the press, saying they’d always been out to get him. And then he did what he always does: threw some money to make a problem go away.”

That at least explained the favorable coverage.

“So why now?” I asked. “What’s the urgency?”

Gabriel grabbed a copy of the day’s *Oracle* and flipped it to me.

Christos Declares Candidacy for Mayor

Official Campaign Launch to be Held January 22nd on MCH Grounds.

Thomas Bowler, *Oracle* Staff
Friday, January 9th

Philanthropist Cephalus Christos declared his candidacy for Bay City mayor last night at the art opening for local painter Jacob Hoyer.

The opening at SOMA's Michael Henry Gallery turned political when Christos shocked the upscale crowd with his unexpected announcement.

With several political and spiritual leaders of the community in attendance, Christos said the timing was right.

"For too long I've been willing to sit back and watch our great city suffer the slings of outrageous fortune," he said. "I am here tonight to tell you, No more!"

With a citywide spike in drug-related crimes, public opinion polls support the notion that a change is warranted—and welcomed. Civic leaders agree.

"What Cephalus Christos has done for this community is unparalleled," said Artimas Black, First Methodist minister and MCH chaplain.

The Meltemi Children's Hospital is the waterfront hospital that treats and houses the city's neglected children.

As an orphaned child on the Greek Isle of Tinos, Christos said "he learned what it's like to go to bed hungry," and that he "made a vow then to wipe out such atrocities."

Christos drew his biggest applause of the evening for his attack against criminals running amuck in the city by the bay.

"You don't need me to tell you what's become of our city," he said. "Gangs sending our elderly scampering.

Drugs killing our sons and daughters. As a father myself, I know what crime can do to a family."

This last comment was especially touching, since it is well known that Christos has family members embroiled with the law.

However, Christos made it clear that the city would come first, and anyone who didn't abide by the law of the land, kin or not, would be dealt with harshly.

"Mob mentality is a thing of the past," Christos said. "There is only one way to deal with the criminal mindset and that is to strike it down!"

The man to whom the evening was supposed to belong, artist Jacob Hoyer, said he didn't mind having his thunder stolen.

"I am glad my work provided the opportunity for a great man like Cephalus Christos to get his message across," Hoyer said.

Members of law enforcement in attendance echoed the sentiment.

"I foresee great things for Bay City," said Chief of Police Mark Sandman.

The official launch for Christos' campaign is slated for Thursday, January 22nd at 9 a.m. on the MCH grounds.

Three Dead from Heroin Overdose Lawrence Hitch, *Oracle* Staff

The bodies of three men were found early yesterday morning outside 3rd Street Station by a yard worker, the apparent victims of heroin overdoses...

I set the paper down. “So?”

“So this has been in the works for a while, and you can bet that before his big campaign kick-off, shit is going to be coming down. He’s gonna be putting on the squeeze,” Gabriel said. “But he’s underestimating me. He’s forgetting that I’m his son.”

I drew on the smoke, which tasted like baked ham and maple sugar. “Just what is it you expect me to do?”

“Follow him,” Gabriel said urgently.

“The Old Man?”

“Yeah. Keep an eye on him, maintain a log—his meetings and times, the whos and wheres and whats.”

“Private dick work.”

“If I’m going to war, I need someone who doesn’t have any allegiances to him.”

“Did it ever occur to you, I don’t have allegiances to either of you?”

“Call it a hunch.”

“Call what a hunch?”

“That I can trust you.”

“That’s a pretty big hunch.” I had to laugh. “Why don’t you just call him up?” I said. “Invite him for dinner, have a nice sit-down, father and son chat?”

“The Old Man is not somebody you talk to. That might be hard for you to understand. But my father is a different animal. Remember when the Filipino stepped on his cat’s tail? They found the guy’s head in Manitoba and his asshole in Maine. This is about survival. Whatever ill you think of me, I can promise you, compared to my father, I’m a fucking saint. If he’s running for office, he can’t have his past coming up to bite

him on the ass. I've got to stay on top of his every move. And when it all comes down, I'm gonna need a wrecking machine or two in my corner."

"Like I said, Gabriel, it's your dime. Just know, I'm not buying any of this cock and bull story. This family feud, your conspiracy theories, they have nothing to do with me. But I'll take the job. And I'll take your money. So long as you understanding something: I'm not signing on for any war. You can get me out of this jam? You can get my parole waved? Good. It's the least you can do." I squashed my smoke.

"Fair enough," he said, smiling. "Go wait upstairs, mingle with the girls while I call in some favors and get you in the clear. The blonde's name is Billie. She has a thing for big boys."

When I got to the door, he called out to me.

I turned around.

"It's good to have you back, Collie."

And with that, the devil was in my life and there was nothing I could do about it.

After Gabriel made his phone calls, I had a room waiting for me at the Coat of Arms, an upscale, downtown hotel. A nice spread, it certainly beat all hell out of the *Casa Loma*. A mere few blocks away and it was like another world, the kind of joint that has a bowl of fresh apples at the check-in desk and a complimentary paper outside your door each morning.

It was hard not to feel sick, though, like I'd allowed myself to be bought. But this was temporary, I kept telling myself. I was using Gabriel this time, not the other way

around. I'd make sure I was in the clear, stash a few bucks, and then I'd ditch this town for good. Only I didn't know where to go.

My room was on the third floor, and I had a bird's eye view overlooking Union Square and the gaggle of tourists who flock to Bay City. I opened the window wide and peered down over the never-ending festival: the picture-snapping, postcard-buying, consumer-stuffing the belly of the American economy fat, night bright as day, with illuminated decorations and awnings glowing, harkening deals and last minute blowout sales.

I poised to close the window when something caught my ear. Down below, a busker had set up shop with his guitar and was picking a drifter's lament, crooning about eating dinner from a can and bedding down on prairie dirt, the ability to fit everything one needs into a rucksack and the wisdom of God's great plan. Some plan. I used to think about crap like that when I was young, about setting down the open trail for adventures, and it's for fools, child's play. Real romantic, kid. Playing for pennies tossed into a hat and sleeping at the Salvation Army. I had to slam the window shut to keep from losing my lunch.

I leaned against the heater. I'd never been in a room so clean and luxurious: folded back bedspread, monogrammed sheets with crimson logo, a crest with crisscrossed swords and jousting knights; extra pillows, with a goddamn mint resting on top, just like in the movies; two plush sitting chairs, with high and wide backs, stationed around a little table; the pleasantly stiff scent of disinfectant orange and bleach; a television. It didn't strike me as extravagant, just sensible, what every man is entitled to: a place to lay his head without fear of mice crawling in his hair. A guy could get used to this sort of thing.

Maybe I'd been going about it all wrong. What sort of dividends had being a stand-up guy yielded me? I grew up in a one-bedroom shack in the ghetto, the only white boy on the block, getting his ass kicked for asking the gringos and brothers if they wanted their weed-filled, tiny lawns mowed for a nickel so I could save up to buy Nana her medicine after the Social Security check ran out. And, every month, it ran out. Fast. I never stole. I never lied. I never cheated anyone. I only wanted to sing my songs, try and touch a few hearts, like that busker with scabies and head lice on the sidewalk, deluding himself into believing somebody gives a rat's ass about a couple chords and melody. Peace, love, and understanding? Save the sentiment for the greeting cards, kid. You play by the rules in this town and you get eaten up, chewed good and spat out. No, the way this place works, you want it, you take it. If you're big enough and strong enough, who's to say it doesn't belong to you anyway?

I needed a drink.

Chapter Five

My job description was simple. Follow the Old Man. Keep a log of whom he was meeting with, where and for how long. And be sure to keep a safe distance. That was one drawback even Gabriel conceded to: I didn't make the most incognito dick. Of course I'd be involved in other aspects of the business, too, collecting money, pick-ups, that sort of thing. I was fitted with a piece, a .44 Special. There was no negotiation of salary, as the offer laid on the table meant more dough than I'd ever seen. I had no intention of turning this into a career. I made that clear. In a few weeks I'd have enough scratch to get the fuck out of Dodge and never look back.

Early the next morning, I went to get a head start to see what I'd be up against.

The Old Man now lived in Pacific Heights, in a high-rise off Jackson, far removed from swarthy city streets. It shouldn't have been much of a climb from Union Square, just over California Street's trolley tracks and up some hills, but the cold and drizzle made it seem farther.

Once on Jackson, I ducked beneath an awning, blowing on my hands. Under an umbrella, an old lady passed by me wrapped in fur, her tiny dog bundled in a fluffy pink sweater.

Within half an hour, a stylish car with tinted windows pulled up in front of the Old Man's building, and then he emerged from the foyer. Even from afar, I recognized the fat bastard. Like in the old days, he was dressed all in white, from cap to shoes. His driver opened a backseat door for him. At first I thought the car was a Mark II, but when

they backed up, I got a better view and saw it was a Cadillac Eldorado Brougham, which meant 325 Horsepower V-8 Engine with Gold-Tone, Dual Carbs. Nice ride. I noted the time.

I headed to the dealership Gabriel recommended to pick out the car I'd need. I decided on a Mustang convertible, Gulfstream Aqua with a 289 block. I'd always wanted one. Not bad for a kid who used to ride the bus.

I'd pick up the Old Man's trail tomorrow. Right now, I had something else burning the brain. See, there was another benefit to my working for Gabriel, call it a perk, one that I intended to keep just for me.

After my arrest, Zoey had disappeared. One week she was sneaking in letters via her friend Roberto disguised as a candy-striper, telling me how much she loved me and how she was going to stick by my side. Then nothing. I held out hope for a while, but I could take a hint. It looked bad. I was deformed. I'd be going away. She moved on.

I had seven long years to forget about Zoey, and I *wanted* to forget about her, because it could never be. I rationalized it was for the best, that she should remember me for the way I was, not the thing I'd become. So I'd sleepwalked through my time on the inside. But it's easy to keep beautiful times at bay when you're encased by ugly stone, surrounded by monsters. Since being on the outside, forgetting about her had grown harder. I wanted to see with my own eyes the woman she'd become, make sure she was OK. I told myself I deserved that much. Working for Gabriel would afford me the resources to find her.

I'd treat it like a separate case.

Zoey used to live with Roberto, in a sleazy hotel called the Civic Center. I knew she wouldn't still be there of course, but I was hoping Roberto might, or at least that someone at the hotel could put me on the right path.

The Civic Center was midtown, another transient joint like the *Casa Loma*. I hated her living there. I had wanted to take us both somewhere better.

A handful of junkies were nodding out around a black and white TV in the open common room when I arrived, skinny boys with pencil-thin arms sporting abscesses, waifish girls with dead eyes.

The desk clerk said he didn't know any Roberto. Or a Zoey. I wasn't surprised. Hotels like the Civic Center are stopovers; nobody stays long.

Zoey grew up in Pleasanton, about an hour's drive over the East Bay Bridge. I couldn't imagine she'd be hanging around there. She didn't have any family, just a mother, and from what I remembered about her, she wasn't the sort of parent you could count on. But Pleasanton was a start. It being the weekend, however, any public records office would be closed, and I'd need them to dig up information, so I'd have to wait until Monday.

I headed back downtown for some grooming and new clothes, a few suits, an overcoat to contend with this miserable weather, and a haircut to polish up my image. I picked up some binoculars, too, a set of Minolta 10 x 40s, along with a day planner where I could make notes of the times and places, and whatever other particulars I deemed relevant in my pursuit of the Old Man.

Then I hit the pawn shop and picked up my watch.

The next morning, I was back outside the Old Man's. Parked down the block, I splashed some bourbon in the black coffee I'd taken with me from the hotel. My top was up to keep out the cold and mist. Waiting for him to show, I read the paper, although now knowing who ran the *Oracle* it proved tough to take anything seriously. My mind wandered. Pictures of Zoey kept popping in my head. Maybe she'd decided to get far away from it all, headed out east and was living on a beach in Florida or in some saltbox in North Carolina.

Outside my car, doormen looking more like naval officers in their shiny, high-buttoned overcoats opened gold-plated doors and tipped their caps as the rich and mighty, mostly old, white people, exited exclusive residences with names like The Top Tier and The Excelsior. Those who weren't living in the neighborhood's luxury condominiums dwelled in one of the many surrounding mansions perched on the hills, their gothic columns and ornate landscaping rendering them more like museums than residences.

Just when I thought the Old Man might sleep in on Sundays, he trudged outside. No driver today. Instead, he waddled to the valet to bring around his Cadillac, which, like his suit, was also all white. Except for those stupid tinted windows.

I took a swig of coffee and let him get a head start.

The Old Man slithered down Lombard, toward the North Bay Bridge. Coming off the NBB, the road dipped after the Rainbow Tunnel, dropping into the Waldo Grade. He took the Mars Beach exit, turning onto Highway 1, the rolling hills of the Headlands obscuring the Pacific, on toward Seaside.

We wound through the sleepy fishing villages, past the houseboat dwellers of the North Bay, before crossing onto the main drag of Bridgeway, the boulevard lined with

coffee houses and old bookstores, weirdoes camped out in front, trust fund poets, faded pop stars, gypsies in sarongs weighted down by beads.

I had him in my sights, was maintaining a safe distance, traffic flowing effortlessly on both sides. Then the Old Man took a surprising left, darting through a narrow passage of traffic, and by the time it cleared for me, he was gone. And I was stuck in this bohemian, seaside town full of crazy, long-bearded fisherman and granola munchers, wondering what the hell I was doing with my life.

If I was going to make any headway into finding Zoey or keeping track of the Old Man, I'd need to start doing a better job.

Trading in the Mustang for something a little less conspicuous was probably a good start.

When his driver picked him up Monday morning, I was there in my new dark blue Chevrolet sedan to check my watch, scribble a note, and follow. First stop, The Portly Prince, the "Large Man's Clothier" off Chestnut, where I watched through the plate glass as the fat bastard was fitted for some more ghastly all-white suits and bowler caps. Next, off to the Fairfield for an early lunch. I sat at the bar, my back to the crowd, and picked up what I could. I recognized a couple of the other players when I walked in. One was state senator Bane Cueter, who'd been in the paper of late for backing a bill aimed at rehabilitation options for drug addicts. Another guest, Judge Orlando Vargas, had also been making headlines for being a staunch opponent of said bill and favoring stricter, mandatory sentencing guidelines for offenders. But everyone seemed to be playing nice,

with lots of yapping, cigar smoking, and feasting. Soon another man, a sandy-haired, bespectacled fellow who I quickly gathered was the Old Man's attorney, joined them.

Listening to the interaction was befuddling. The Old Man had been rechristened a bona fide celebrity of Bay City, strictly high society. That was the most infuriating aspect of the case. At least in the old days, the Old Man had the sense to stay locked in his basement dungeon far from civil society. These days, three course luncheons at the Fairfield.

It's one thing for crooked cops and corrupt city officials to be coming into an after-hours' club for a payoff, and it's quite another for state senators and appellate judges to be seen with someone like Cephalus Christos in broad daylight. It was as though a decree absolving all past sins had been issued.

After the Old Man's driver dropped him off at the member's only Samler Steam & Sauna on Turk, I headed across the water to the Pleasanton town library, where I used an old city directory and found an address for Zoey. I drove to the south side of town, parking outside a squalid apartment complex, which squeezed a dozen units into a space meant for four. I climbed to the second floor landing, navigating the single roller skates and empty hamburger boxes.

The dumpy housewife who answered said she didn't know anybody by that name, in-between chomping on a box of macaroons. She said she'd lived there four years but never met the previous occupants. The housewife wasn't looking to be helpful, but I didn't get the impression she was lying.

The rest of the day was spent trying all the usual routes—school records, town hall, but those turned out to be dead ends, too. I went around to the few places I could remember Zoey having mentioned, but after seven years memories get hazy, names change. Then again, Pleasanton is a big place and going up to strangers with a face like a butchered frog, asking if anyone knows a girl named “Zoey” isn’t exactly a ticket to results.

I started beating myself up. I looked down at the suit I didn’t belong in, at the ordinary people schlepping through their ordinary day, and I started to get depressed as hell. I wasn’t a detective.

I decided to stop off for a drink before heading back to the Coat of Arms.

The sky hung low when I rounded the corner and entered a bar called the Rat and Raven. Pulling up, I ordered a bourbon and lighted a pill. A country and western ditty, “Mistress of Wyoming,” played on the jukebox, some twangy chanteuse pining for her lost pappy. I remembered it from when I was a kid. Papa’d gone out on the range to hunt elk but got lost in a snowstorm. Now it’s Christmas Day and the dinner table is empty on the plains. A bit heavy-handed, sure, but the broad singing it was botching it awful. The more sentimental a piece is, the less affectation a singer needs to project. It’s a common mistake, vocalists trying to ratchet up the emotional stakes by laying it on too thick, and they end up sucking all life out of the tune in the process. A singer needs to let the songwriter’s eloquence come through, naturally, not forced; words have to breathe, melody has to breathe. It isn’t about the notes you play—but the notes you *don’t* play. Every musician worth his salt knows that. All that banshee wailing is braggart bombast—and it ruins a piece.

“What’s the matter, pal? Don’t like the tune?”

I looked up. He was in his late thirties, dressed professionally in a tailored three piece. He chewed on a toothpick and stared straight ahead.

Gray afternoon light crept across the bar floor, his sharp face softened by its shadows. He didn’t belong there.

I ignored him. He took up the stool next to me.

“You from around here,” he asked, continuing to stare ahead.

I pulled on my smoke. “Nope.”

“What’re you doing here then?”

“I don’t see how it’s any of your business, friend.”

“Just making conversation, is all.” Then the man got up and walked to the other end of the bar, and I felt bad. These kinds of places attract a certain clientele, and it doesn’t make a difference if a man wears a tailored three-piece or a hobo sweater; you come here because you’re lonely.

The bartender conversed with a barfly at the far end, an old woman who had to hold one hand with the other to take a sip, she shook so badly.

I beckoned the bartender over and ordered another. “And whatever he’s having,” I said, motioning to the man who’d just walked away.

I was trying to be friendly, but apparently he didn’t take it that way.

“Let me give you some advice, pal,” the man said, abruptly standing up and making for the exit. The traffic whizzed by the open front door, making it hard to hear. But I heard what he said all right. “Loose ends get tied up and disappear,” he said. “And unless you want to go that route, I suggest you stick on your side of the bay.”

With that he walked out. I pounded my bourbon, slapped a bill on the counter, grabbed my coat and followed. I looked across the street, as tractor trailers fresh off Highway 80 barreled down the boulevard. I couldn't catch sight of him.

Was Gabriel sending someone to look after me? No, this boy wasn't one of his. The Old Man? What reason did he have? But somebody was following the follower. Perhaps my efforts to find Zoey hadn't been such a waste. If someone was taking notice of me, maybe I was doing something right, after all.

After a shower, I fixed myself a drink and was set to doze off when Gabriel phoned. He wanted me to go with the Giant to collect some money at a Korean massage parlor.

Figgs.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel some trepidation. Up until now I'd been working as an independent contractor, coming and going as I pleased; an air of mystery hung about me. I saw Figgs and Petersen that first day at the club, but we didn't talk. By now they knew who I was of course, and I'm sure the matter had been discussed privately. ("What would bring him back here?" "What should we do?" "I don't trust him.") Let them wonder about me all they wanted. I didn't give them a second thought. Until now.

Regardless of who I thought issued the order, Figgs had been involved in the beating. I didn't expect an apology. But a man has to be able to stand tall, look himself in a mirror every day, so to speak. As long as I played the wildcard, I could maintain a semblance of dignity. Nobody rented space inside my head, nobody knew my

motivations, and I still had my physical proclivity and scars to lord over them, as proof that I was one tough cookie. Getting into a car with a man changes things. Now you're partners, you're in cahoots, you're buddy-buddy. How could I sit side by side with this Giant, both of us knowing what he'd done to me, and expect any respect?

This figured a tricky order. I had a few options but I wasn't crazy about any of them. Finally I decided I'd bust his beak and we'd call it even. It wouldn't be even of course, but if I broke it good enough, it'd allow me to save face, which honestly was all I cared about doing at the time.

Figgs picked me up in front of the hotel on a chilly Bay City winter's eve. He grunted a salutation. I returned the same.

We drove up California Street, neither of us saying a word. With Zoey on my mind, I wanted to pick the Giant's brain, and I figured now would be the time, since he probably wouldn't be in the talking mood later.

We stopped to let a trolley pass.

"When did the Palm close up shop?" I asked him, by way of an ice-breaker.

"Few years back."

He looked like one of those clowns in a tiny car, the way his gangly body contorted to fit behind the wheel.

"Why'd it close?" I asked.

"You'd have to ask Gabriel that."

"Sure is different inside."

The Giant cast a sidelong glance. “What’re you getting at?”

I fished my bottle from my inside pocket and offered the Giant a swig. He declined.

“Do yourself a favor,” Figgs said, “don’t ask questions like that. Those days are gone, and nothing you find out will do you any good.”

“Who said I wanted to find out anything?”

The neighborhood took a decided turn for the worse, gang screeds and graffiti on tenement walls. We passed a band of transvestites on the corner of Polk, all cocktail dresses and sequin pumps.

“What about the deaf and dumb hunchback,” I asked, “the one who used to mop the floors?”

Figgs pinched his nose and took a couple stiff sniffs at the diesel air. “Murray? He wasn’t deaf.”

“What happened to him?”

“Won’t do you any good,” the Giant repeated.

Figgs pulled into a back alley off Post and killed the lights. A door was open. We took the back way into the massage parlor.

The hallways lit up jade green. Everything—carpets, couches, floor lamps—all green. Stifled moans escaped from behind closed doors.

I followed Figgs down the hall and up the stairs to what I assumed was the office and boss.

Figgs didn’t knock.

A squirrely Korean sat huddled behind the desk, snorting hard through a dollar bill straw. As we came in, the Korean stopped, shooting a crazy eye. He reached into his desk drawer, pulled out an envelope and threw it at the Giant.

The Giant snared the envelope and looked inside, shaking his head slowly.

“All I have,” the Korean said, jerking a hand. “You go. All I have.”

The Giant extended a long arm over the desk and grabbed the Korean by his shirt collar. From the corner of my eye, I saw a closet door creak open. As the Giant was slapping this Korean around, another shot out from the closet, this one with a cocked aluminum baseball bat aimed for the Giant’s head. On reflex, I sprung past and caught the bat before it struck its mark. I tugged but he wasn’t letting go, so I yanked both forward and with a nose breaking elbow laid the monkey out cold.

Pulling up to a space outside the Kitten Club, Figgs said he’d take of swig from that bottle now. I passed it over.

“Thanks,” he said.

“I got plenty.”

“No, I mean, back there. Thanks.” He wiped his brow. “I’m getting too old for this shit.” He paused. “Murray’s still in town,” the Giant said. “You want to talk to him. Over at the Lusty Lady, mopping up the quarter booths.”

He didn’t say anything more.

Inside the Kitten Club, the ladies had finished dancing for the night, but the ripe musk of sex still saturated the air. A few of the girls were hanging out by the pool tables,

flirting with the boys. The suckers had all been sent back to their wives and kids to get a few hours of shuteye before trudging their fat asses back onto the assembly line.

No one tended bar, so I went behind and poured myself a strong one, and then took a stool.

Why had I put myself in harm's way back in that massage parlor? For the same man who'd maimed me? Where was the requisite hatred I should've felt for him, for all of them? I searched my mental files but it wasn't there. Save the psychobabble. It wasn't buried. It wasn't suppressed. It simply wasn't there. I didn't feel much of anything, for the Giant or anyone else. Everyone was guilty in my book, which, in a weird way, meant that nobody was.

A hand slapped my shoulder.

"Figgs told me what happened back there," Gabriel said. "Nice work."

"Just some hopped-up hype who thought he was Babe Ruth."

"You're being too modest. I send Figgs up there alone, his brains are spilled over the floor right now. And I lose a good man. I had a hunch to send you with him tonight."

"You play a lot of hunches," I said.

He whistled for one of the girls by the pool tables.

The blonde came running up. She wore a skimpy sundress, white with hearts and roses, splashes of dewdrops and lavender. She was young, eighteen if a day. Pretty with wild yellow locks, shorn and funky, a knockout little figure, too, but young. She should've been in bed, getting ready for school the next day, not shaking her tail-feather in a place like this. But, hell, I was nobody's moral compass.

"Billie, this is my friend, Collie."

She bit her thumb, sort of swaying on the balls of her feet, and mumbled hello, the way a shy little kid might do. She didn't have on any shoes. She had big blue peepers and tiny feet, like a ballerina.

“Collie, do me a favor. Give Billie a ride home.”

I turned the car onto the Broadway strip, the lights of Big Dolls glowing hot, the road dipping to betray the haunting lights of the harbor below. “Where do you live?” I asked.

“Why you wanna know?” She had a high and tiny voice.

“Because I'm taking you home.”

“I'm not going home,” she said, giggling. She folded her legs Indian style and started bouncing lightly, like a kitten.

The tall empty buildings of downtown waited in the valley like tombstones, granite grey and stark against the black sky of the bay. The earth stood still, just a slow moving car with two lost souls on the midnight streets of Bay City.

In his own sick way, I could see Gabriel meant to do a nice thing, but I had no intention of lying down with the girl. A lot of ex-cons wouldn't have thought twice. I still had some sense of decency. I wasn't an animal. I could control my urges. She was a baby, somebody's sister or daughter.

“Well, little lady,” I growled, “It's late and I'm going home. I'm not much for company right now, so I can either drop you off at your house, or I can let you out on the next street corner and you can try your luck flagging a taxi. Up to you.”

“What's wrong with your voice?” she asked.

It was an innocent question. There wasn't a hint of nastiness to it. An innocent question posed by an inquisitive child. It shouldn't have upset me. But it did, and I felt my heart turn angry.

"I had an accident. Listen, I don't feel like driving in circles—"

"Is that how you hurt your face?"

I jerked the wheel into an alley, up on a curb, knocking over garbage cans and scaring the hell out of some strays. I left the engine idling. I curled my fists around the wheel, snorting like an ox, grinding my jaw.

It was late and dark behind Chinatown, soggy cabbage heads and feline innards clogging the air, canned meats and gutter stink. I wanted to tear that whole filthy city apart. Brick by brick, and bone by bone.

"It's OK," she said softly, sliding over. She tentatively reached out to touch my face. I grabbed her wrist, and if I wanted to, I could've snapped her arm in two, like a chopstick.

I let her wrist go, and she touched my skin, the way a blind person might, feeling her way with her fingertips. I flinched, but she repeated that it was OK, and so I let her. She brushed my scar tissue. It was the first time anybody had done that.

She curled closer, her breath warm and sweet, like extra milk in hot chocolate, and suddenly I couldn't smell Chinatown anymore.

"Poor baby," she said.

I tugged away, halfheartedly.

"It's OK if you don't want to talk." She reached over and killed the engine, flipped off the headlights. "We don't have to if you don't want to." She leaned in and

began planting kisses on my face, apprehensively at first, under my eyes, on the bridge of my nose, my chin, my neck.

She was kneeled over me now, straddling me. She placed her hands between her thighs and pulled her panties to the side. “It’s OK,” she said again, whispering softer now.

She tasted like a woman. She undid my belt and pulled me out. She eased herself down and gasped.

The whole time she never stopped saying, over and over, “It’s OK. It’s OK...”

Chapter Six

That night, back at my hotel room, I dreamt I was the captain of a skiff chartering the mean waters of the North Pacific. Like Ahab, I was searching for a big fish, only in my case it wasn't any whale. A storm had been tracking me for miles, skies burbling black, the belly of the beast rumbled, and suddenly it hit. The seas turned rough. White crests swelled twenty feet high and came crashing over the rails, aiming to sink my insignificant boat. I was a crew of one. The world grew darker, the rains slanting harder. The boat capsized and sank to the bottom, and there I bobbed alone, in the middle of the vast Pacific, hundreds of miles from land, knowing that no search party was on its way to save me. The worst part of this dream, I was powerless to save myself. No matter how furiously I swam, or which direction I tried to go in, I couldn't move. My body possessed no strength, like those punches you throw in your dreams that don't pack any wallop. I kicked and paddled and screamed with all my might but I was voiceless, running to stand still.

When I woke, my bed was soaked, and a hard rain lashed against the window. I had a message waiting for me. My PO, Fenster.

He said he wanted to see me, a request at which I naturally balked. But he assured me the meeting would be in a strictly unprofessional capacity, just two men getting together, not as PO and ex-con, because honestly, he said, that relationship no longer existed, and in case I remained doubtful, he had the paperwork to prove it.

There in black and white: I, Colin Specter, was a free man.

At noon, we met at the Russian Room on the Sunset border. Gabriel had rung while the paperwork was being sent over, asking me to make a pick-up, so when Fenster called back, I told him I could spare half an hour for a quick bite.

The Russian Room used to showcase music from time to time when I was younger. I'd made the trek there plenty. The layout was like something out of an old foreign film: the walls slathered blood red; a dinged up though perfectly in-tune baby grand, where a crusty Ruskie sat hammering out waltzes, booming boastfully about the homeland; oil paintings of czars with gaudy gold frames running the length of the galley, a testament to fallen heroes. And, of course, it housed a wide selection of top vodkas.

I ordered red borscht and meat pie along with a sampler of Russian cocktails. Fenster wasn't eating.

"I don't know how you did it," Fenster said.

"I'm sure I'm not the first guy to buck the system."

I tested my second drink, a Siberian Sunrise. Usually I didn't like to mix it up; for the Russian Room, I was making an exception. My first had been a Birch Sap. OK, but I wouldn't get it again. Too bitter and not enough kick.

Besides us, the joint was empty. One of those hidden gems of the city, the Russian Room didn't usually draw much of a crowd, regardless of the hour.

Not quite the shaggy haired bum I was when I first got out of the can, I was dressed a little peppier. A suit and tie, starched white collar and crew cut make a man look professional.

The red borscht at the Russian Room got my vote for the best in town, the perfect blend of pork sausage, beet, cabbage, and potato.

“Of course, I have an idea what happened, *who* went to bat for you,” Fenster said.

“Lots of people have lots of ideas.”

The obvious appeal of my new occupation shouldn't have been that difficult to ascertain. Immediately, it got me out from under the watchful eye of the State and a fine print clause portending certain doom. For it had never been a question of “if” but “when.” I saw that now. Sooner or later, I'd run afoul. Maybe I'd miss a bus and show up late for work, or maybe when I walked into the Hindu Mart Hazeem wouldn't have liked the way I looked at his daughter. What difference did it make? Corrections is a revolving door. My chances of making it the full three were slim and none.

“Doesn't take a genius to figure out,” Fenster continued. “Just surprising is all, given the particulars of your case. But I get a phone call saying your parole's been waved, who am I to question anything?”

The meat pie was a zesty mix of ground lamb, onion, garlic, and a spice I couldn't name for the life of me. I wanted to say paprika? Fennel? Drove me nuts.

“Yours was a very unusual case,” Fenster said. “I'd been transfixed by it, actually. A boy so young, no criminal record, not even an overdue library book—if you'd only fought the charges. Didn't make sense.”

“No, it didn't make sense.”

“May I ask why you didn't fight the charges?”

“No, you may not. As those papers you sent over indicate, that no longer falls under your jurisdiction.”

He wasn't looking at me, and I wasn't looking at him. Like we'd been caring on independent conversations in a vacuum. He had nothing new to say to me, and I didn't

speaking his language anymore. I checked my watch. I liked having it back from the pawn shop. All it needed was a new band. It sparkled plenty.

Fenster turned to face me. I'd finished my lunch and would have to be going soon. I dabbed the corners of my mouth with the cloth napkin I had on my lap, wadding it up and depositing it in my empty bowl.

"There's nothing in it for me, coming to meet you like this," Fenster said, "so I hope you can appreciate what I'm about to say." Then he launched into this very heartfelt and tired speech about the rehabilitated man and the value in choosing "the right path," how sometimes boys who go in at so young an age can develop physically and mentally, but when they get out, in terms of emotional maturity, they are still that same young boy. I listened politely, but his words rang as hollow as those of a parent preaching the value of an education to a first round draft choice. He concluded with an anecdote about a rooster, or it might've been a talking chicken named Buck-Buck. I'd stopped listening by that point.

"I'm in the book," Fenster said. "You ever need to talk, don't hesitate to call. I've seen this sort of thing end ugly too many times—'Ten Dead in North Beach Massacre, Police Seek Ex-Con for Questioning' headlines. I like you. Liked you the minute you came into my office. I had to play a certain role because that's my job, you understand. But I sensed a goodness about you. I think you might be in over your head, feeling like you don't have a choice. But we *all* have choices, Colin. You ever feel that way, you call me. I may be a State pencil pusher, but I still have a few means at my disposal to help men like you, even when those men are no longer, technically, under my care."

I thanked him and picked my jacket off the stool.

“Almost forgot,” he said, offering me an envelope. “Your money. What’s left from your inside jobs.”

I leered inside. “Keep it.”

It might be tough for a guy like Fenster to understand, but I operated on the other side now. I viewed my new career as a showcase for unique talents. I’d lost my pretty, and I sure as hell couldn’t sing anymore, and despite whatever Fenster or even ol’ Tulane thought they’ve may’ve seen in me, I wasn’t a nice guy. No revenge exacted would return me to my former glory. That the source of the pain now provided the relief was of little practical consequence. I’d adopted a new creed: what’s in it *for me*? How could I stockpile the most *for Collie*? Spare me the lectures about responsibility and justice. Morality is not an absolute. One day they say killing a man is wrong; another day you return from slaughtering overseas and they pin a metal to your tit and throw you a parade. You work for the State and pump the 10,000th customer full of sodium thiopental, pancuronium bromide, and potassium chloride, and, why, you just might be eligible for that all expense paid trip to Maui. Who’s to say?

After lunch, I delivered Gabriel’s product to the club and left him my report. Then I picked up the Old Man’s scent, tailing him as his driver brought him to the Meltemi Children’s Hospital.

The MCH was a big hospital, two seven-story connected towers off a grand main entrance, with giant Doric columns, replicas from the Parthenon, propping up the archway.

I watched him wobble in, and went to have a look around.

The lobby was like a mausoleum, all marble and mother-of-pearl, high-ceilings and skylights. The walls were covered with gigantic framed photographs of gap-toothed, smiling children of every ethnicity and shade, scuffed with mud, looking extra hungry. Underneath each were pithy sayings like “The Children are our Future” and “Even the Mighty Oak Begins with the Smallest Acorn.” Not exactly going out on a limb, but one could appreciate the sentiment.

In the center of the room stood a giant bronze statue of a doctor holding an infant in swaddling clothing. There were three plaques at the bottom: a burnished mission statement and the Hippocratic Oath on either side, and in the middle, the hospital’s board of directors. On top of that last one, two names: Cephalus Christos and Dr. Nathaniel Murdock, co-founders. I didn’t know the Old Man had a partner.

To the right of the main entrance was the Cephalus Christos Center for Child Research, and to the left Patient Wards. I headed into the patient building, snatching some brochures stuffed in a Plexiglas display unit, color prints of ecstatic parents tossing now healthy children up into the bright blue sky, rolling green meadows and plump trees slightly out of focus in the background.

At first it seemed like just another hospital, in that there were nurses and doctors making rounds, a gift shop and cafeteria. But it soon became apparent that this one catered to a specific clientele, namely the lower class—guys dressed in chinos and felt

tips, the kinds of clothes poor men wear when they want to look sharp, women in bulky floral prints or sweatpants, kids in obvious ill-fitting hand-me-downs—which struck me as odd given what I knew about the Old Man, because these weren't the sort of folks you could bilk for all that much. State welfare and Medicare insurance doesn't exactly line the pockets. The Old Man would truly have to be doing something out of the goodness of his heart, which would prove a daunting task, considering the man didn't have one.

I grabbed a coffee in the cafeteria, and took a seat along the railing, perusing the brochures. The reading material was basically offshoots of the *Oracle* piece I'd read, the one describing Christos's orphaned upbringing, thus spawning his crusade to wipe out hunger and sickness. He might as well have thrown in "world peace." There was also a big section dedicated to all the leading edge causes the hospital was currently pursuing, featuring prominently the research center.

When I got to the credits' page, the only founder listed was the Old Man. No mention of any Dr. Murdock.

Just like the fat bastard to take all the credit.

Chapter Seven

The more I followed the Old Man, the more out of my element and over my head I felt. I needed an ally, an authority on the subject, so I swallowed a little pride and dug out the contact information Tulane Church had left at the *Casa Loma*. I didn't know what he could tell me, but Church was as well versed on the Old Man's dealings as anyone I knew. Then again, I didn't really know anyone else.

He sounded surprised to hear from me but readily invited me over.

Tulane lived out by the North Bay Bridge in the Richmond district, where the fog is always worse, and as I drove there the rains returned in fits and bursts.

I found his place, a two story Victorian, the kind Bay City is famous for.

"Colin Specter," he said with a sad smile, greeting me at the door.

Before I could say a word, he held up a polished soapstone chess board. "You play?"

I nodded.

"I just put on some water for tea. Care for some?"

I nodded, and he set the board on the coffee table and made for the kitchen.

The house was strictly pack rat, overrun with green, lush plants and exotic birds. He had three cockatoos, one yellow and two white, as well as half a dozen parakeets. The interior design was the sort antique dealers drool over: matching turn-of-the-century purple couches and love seat, an old time coat and hat rack, tall hand-carved lamps, armoires, and everywhere grand bookcases and books galore.

I walked to one of the cases, inspecting his collection. The man had first editions of *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

“Nice place,” I shouted best I could over the whistling kettle.

He poked his gray head out. “Sorry. I didn’t catch that.”

“I said nice place.”

“It’s been in my family for years. I’m not sure one could afford it otherwise, not the way Bay City is these days.”

The rest of the layout contained a lifetime of wanderlust knickknacks: salt and pepper shaker steins from Germany; World War II replica model submarines, replete with turret towers, cannons, and even little sailor lookouts; a massive baseball card collection that boasted an encased complete set from the last year the Giants played in New York; postcards sent from around the world, Paris, Havana, Cairo, Amsterdam; an autographed photo with Ernest Hemingway; and a pair of boxing mitts that had once belonged to Jersey Joe Wolcott.

Standing in front of his big bay windows, you could see the top of the North Bay Bridge, its freshly applied, red coat shimmering bright like a beacon through the dreariness. For some reason, it was the safest I had felt since getting out of the can. The pad had a nice, homey smell to it, like rich cinnamon breads and radiator heat in your grandmother’s house on a Sunday.

“You’ve been around,” I said when he walked back into the room with the drinks on a tray, like the butler in some old movie.

“A writer needs to see things. I had a very fortunate upbringing, which afforded me the opportunity to travel the world when I was younger.” He set the tray on the

coffee table next to the chess board, in-between the couch and love seat, taking a seat on the latter.

“Still do it?” I asked. “Writing, I mean.”

“Please,” he said, gesturing to the love seat. “Since I don’t work for the *Oracle* anymore, you mean?”

“I didn’t mean to bring up a sore subject.”

He smiled. “I do some freelance work, mostly out of town journals, magazines, various hard hitting coverage of the scandalous entertainment world.” He tittered. “My name took a bit of hit following the grand jury affair, but I keep busy.” He leaned forward, hands cupping the tea. “I’m glad you decided to take me up on my offer of a visit.”

“I guess you could say I’m more here on business.”

“So I’ve heard.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Bay City isn’t that big a town. Despite my banishment from the world of, er, respectable journalism, I still keep a finger on the city’s pulse.” He took a sip of tea. “Although I have to admit,” he said, “I was surprised to learn about your new occupation, given known, turbulent histories the recently hired has had with said employer. I took you more for the artistic type than I did a pedestrian knockabout.”

“Man’s got to make a living.”

“Yes, Mr. Specter, he does.” He inspected my new duds more closely. “You are looking quite spiffy. Normally, they say the suit makes the man, but in your case, I beg to differ.”

The board was already set up. Rain pelted the window. It was the kind of day you were grateful to be warm and indoors.

He moved his king's pawn two forward, a safe and predictable move.

I immediately put him on the defensive, a dual attack with my bishop and queen. "So you mind if I ask how you lost your job, exactly? I know some of the story, but I imagine there's more to it than what they printed in the paper."

"I'm afraid I wasn't entirely honest with you at your hotel room that first night." He fingered his queen but held her back. "I said I had only one regret. Call this second one a lesson learned. I broke the cardinal rule of journalism." He moved his knight. "I printed a story before I had all the facts. I got careless. In short, I underestimated my opponent."

This would be a short game. I had him on the run already. I brought out my big guns.

He gave up his bishop. It was all he could do.

"I don't know how you're doing it," he said. "I'm not what you'd consider a slouch at this game. At one time, I dare say, I fancied myself quite good."

"First rule of chess, Tulane."

"What's that?"

"Never play someone who's been in prison."

He laughed. "It was after your trial," he continued. "I'd been given my own page two column at the *Oracle*. The authorities were closing in on the Old Man. I was soon put onto the trail of Wilson Persimmons—do you know who he is?"

I shook my head no, aiming my queen to get into his back row.

“In the end, it’s not important,” he said, “just another one the Old Man’s crooked cronies.” Tulane slipped a pawn to defend. “Persimmons had had a falling out with the Old Man. The particulars are rather salacious. Persimmons was a transvestite who made use of the Old Man’s, shall we say, escorting services.” He held up a hand. “I’ll give you the truncated version. I met with and interviewed Persimmons. He had the goods, all right, documentation of a bribe, from one of the Old Man’s dubious construction outfits. Persimmons was brought to the District Attorney, who put him into hiding, while they moved to convene a grand jury to indict the Old Man, which seemed inevitable. On the eve of Persimmons’s testimony, however, I made my mistake. I printed what Persimmons told me he was *going* to say. What I didn’t know was that the Old Man had gotten to Persimmons, probably through the cops he had on the payroll like Mark Sandman. The article ran with my name attached to it. Persimmons never said a word, and I was hung out to dry.”

“What happened to Persimmons?”

“After the grand jury, he spoke to reporters, denying he’d ever said a thing to me. And before the DA could get him back in he was gone. Vanished. They found him six months later in a small, coastal villa in Buenos Aires, wearing a lovely bridesmaid’s gown, with untold riches in absconded city funds sewn into his mattress. Two shots in the back of a dead cross-dresser’s head apparently didn’t warrant more than a buried, page fourteen blurb. By then, the Old Man had convinced ownership to sell him the paper and had fired me.”

“But this Persimmons must’ve given a statement to the District Attorney?”

“Sure, he did. But without an indictment, and the Old Man’s team of litigators on the offensive against the city, folks decided to cut their losses.”

“Why would anyone agree to sell a newspaper to the Old Man?”

“After the grand jury fiasco, the Old Man climbed high on the moral soapbox, saying he’d been innocent all along, how the press was the real enemy, specifically me. When I’d been hired, *Oracle* circulation was low, and they’d hoped my name might increase it. It hadn’t. The paper issued a retraction. The Old Man threatened a lawsuit, which wouldn’t have gone anywhere, but in the end I suppose the paper didn’t want its name dragged through the mud any more.”

And Tulane Church fell from his lofty perch.

All my artillery was poised. I had him in two moves, maybe three, depending on his defense. I don’t get anxious in these spots. It’s merely a matter of time.

He slid a rook down the board. “Checkmate,” he said.

I pulled back, studying the field. It wasn’t possible. I hadn’t lost a game since shortly after I went in.

He reclined, arms behind his head.

I scratched mine. “I was distracted. By your story.”

“I understand,” he said. “Shall I set them up again?”

I chuckled under my breath.

“I appreciate the company, Colin, but I’m guessing you didn’t come all this way for a game of chess and some tea, or even to hear the sordid details of how an old man lost his job.”

“Like I said, Tulane, business. I’m investigating the Old Man.”

“What do you want?”

“You have files on him, right?”

“I mean, what are you looking for exactly?”

I rubbed my chin. “Honestly? I don’t know.”

“Colin, I am pretty sure in the world of investigation, one can’t find what one is looking for—unless one *knows* what one is looking for. If you are expecting the Old Man to have some evil master plan filed away, I can assure you, you won’t find it. He is a ruthless beast of a man. But a very shrewd one. You don’t get to where he is without being so. Don’t let this new hospital business fool you.” He took a sip of tea.

“His mayoral campaign kicks off in little over a week.”

“I am aware of that.”

“What are his vulnerable spots? What is his real agenda? You just said this hospital business is a cover—”

“I didn’t say it was ‘a cover,’ only that the Old Man isn’t the good, selfless Samaritan his paper reports.”

“Well, I want to find out what he’s really up to.”

“Let me ask you something—why the interest in the Old Man? I’d think your gripe would be with Gabriel. Don’t get me wrong. The son may be the lesser of two evils, but you of all people should know what he’s capable of.”

“If you’re referring to this”—I pointed to the scar on my throat—“maybe it isn’t so simple.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning maybe Gabriel isn’t alone responsible.”

“Colin, I covered your trial. Gabriel wasn’t some innocent bystander.”

“I never said he was. But the Old Man was the one running the show. It’s not like I can walk into the club and ask anyone. But, sure, I know the kind of man Gabriel is. So what?”

“How you can say that? If you are doing the bidding of the same man who took away your livelihood—”

“Nothing I do can change any of that now. So I take out my gun and shoot them all down. I walk into the Kitten Club, guns blazing like some old western, and I shoot them all between the eyes. The Giant. Gabriel. The Old Man. Then what? I sit in a jail cell the rest of my life? Live my life on the run? For what? Do I get my voice back? Do I get my youth back? Do I get my girl...” I stopped.

“The girl,” Tulane repeated sadly.

I didn’t say anything.

“Is that what this is about?”

“That’s none of your business. I came here tonight for one thing: to ask for your help investigating the Old Man. That is my job now. It is a job that pays well, and I intended to do it right. Either you’re willing to help me or you’re not.”

Tulane wrinkled his mouth, before sighing. He looked up at me. “Very well,” he said. “I’ll dig out my files and revisit them, see if anything pops up.”

It was late as I drove back from the Richmond, the roads lonely, the night dreary and cold, only the sporadic passing headlights separating a man from his thoughts. Maybe I’d snapped at Tulane. But he’d hit a sore spot. I was well aware I was working

with the same men who had ruined my life. Did I believe Gabriel when he said it was all the Old Man's doing? I'm not stupid. He brought me to that marina in *his* car, *his* boys worked me over, and *his* buddy on the inside, the Sandman, finished the job. Gabriel wasn't some innocent naïf, I knew that. He was a liar and a manipulator, and at the very least, he was one hundred percent complicit.

But there was more to this case than merely my own personal history, which I was sick to death of analyzing. There was something captivating about it that made me want to dig in deeper and uncover the truth about the Old Man. Call it a gnawing curiosity.

For as well known as Tulane Church had once been throughout the city, so, too the Old Man, only on the shadier side of the street. Here was a known pornographer, drug dealer, mobster, the target of several investigations—how was it possible he now mingled with society's elite?

Once upon a time, the authorities had him on the ropes, had him by the short ones, were *this close* to putting him away for life, and now those same politicians who'd demanded the inquisitions were welcoming him into their homes and spurring on political aspirations. It was like living in Bizzaro World.

Maybe I hadn't been asked to crack a case, just do a little surveillance, which is what I was doing. Still, the Old Man's movements fascinated me. At first I may've told myself it was just a paycheck, but that wasn't the truth anymore: I'd begun treating this job like, well, a job.

Chapter Eight

The next day I returned to the MCH, this time scoping out the research center. I took a seat in the pharmacy waiting area, peeping around the paper I held up to my face, as guardians and nurses tried to reel in screaming children.

A red-haired nurse wheeled a sickly kid past and on through swinging doors. Poor little guy couldn't have been more than six or seven, and your heart went out to him. I didn't know what was wrong with him, but what an awful lot, to be so young and in need of so much help. And a lot of these kids were without parents on top of it, abandoned by addicts and criminals, left to the care of social services. How terrifying it must've been for them, surrounded by strange adults.

Sitting there over the next several hours, I noted the patterns, especially that of the red-haired nurse, who was like a looped recording, wheeling in sick kids, and then a few minutes later wheeling them back out. After every three patients, the red-haired nurse would go outside for a smoke break. There was a bench and an ashcan by an old gnarled tree. She never sat on the bench, just puffed furiously standing up. Each cigarette in under three minutes. I timed her. Then it was back inside for another go-round. It was a revolving door with her, a mechanic wheeling in cars in need of servicing, oil changes and new sets of shocks. Only these kids didn't exactly come back looking ready to take a tour around the track.

Early-afternoon, I found a payphone to check in with Gabriel. He told me to get back to the club, as he had more urgent business that needed tending to.

Gabriel sent me with Petersen to Hunter's Point.

"What are we doing out there?" I asked as I got into his car.

"Picking up money," Petersen said.

Petersen, like the Giant, looked worn down, an old man ready for his watch and set of gold clubs, heavy lines digging into a battered face that'd taken its share of hits.

We cut across Market, past Sixth and the pawn shops and seedy hotels, the dope fiends, their shopping carts and filthy kittens on a string, huddled to keep out of the rain in "for lease" doorways, everything they owned stashed into fishing net homes, assorted odds and ends of a life, books dug from the trash, wooly blankets from the shelter, various telephone wires and cables. Who knew why hobos collected so many wires and cables?

I remembered seeing bums when I was a kid, but nothing like this. Maybe I'd been blind or delusional, the way the mind modifies out the unpleasantness as one gets older, recalling only noble politicians and honest cops, days when your dad was the strongest man in the world, but it seemed like the divide between the haves and have-nots grew wider by the day in this town.

We now passed the vacant, wind-blown lots of the Southern District, speeding to the water's edge and its abandoned warehouses.

"Gabriel's losing it," Petersen said, bluntly.

"Seems all right to me," I said.

"You ain't been here long enough. Since the split with the Old Man, I'm telling you, he ain't been the same. Gabriel was the one who wanted to go legit, and it's killing

him watching his father. I ain't the only one who sees it. Haven't you noticed the other boys around the club?"

"What other boys?"

"My point. Most of them have bailed. And Gabriel hasn't done a damn thing about it."

"People quit jobs, Petersen."

He looked over at me like I was a two-headed freak show. "Maybe when they're loading fish on the docks. But not in this business, kid. Dead men tell no secrets, y'know?"

I fished the bottle from my pocket, downed a slug, and offered it to Petersen, who gladly took me up.

We turned onto Third, heading south past the check cashing joints, barber shops, and chicken places, tracing the tracks into the ghetto of the Point.

"You really think the Old Man's going to win?" I asked.

The big boats trudged up the waterway, framing Petersen's massive clown head. "*Gonna* win? He's already won. He's taken virtually every ally we had—except for the Sandman, and how long you think Gabriel's holding onto that? One man is going up, one is going down. The Sandman is a businessman. He wants to be on the winning side, like everybody else."

We took a left through the housing projects, the final crawl of the unemployed sidewalk.

Petersen pulled into a dirt parking lot in front of a small building that read Ray's Auto Parts, a couple junked cars up on blocks, oil like blood pools drained beneath. The front door was chained.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“C'mon.”

At the windows of the auto shop, Petersen cupped his hands and peered inside, groaning. He motioned for me to follow him around back.

Behind the shop stood a large garage, and attached to it a staircase leading to a second floor apartment.

I followed Petersen up the stairs. At the door, Petersen pulled his gun. I followed suit. He lowered his shoulder and torqued, bulling his way inside.

The lights were off, windows closed, giant blankets tacked up but not quite covering them so that a dank gray light splashed down, revealing junkie castoffs on an uprooted floor—wooden banana crates, spent matchbooks, sawed pop cans, assorted abandoned sneakers. Mice scurried. Raindrops drummed steadily on the tin roof, the place choked with the aroma of human waste, piss and clogged up toilets. I used my undershirt as a gas mask.

I quickly discovered we weren't alone. In the next room, half a dozen emaciated people sat frozen on the floor, dismantled electronics, tape decks and receivers, spread before them.

“Where's Blue?” Petersen asked, and one of the tweakers, eyes bulging, shakily pointed to the bedroom.

Petersen shoved open the bedroom door and it bumped against something heavy, followed by a thud. Inside, a prison-sculpted black man looked up from his knees. I aimed my .44 between his eyes.

On the bed, two half naked, rat-faced girls sprung up, leaving behind a sinewy black man with a rubber tourniquet wrapped around his bicep.

“Hello, Blue,” Petersen said.

Blue didn’t look up right away. When he did his face was as black as coal. “You’re too late,” is all he said, and then, fixing his attention back on his arm, he pulled the dropper head.

I watched the syringe fill with dark, red blood.

Petersen grabbed Blue’s arm, and the needle fell, sticking in the grimy floor like a miniature javelin.

Blue gazed down longingly at the needle, which was softly vibrating. “What you do that for?” he said, looking up at Petersen. “Now it’s gonna be barbed.”

Petersen jacked him against the wall. The two girls now had their shirts pressed to their chests, but it didn’t hide the bony ribs sticking out or the sores lining their lips. Nobody stirred in the next room. I made sure my man didn’t move from his knees.

The stench of the place burned my sinuses.

Petersen dragged Blue from the bedroom, through the narrow hall and to the kitchen, as Blue kept screaming, “Ain’t nothin’ I can do, ain’t nothin’ I can do!”

Positioning myself in the doorway, I motioned my man to sit on the bed. I poked my head around the corner, watching as Petersen lifted Blue’s wriggling body by the neck and dropped his head by a burner on the gas stove. He turned on the jets.

“Pass me a lighter,” Petersen shouted to me.

I flipped Petersen my lighter.

“It’s been a week, Blue,” Petersen said, calmly.

“What can I do?!” Blue tried to wiggle away, but Petersen kept his head pressed down and lit the flame.

I felt nauseated.

“The cops shut it down!” Blue yelled. “They come by and shut the whole operation down! Ain’t nothin’ I can do!”

Petersen released his grip and Blue slipped to the ground, the tourniquet still wrapped around his bicep.

Crouching, Petersen pointed to it. “But you got money for that shit, don’t you?”

“That’s *my* money. Not Gabriel’s. Mine.”

“Blue, why you lying to me?”

“I’m not lying!”

Petersen smacked him across the face, and blood dripped out the corner of his cracked lips.

“I’m not lying, man. They come by. Ask where the numbers’ money is. Ain’t nothin’ I can do! They the fucking cops!”

“No cops came by here, Blue. We pay a lot of money to make sure cops don’t come by here.”

“Shit, man, I think you knocked a tooth loose.” Blue pinched two fingers in his craw. “I’m telling you the truth. Check it out yourself.”

“I will, Blue,” Petersen said. “And if I find out you’re lying, I’m coming back to finish cooking your black ass.” He looked at me. “Let’s go.”

I slowly backed away, making sure nobody got any ideas, all the way to the door and the stairs.

As we descended, Blue came to the stoop. “What you expect, man? Take a look around this neighborhood. How long you think you could get blood from stones anyway? This town is dryin’ up, brother. It’s dryin’ up!”

Back in the car, Petersen wiped the sweat from the back of his thick, steak neck.

“What the hell was that all about?”

He rolled down the window, spitting. “*That*,” he said, “is what I’m talking about. Gabriel is dropping the fucking ball.”

At the Kitten Club, Gabriel and Petersen went at it in the office.

“The Sandman?” Petersen shouted. “The Sandman is playing you!”

Gabriel came around his desk violently, swinging an open palm and clearing the surface, phone, index, pens and papers spilling to the floor. He stood there smoldering, chest rising and falling.

“You know Blue as well as I do,” Petersen said. “He’s never missed a payout.

Not once.”

“He’s a goddamn junkie,” Gabriel said.

“A goddamn junkie who’s never missed a payout. And he’s right. That neighborhood is dryer than shit. What do you expect, to keep bleeding welfare and social security checks?”

“People always gamble. Doesn’t make a difference how much money they don’t have. They find money to gamble.”

“It doesn’t make any difference now, does it?” Petersen said. “The cops shut it down.”

“I’ll make a phone call and we’ll find out, won’t we?”

Petersen shook his head. “Listen to yourself. Make a *phone call*? You’re the one who’s supposed to be one top of this shit.”

Gabriel narrowed his eyes and strode closer. “Watch it,” he said.

Petersen held his ground momentarily, before dropping his shoulders. “I’m here with you, Gabriel. I’ve been with you this whole time. All I’m saying is you’re getting fucked by the Sandman.”

“I’ll worry about that. Not you. Me.”

Petersen blew out a big gust and stormed from the room.

“You mind telling me what’s going on?” I said.

Gabriel groaned. “Blue collects for a numbers’ game we got in the Point. He’s a junkie, but he’s reliable. He’s one of those rare breeds.”

“Rare breeds?”

“A reliable doper.” Gabriel made for his wine rack. “I could use a drink. How ’bout you? You want a drink?”

“Sure,” I said. “Just not that retsina shit.”

Gabriel reached into the serpents, lifting up a bottle of scotch. “Just for you,” he said, smiling.

“No chance this Blue is lying?” I asked.

“I didn’t want to say it with Petersen here, but no. These numbers’ games are supposedly taken care of. But I just found out another one was shut down in the Tenderloin while you two were gone.” Gabriel returned to his seat. “So it’s just the hospital?” he said, changing the subject.

“Pretty much. That, and meals and fundraisers. What’s in my report.”

“I don’t know what I was hoping to find.” He forced a laugh. “Hey, take the rest of the afternoon off. Grab one of the girls upstairs. I have to call the Sandman, get him down here, find out what’s going on. I’ll call you later at the hotel.”

“Thanks. But I’ve got another avenues to check out.”

He smiled wide. “I like that. Man doesn’t take his vacation time.”

As night began to fall, I went to work on my other case, entering the city’s red light district, with its flashing sex clubs and pornographic emporiums lining the boulevard, platinum girls in lingerie cooing by the doors, trying to solicit passersby. The Christos family had once owned them all. The only one on the strip Gabriel had left: Big Dolls.

I wasn’t expecting much from Murray, but when I thought back about the guy, he did always seem to be hanging around, lurking. And if Figgs wasn’t lying about his not being a deaf mute, well, I’d just see what he could recall.

North Beach has a lot of clubs like the Kitten Club. Somehow the Lusty Lady was a step down from that even. I never went there when Zoey was dancing. I couldn’t stomach the idea of her locked behind Plexiglas, bending over while perverts dropped coin to pleasure themselves.

I had to park a good ways away, and when I started walking I got the strange sensation someone was watching me. But every time I turned around, I only found the same stray Chinaman or drunken married guy stumbling out of a club

Heading down Kearny, the Lady's bright yellow bulbs blazed around a sign boasting its long establishment, even though I knew it had changed ownership, out of Christos' hands.

Suddenly someone poked his head out of a darkened doorway, and my fists went up. "You lookin'?" the man whispered. He was filthy, in a bulky blue padded coat, with ski cap draped askew. "I got some good shit. *Real good* shit. Two customers OD'd already."

I shoved open the Lusty Lady's doors.

Fucking junkies. One hears another's overdosed, he doesn't steer clear; he wants to know where the guy got it. Because it means it's strong. I saw it all the time in the can. Makes no sense, I know. But that's how the sick bastards think.

The lobby was like the check-in desk at an Indian hotel, replete with curry stink and too much air freshener trying to douse it. The degenerate slackjaw behind the desk stopped slopping over his masaman long enough to ask if I wanted change. I told him whom I was looking for.

"Check the booths," he said, grimly.

Inside the dark main foyer, cinema advertisements celebrating the latest in XXX features were slapped on crimson walls. Arrows pointed left and right, depending on which perversion one wished to feed, free box of Kleenex included in the admission price. Every man walking around looked like a fallen minister.

Straight ahead stood a row of phone booth-sized closets where one could peep on the live, nude girls. Over the doors, a sign lit up either “occupied” or otherwise.

I headed into number eight and shut the door. I fished some coin from my pocket, pushed it in the slot, and waited as the partition rose.

What a sight. Five undernourished girls, deflated torpedo tits, bodies covered with piercings and tattoos, slithered every which way, spreading themselves open like they were visiting a gynecologist. What did that author call it? The wound that never heals? Looked more like a rusty hinge to me.

Had Zoey looked like that? To me, she’d been everything beautiful, but it’s hard to ignore the evidence when it’s spread out like that.

Backing out of the booth, I saw the hunchback. He was a little older, a little balder, a little more humped maybe.

He abandoned his trusty mop and lurched for a door marked “Exit.”

In the back alley, the hunchback lit a cigarette. The smoke blended with his breath and the hissing steam from sewer grates, forming thick, silver plumes rising high to heaven.

He peered over his crooked shoulder at me.

One doesn’t often encounter a hunchback. Murray was the only one I’d ever seen. Hobbit tiny, pink skin, ridges of carbuncles dotting a pronounced brow, black eyes like a largemouth bass, face like a maggot.

“What do you want?” he said. It was the first time I’d ever heard him speak. It sounded like air escaping a pinched balloon.

“Just a few answers, is all.”

He immediately grew nervous, hurriedly pulling his pockets inside out. “Tell Mickey I got nothin’. I got nothin’!” He backed his bent body up, knocking into some trash bins overflowing with rigid tissue and empty Kleenex boxes. “Don’t hurt me.”

“Relax. I don’t know anybody named Mickey.”

That did little to calm the bugger down. His miniature fists curled into tiny lobster claws.

“You used to work at a club,” I said. “Seven years ago. The Lone Palm.”

“Never heard of it.”

I moved in closer and the hunchback flinched.

“I already told you,” I said. “I’m not here to collect. And I know you used to work at the Lone Palm, so stop wasting my time.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Do I know you?”

“That’s not important. What is, I know you, *Murray*. Now, you remember a girl who used to hang around the club.”

“Maybe.”

I pulled my wallet out, peeled off a few, grabbed the hunchback’s hand and closed the bills in his fist.

“What was her name?” he asked.

“Zoey.”

“Gabriel’s girl,” he said.

“Yeah, that one.”

“What about her?”

“What happened to her?”

“Who wants to know?”

“I’m an old friend of the family.”

“She don’t hang around there no more.”

“I know that. What else? Places she may’ve gone. Anything you might’ve overheard—”

Just then the slackjaw from behind the desk poked his nose out. “Talk to your friends on your own time. There’s spooge all over the floor in booth nine.”

I turned and let the slackjaw get an eyeful in the floodlights shining down. He retreated inside.

“You the cops?” Murray asked.

“Do I look—do I *sound* like a cop?”

He looked left and then right, skittishly. “You work for *him*?” he whispered.

“Gabriel?”

“No. The *other* one.”

“I don’t work for anybody. And you’re trying my patience, little man.”

He stared down at the bills in his hand. I supplemented.

“She started fooling around with a singer over there,” the hunchback said. “Real pretty boy. Pretty like a girl.” He sniggered and leaned in. “I used to listen to them making sweet talk in the basement. She was a dirty, dirty girl.”

“I can do without the color.”

He started hopping about, like a rabbit shot in the foot, but giddily. “I told *him*.”

“Gabriel?”

He shook his head. “The *other* one.”

I lighted a smoke and offered one to the hunchback, Camels being a step up from the GPCs he was huffing on. He was happy to take me up. “What happened to the singer?” I asked.

“They killed him.”

“And the girl?”

“Run off.”

The hunchback was relaxed now, fairly certain I wasn’t there for a shakedown.

“Zoey had a friend,” I said. “A guy named Roberto. You know him?”

“The Mexican queen, sure. They shared a room at that whorehouse, the Civic Center.”

“Know where I could find him?”

“You got anything to drink?”

I pulled my bottle and passed it to him. He sucked at it like a baby on a teat. “I hear he dances at the homosexual clubs in the Castro.”

“Castro’s a big place.”

“Do I look like the kinda guy that goes to those clubs? I hear he’s dancing in the Castro, all I know.” He paused, wrinkling his tight mouth. “The horn man from the singer’s band, the Jews,” he said, “he might know.”

“Langley?”

“Yeah, big black guy.” The hunchback wiped the dribble from his mouth. “He’s playing weekends, joint called the *du Nord*. Or so I hear. The *du Nord* is near the Castro, so maybe he’d know. But I ain’t promising nothin’.”

I knew the *Café du Nord*. One of the few places in town that played real jazz.

It had been a while. I could use some music. It'd be nice to hear the old boy play again. The weekend was still another day away. But I had plenty to keep me busy until then.

Chapter Nine

After spending most of the day following the Old Man around to his various social engagements, which involved an early lunch at John's Grille and a photo op along the waterfront for what one could only assume would be the next hard-hitting entry in the *Oracle's* ongoing series about the days in the life of a Greek philanthropist, I returned to the Kitten Club in the late afternoon to check in with Gabriel, and was told he was in a meeting and to wait.

I waited at the bar. Two girls huddled there, silently. New girls, and not so pretty. Our night together had been Billie's last at the club. She'd quit for personal reasons, or so I'd been told. I heard she'd taken her act down the road to Regal World, "Where you are King." I'd have to make it a point to stop in and see her.

I downed a couple bourbons. There were hardly any customers. A wild-haired blond kid, who couldn't have been more than twenty, stood off to the corner, bopping his head to the beat, the look of a rabid animal in his eyes.

In the mirror above the bar, I saw the Sandman walking out. He was fatter than I remembered, and he'd grown a mustache. But after that night at the marina, I'd recognize the sonofabitch anywhere.

Gabriel followed up the stairs shortly thereafter. He looked like hell. He took me by the arm. "Let's go for a walk."

We left via the side entrance.

Several blocks away, at an Italian café, we sat outside at a tiny iron wrought table facing Columbus. He fired up a brown cigarillo. His face was covered in stubble and he looked like he hadn't slept.

"I had to get out of there," Gabriel said. "I feel like a prisoner."

"What'd the Sandman say?"

Gabriel laughed a nervous laugh. "Let me know I'm fucked."

A pretty young Italian waitress came out. I ordered two coffees. Gabriel looked like he could use some.

He leaned far over his knees and began softly rocking.

"What did he say exactly?" I asked.

Gabriel stared off vacant-eyed toward the park, like he'd been distracted by a bird's singing. I didn't see any bird, just the monolithic equestrian statue facing North Beach Cathedral in the middle of the green.

"Gabriel?"

He turned back around slowly.

"The Sandman. What did he say?"

"Gave me the heads-up on a raid."

"At the club?"

"No, not yet. But that can't be far behind. Big Dolls. It'll be the second joint I've lost this week."

"When?"

"Before the Old Man's campaign officially kicks off a week from today. Bastard's got me scurrying like a rat for cover." He said this last part in almost a sing-

songy whisper. “Listen,” Gabriel said, perking up. “I need you to go deal with something for me. Tomorrow night. Down on the docks. Hondurans. Borkowski is bringing it in for me.”

I remembered Borkowski’s special cargo. “*Borkowski* is the one who brings the shit in for you?”

Gabriel looked confused momentarily, before quickly snapping out of it. “That’s *what* Borkowski does. I started letting him handle business *for me*, after your little fight down there. A bone so he wouldn’t go to the cops.” He smirked. “Don’t sweat it.”

“You want me to pick it up?”

“I’m not going down without a fight,” Gabriel said to no one in particular, ignoring my question. “He wants to force my hand? I’ll just dig in deeper. There are plenty of ways to make money in this town.” He paused and redirected his vacant gaze back toward the park. “I’m Gabriel Christos,” he said, as if to the statue, and none too certainly.

The pretty Italian girl brought out the coffees.

“Take the new kid,” Gabriel said. “Midnight tomorrow.”

“New kid?”

“Name’s Buick. He’s at the club now.” He leaned closer to me. “This one’s important, Collie. *Really* important. I can’t tell you how important this one is.”

“And everything’s set—you know, with the Sandman?”

“Yes. He promised me. There won’t be any problems.”

I went back to the club to work it out with this Buick, to make sure he knew the score, and after a few minutes of talking to him, I wasn't exactly put at ease. The kid was nineteen-years-old, a real pretty boy, blond hair, high cheekbones, and bright green eyes. But one look in them told you something was screwy upstairs. He was the only new talent Gabriel had brought in to replace the men who had been jumping ship, and he didn't seem like much of an answer to me.

Petersen was right: Gabriel's head wasn't in the right place. This Buick was a nightmare. He bounced about like an overly stimulated tiger cub, too enthusiastic. Gave me a headache just being around him.

Seeing Gabriel today, I started wondering if he wasn't tapping into his own product, something even the lowest pusher knows to avoid.

Tulane came back with our refills, setting them next to the coffee table on a folding tin tray, another relic from Norman Rockwell's America of Yesteryear. "My turn?" he asked.

I nodded.

He studied the scattered black and white pieces, before meekly advancing a pawn.

"So no section marked 'current nefarious doings' in those files of yours?"

Tulane tittered that little queer laugh of his. "Not exactly. As you are aware, the Old Man operates in a different world these days."

"What happened after he bought the paper?"

“There’s the hospital of course, but my files sort of stop there.”

“Maybe you should start them up again.”

Tulane exhaled dramatically. “When I came to your room that night, helping Gabriel wasn’t what I had in mind.”

“This is about the Old Man,” I said, castling. “You were a journalist. You have accesses, avenues—you know people I don’t.”

Tulane caught my eyes, looking into them hard. “OK, Colin,” he finally said. “I’ll dig into the Old Man’s current enterprises. But I’m not doing this for Gabriel. I’m doing it for you.” He fixed his stare back on the board, going from it to me and then back down again, eventually sliding his bishop across. “So, in the meantime,” he said, drawing the syllables out, “answer me something.”

“I’m listening.”

“Clearly, you’re professional life is a smashing success”—and with this he mockingly looked up from the tops of his eyes—“and you’re doing well financially. That only leaves one thing. Your love life.”

I returned a straight face.

“Oh, I think it’s time you got over that. It’s really not as egregiously offensive as you like to pretend. I admit, when I first saw you, the scars caught my eye. But now I hardly even notice them. I’m sure there are several young ladies out there who would feel the same way. You can’t continue to live alone.”

“I don’t have time for that sort of thing.” I strategically placed my knight in the middle, leaving my queen in the back.

“Everyone has time for love.”

“That so? How come I don’t see any Mrs. Churches around?”

“Some men are born bachelors, I’m afraid.”

“Well, then, that’s me.”

“I don’t believe that,” Tulane said. “And you’re forgetting one thing. I once heard you sing.”

“So?”

“So you are a romantic. You have no more hope of suppressing that forlorn characteristic than I do flying away like one of those birds.” He gestured nonchalantly at the cages.

I peered around him. “Aren’t their wings clipped?”

“Yes. It was an analogy.”

“In case you haven’t noticed,” I rasped, “I don’t sing anymore.” I moved my knight so that he’d have to choose between his queen and king.

He craned his neck for a better view. Ultimately, and begrudgingly, he surrendered his lady. “True, you may have lost the pipes,” he said, “but that passion, that lust for life, doesn’t just go away. You can push it down, hide it somewhere—for a while—but eventually it is going to get restless. You *are* a romantic, and romantics need their love. It’s in their nature.”

Now I brought out my queen. “Checkmate.”

“How—oh.” He looked at the board, traced a move backwards with his fingers, then smiled up at me. “Well played, sir.”

He stood and stretched his arms, the full width of a restricted wingspan. He was dressed like a lazy-boned codger. Well-worn pajamas, ratty pink bathrobe, dingy slippers pulled over a pair of black socks. He seemed to delight in flouting the fashion gods.

He moved over to the birdcage and the yellow cockatoo. He rapped lightly on the front door, making “po-tweet” kissy sounds.

“What are their names,” I asked.

“This one,” he said with his back to me, “is Raskolnikov.”

“Cute.”

“I thought you’d appreciate that. And that little fellow is Bartleby, and that, that is Henri. Henri was a gift from the nature preserve. Seems the little guy was emotionally disturbed and kept eating his own toes. But we fixed that, didn’t we, Henri?”

He stuck his fingers through the bars to pet down the cowlick, and then plunked himself back on the couch, his crazy hair sticking up like a mad scientist. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“The girl? What was her name? Zoey?”

“Tulane, you can ask me about anything. But not her.”

“OK, then. What does it feel like spending so much time in the company of the same men who did you wrong?”

“I told you the other day, I don’t think about it.”

He cocked his head, like a doubtful priest. “Come now. You propose to tell me that you have *no* thoughts on the subject, whatsoever? I find that difficult to believe.”

“I can see how you might,” I said. “My old PO, Fenster, I talked to him a few days ago, and he said something similar.”

“Then you can appreciate how it would look to the outsider.”

“Sure, I can appreciate it. Only I don’t live in that world. Haven’t for a long time.”

“And what world is that?”

“The land of the living.”

“Oh, yes, the ‘Colin Specter and his dead-man-walking parade’ again. You certainly have a flair for the dramatic.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Well, sir, you are free to adopt that tack, champion the party line of the trampled upon, but allow me to go on record as saying I am skeptical of its merits as a life-guiding philosophy. In other words, I think you’re full of beans. That is the banter of a scared little boy.”

I raised my eyebrows and opened my arms.

“Yes, it is true that, physically, you are a man, and a large, strapping man at that. You are bright and well-spoken. But your ideas are still those of a little boy who refuses to grow up. Do you think that because life has dealt you a series of harsh blows you are granted the right to carry on like a hoodlum? to throw your weight around as the muscle for thugs?”

“You want to know how I feel taking Gabriel’s money? How it feels working side by side with the same butchers who took my life from me?”

“Yes. Very much, indeed.”

“It’s a job, Tulane. Same as it was for them. Knocking me about required as much personal investment as chopping vegetables for a stew.”

“And Gabriel?”

“Tulane, I’m not innocent in all this.”

“Perhaps not now—”

“Not then, either. Look, I took his girl. I knew that she belonged to him. I let him promote me, build me up, and then I signed a record contract behind his back, was planning on skipping out in the middle of the night, on my knees. Like a common swindler. Now, I’m not saying I got what I deserved, only that actions have consequences. *My* actions had consequences. I can’t go back in time. All I can do now is what’s best for Collie.”

“Which is?”

“Taking as big a piece of the pie as God will allow. And damn whomever stands in my way.”

“That is a frightening liberty.”

“Maybe so. But I’ve taken it.” I reclined. “I don’t know what you see in me, and if there’s something good in there, then you’re either extremely perceptive or inherently delusional. Either way, I thank you. Those are nice things to say. But I don’t see those things. I don’t see black and white, only sickening, mutated shades of gray. I got a nice hotel room to sleep in every night, I’ve got my drink to dull the pain, and I got a wad of dough in my pocket. I’m not interested in taking heroic stands. You took a heroic stand, Tulane, and how’s that working out for you? You’re a laughing stock in this town, and I don’t say that to hurt your feelings, but it’s the truth. You tried to do the right thing and

where'd it get you? Screwed, sequestered in your lovely two bed-, two bathroom home.

A severance package.”

“At least I tried to do the right thing, Colin.”

“And what good did it do?”

“You’re sitting here, and I’m having the chance to try to talk some sense into a young man I am quite fond of before he goes too far and it becomes too late for him to turn back.” He cleared his throat. “You are quite astute in your assertion that actions have consequences, I will not argue with that. That mandate defines us as human beings, a genus that, like it or not, still includes you.”

I smiled.

He shook his head and let go a heavy sigh. “Call me tomorrow. I’ll see what I can dig up on the Old Man’s current enterprises.”

I thanked him for his hospitality and the conversation, and the favor. He walked me to the door and asked if I wanted to borrow an umbrella. I told him my car was just up the block.

As I headed into the squall, he called after me. “You got lucky tonight. Next time you come by, I’ll be ready for you.”

I waved him off and headed to my car.

It was raining hard, and there didn’t appear to be any relief in sight.

Chapter Ten

I had a lot running through my mind. I was still creeped out by the conversation with the hunchback, his inability to recognize me and his tragic version of the love story between the stripper and the singer, how they'd killed the singer, which, in a way, was true. And of course I was kicking myself for our ever having been so stupid. How careless Zoey and I were, to get caught doing anything at the club. Christ, when you're young, nothing can touch you. You're above it all, smarter, stronger, faster; nothing stands in your way. To have a whole life defined by the slip-ups of youthful arrogance... I had the world at my feet, and I lost it all, and where was I now? Muscle for thugs, was how Tulane put it. Yet, how was there more dignity in pushing pencils or loading box-cars? Oh, that's what they want you to believe, the day worked and the dollar earned and all that crap. No, that was a life for the suckers. I'd taken my punches. Spent seven years locked up for a crime I didn't commit, I'd paid my price, and it was time I got mine. Still, I had that other part tugging at me, that boy who took care of his grandmother, the singer who only wanted to make people feel good, and I remembered that busker outside the Coat of Arms and realized it wasn't him I hated. And where had she gone? Why hadn't she at least written? I viewed Gabriel with scrutiny, but the one thing I had come to believe: he wouldn't have hurt her. Which only brought me back to the original question: where was she now?

I spent the next afternoon outside the hospital pharmacy, hiding behind the paper, studying the foot traffic and robot-like behavior of the red-haired nurse. Three oil changes and a cigarette. Repeat.

Waiting for her to come back from a smoke break, I decided to take a deeper look into things.

When the red-haired nurse came by again, this time with a little girl with thick glasses and colorless, wet cheeks, I folded my paper and set it on one of the blue plastic chairs and followed.

Under the unflattering industrial lights above, the click-click clanking of wheels rolled over cold, sterile tile as the red-haired nurse pushed through swinging doors.

I walked by the reception desk, casting a glance at a woman in a threadbare plaid coat signing administrative forms, the plump nurse behind her station gathering and stacking more insurance documents for the next two waiting in line.

A steady stream of doctors in white coats, social workers, and aides strode by, following the color-coded lines that would lead each on a separate mission.

The well-oiled machine of health care.

I went past gurneys, some occupied, most not, and down the corridor, each side lined with more goddamn, feel-good posters.

Around a corner, the crowd thinned, and I had to wait until the red-haired nurse took the next one before I could come up. We did this dance down two more and through other sets of swinging doors.

Footsteps now reverberated down the desolate hallway, no more posters, and I had to pause longer and longer before making my way. Finally, the footsteps stopped.

I peered around the corner. The red-haired nurse pulled out a large key ring and fitted one in a door. I pulled back, hearing the heavy door open and shut. I slowly made my way up the corridor. I came to an unmarked door. I tried the handle. It was locked.

I turned and took a hard nightstick to the gut.

Out from my window, despite the rain, families lined up at Union Station for the trolley, smiling babes and doting folks in the bright metropolis, memories of a lifetime snapped for the family album. On the green hill in the middle of the Square, disenfranchised teenagers huddled in small groups, plastic tarps over their heads, the boys lean, angry, and scruffy faced, their girls apparently having nowhere better to go.

The security guards had escorted me out of the hospital, not listening to my halfhearted pleas that I was a lost parent. I didn't push the issue, not wanting to draw any more unwanted attention. Had I just been somewhere I shouldn't have been? Or were my suspicions that the Old Man's pet project wasn't what it purported founded?

The pick-up was all set up for down on the docks. I told Buick to be ready at quarter till midnight. I didn't feel good about taking the kid. But there shouldn't be any trouble. A nervous Gabriel had spoken with the Sandman ad nauseam. It was a done deal. No interference. And it had to be that way. With the Old Man's imminent campaign kick-off, business had taken a crippling hit. The sex shops and numbers' rackets, the protection scams and strip clubs were going under at an alarming rate. Father was trying to push Son out of town, for good. But Gabriel still controlled a significant chunk of the drug market in Bay City, and the shipment coming in tonight would allow him to at least keep that.

Following a couple porterhouses and a shave, I headed for the *Café du Nord* to talk with Langley, parking in the gully of Church, the hub of the city's public transportation, where all the buses intersected on various, alphabet-designated lines.

I curled my overcoat collar and stuck my hands in my pockets, fighting the stiff wind and rain that slanted over the peaks of Diamond Heights, as I slogged along upper Market.

It was a little before ten p.m. when I got there, and the band was already playing, a slow tempo, sensual jazz bleeding out into the waterlogged street.

At the top of the stars, I paid my cover, catching the poster plastered against the brick wall: a photo of a four-piece, with a pretty brunette, whom I took to be the front-man, in the center along with my man, Langley, the bassist and drummer slightly out of focus in the background. Up above it read: *Appearing Weekends*. And on the bottom: *Sparkle Plenty*.

Cutting through the animated conversations of the barroom below, the horn smacked me in the solar-plexus. Brassy, seductive, low ebb in D-minor, perfect harmonics and sustain. Unmistakable. Only one man could blow like that. There is no instrument on earth as achingly beautiful as a saxophone on a cold and rainy city night.

The *Café's* a subterranean dwelling, an amber cave in the urban underground. It started out as an old time juke joint back in the '20s, smoky and sultry, and it never changed. When I was a kid sneaking down here, I didn't appreciate its authenticity, its grit. Hell, I was a kid then and didn't appreciate much. I'd listen to the torch singers wail, hiding in the dimmed crevices sipping Coca Cola, and, sure, I was blown away by the chops, the raw emotion behind the performances back then, but only so far as they

related to *me* and *my* life, my climb to where I wanted to be someday. Ultimately, I told myself I bypassed this rung on the ladder because I was something special, and at the time it didn't seem like such a loss. Through my adolescent hubris, I viewed it as a wholly unnecessary step. I went from the low-rent dives to the flashy club, which I thought spelled the fast track to the big time. What a fool.

The *du Nord* split in two, with a bar to the right and some tables and chairs positioned around a dartboard and pool table to the left, and another room for the performers in an adjacent alcove. The bands that play in places like this never play loudly. That's a gimmick for the unaccomplished, the punks who need to substitute decibel level for talent. The music here caters to a romantic's language. You can hear the words, the melody, the timbre in a singer's voice, the slightest fingertip pressure of a bassist, a drummer's brushwork, a horn man's faintest inhale.

I'd forgotten how much I'd missed having music in my life. I could use some salvation.

I ordered a bourbon and brought it to the mouth of the playing area. The old boy still looked the same: big, black, beautiful, and, Christ, could he blow. Langley "Liverlips" Langley, from my old band, the Wandering Jews. Stretching a black turtleneck, he was of course bigger, like we all get, more rounded in the puss, but I'd recognize the old boy anywhere.

I found a spot in the back and sank into a chair, the room only slightly less congested than the bar area but a lot quieter.

It was just the players on the softly lit stage, no singer yet, and besides Langley, they were strictly the pits, as interchangeable as lawn mower parts. The boy on bass was

too young. A bassist needs to have suffered. This tyke had no feeling, the notes as stiff as a Wall Street banker's shirt collar. The spaz on drums wasn't much better. He was older and looked like he'd suffered plenty, perhaps a little *too* much, nerve damage affecting his timing. He was frantic, like a teenage boy having sex for the first time, all flailing body parts, no touch of grace or tenderness. It was like those two were playing to separate beats. But Liverlips could make anything sound good.

Then the singer sauntered out, this smoldering brunette in a sparkling red evening gown. You could tell she'd been around—but not too much, if you know what I mean. Classy. Lots of ladies can play the part, but when she opened her pretty mouth, she wasn't playing anything.

While the blister boys did their best to butcher all semblance of cohesion, Liverlips and the broad held it together. They more than held it together; they were soaring. No one else in attendance seemed to be digging it as much as I was. But your average listener can't separate parts from the whole, so who could blame them? The bassist and drummer were lousing up the chemistry.

The band played the standards: "Walking after Midnight," "Misery Loves Company (and I Love You)," "Texarkana Torchlight," "My Funny Valentine," "My Blue Valentine," "Valentine's Day Massacre," and some others.

The brunette possessed a hell of a range. And she knew how to work it, when to bring it down, pull it back or lay it all on the line. And she had the moves. A real woman, she understood the power of suggestion, restraint, that it's the notes you *don't* play. She sang from the soul, from the heart, from those untouchable cores of love and loss.

They concluded with a number we used to do, “Goodbye Kitty,” and this broad nailed it.

I applauded wildly.

The siren leaned into the microphone, thanked everyone for coming and said they were taking a short break. Langley set his saxophone on a stand, and then he and the woman stepped off the stage, heading toward the bar. I started over to greet them, but when they were flooded by well-wishers, mostly forty-year old men wearing thrift store sweaters and hepcat glasses, I didn’t feel like dealing with it. I checked my watch and headed to the bar to wait.

I ordered another bourbon, and I wasn’t feeling half bad. I was about to see an old friend, and the music I’d needed to deliver some salvation had. What I wouldn’t give to sing just one more song. I didn’t care about the record contract or the name in lights. One more song, on a stage, a few folks in the crowd and doing what I do—or used to do—best. The bitter-sweetness of days gone by wrenched at a heavy heart. And then I made the mistake of looking up to catch my reflection in the mirror above the bottles.

After Tulane had told me my scars didn’t stand out so much, I’d gone down to see Billie, and I could feel myself walking taller into Regal World. We went back to her place and sat around talking halfway through the night, about her hometown in Minnesota, about dreams and things like that. She was a sweet kid, and a little older than I’d originally thought. When she talked about missing her mom and her hometown, it broke my goddamn heart. Fucking Bay City.

When I got back to my hotel room, I went to the bathroom and checked my look in the mirror, and those same scars that I’d avoided for seven years, hell, they were

nothing more than scratches, barely noticeable if I turned the right way or stood in the right light. Even the big one across my throat, for some reason didn't seem so garish. And now here I sat, looking above those bottles, and those same scars had become more pronounced; they weren't scratches, they were gouges, slicing through thick, ugly skin, down to bitter bone.

“Well ain't this a surprise? Boy, I thought I'd never see you again.”

I turned to find Langley and his broad Cheshire grin. The brunette stood at his side.

All I could think to say was, “How did you recognize me?”

Langley gestured to the brunette, shaking his head. “I played with this boy four months, sellouts *night after night*, and he asks how can I recognize him?” Then he turned to me, pulling back. “Not that you haven't grown a bit. But you still got that sparkle in them eyes. Come here!” And he reached in and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me in tight for a bear hug.

They joined me at the bar, Langley on my left, and the woman, whose name was Samantha Darling, to his left. With a girl like Billie, hell, she was one of my own. This Samantha was out of my league, and even before the accident such girls had a way of making me stammer and feel stupid. I could immediately feel myself retreating into a defensive, jaded place.

“Samantha, Colin here's a damn fine singer. We had high hopes for this one.”

“That so?” she asked, looking my way. “You still performing?” It was a courtesy question, of course. She'd heard me speak, and the barely audible groan I could emit would've satisfied any curiosity. Still, it was polite of her to ask.

“My throat isn’t what used to be,” I growled.

She was nursing a tonic water and lime. Despite glorified reports of rabble-rousing vocalists, the true singer knows that the pipes are his or her most cherished possession. Lots of honey and tea. Very little alcohol. No smoking.

I took a swig of bourbon and lighted a cigarette.

Langley slapped a hand on my shoulder. “I can’t get over it. You’re a monster, son. When I knew this boy, Samantha, he couldn’t have weighed more than a buck fifty, soaking wet.” He laughed heartily. “You’re built like a brick house now. What are you doing, lifting trucks for a living?”

“I was in prison.”

That killed the mood. Langley of course would’ve known all about it. He was merely making conversation, *pleasant* conversation. And I had to do that. At least it was out there.

Langley grew somber. He’d never been much with words. “I was real sorry to hear about that. Real sorry.”

There wasn’t anywhere for the conversation to go but up.

I tried to lighten the mood. “Whatever happened to Ham-hands and Stinky?”

“Oh, they’re dead.”

So much for my theory.

“You know Stinky had that problem with the spike,” Langley said.

“No, I didn’t know that.”

Langley pinched his face like a fruit bat. “Him always being sick and skinny, scratching all the time, practically running out as soon as we got paid, then running back

in and going to the bathroom, coming back all yappy? I thought everyone knew about that.”

“Well, I didn’t.”

“They found him a couple months ago. Bad batch. In his hotel room at the Balboa. Man starts shacking at the Balboa, you don’t go looking for him, y’know? He played right up until the end. Or tried to. His coordination was kinda shot by then.”

“And Ham-hands?”

“Just fell asleep one night and never woke up.”

I stared at him.

“We’re all getting old.”

He didn’t need to tell me that.

“What do you do for a living?” Samantha asked, looking my way, which despite the potentially sensitive subject matter was actually a welcome respite from precarious issues of mortality.

“I’m a private investigator.”

“Really? You don’t strike me as the type,” she said.

“There’s been a goddamn revival in the surveillance arts, lady. Everyone’s getting in on it.”

It was a mean thing to say. I don’t know why I even said it, especially the “lady” part. I was expecting to catch it back, or for there at least to be an expression of disgust, but it didn’t come. Instead she appeared almost empathic, like she felt sorry for me, except why would a woman like that feel anything for a guy like me?

“I think we need to get back,” Samantha said to Langley, before shaking my hand and saying that it was nice to meet me, even though I doubted it could’ve been. I watched her walk away.

“Pretty girl,” I said.

“And a dynamite singer. She’s the first one I’ve been excited about since I lost you.”

“Listen, Langley,” I said, getting back to business, “I’m looking for somebody.”

“You’re not kidding about being a PI then? And here I thought you just came to hear an old man play.”

I flashed a terse grin.

“Who?” he asked. “Although I have to tell you, I don’t get out as much as I used to, just the club scene around here, y’know?”

“This guy would be working for a club around here.”

“Musician?”

“More like a dancer. And it would be a *Castro* club.”

“Oh.” Langley rocked back on his heels. “Not sure I know about what happens up *there* all that much. What’s the fella’s name?”

“Roberto.”

“Zoey’s friend,” he said, sadly.

“Yeah.”

“You’re trying to find her.”

“Nobody knows anything, Langley. I can’t exactly ask around the club, if you know what I mean. Let’s keep this between us.”

“Who am I going to tell?” Langley laughed. “Truth is, after you went away, the band broke up. Wasn’t no reason to stick around the Palm. I don’t know what happened to her either. Always liked her, though.” He grinned. “I wondered what was up with you two. I’d see the way you’d look at each other.”

“You weren’t the only one, apparently.”

“I wish I could tell you where to find her.”

“I’m hoping Roberto can, if I can find him. Word has it he works a club over the hill. Thought you might’ve heard something.”

“No,” Langley said with that long drawl, “but I can call around if you’d like. Give me a ring early next week. I’ll see what I can find out.”

I thanked him, we shook hands, and he left to get back to the show.

Walking up the well, Langley and his horn retook the stage. In the swirling wind and rain, I trudged to meet a connection, serenaded by the sweet, sculptural sounds of the saxophone.

Chapter Eleven

I killed the lights and brought the car to a slow stop on Steuart, an unlit residential street with replanted trees in wire baskets a few blocks from the Embarcadero.

“What the hell we parking so far away for?” Buick asked, peering up. He’d been drawing little pictures on a pad.

“Put that away and let’s go.”

Exiting the car, I retrieved the duffle bag from the back seat, neat stacks packed inside, like clean, folded undergarments to take on a plane trip. Gabriel had counted it out in front of me. It was more money than most folks earn in a lifetime.

In Bay City, the weather can change drastically from district to district. Whereas it was pouring along upper Market, down by the water it was dry, but frigid and windy as hell.

We turned onto Howard, stalking between the tightly spaced, unlit office lofts down toward the harbor.

That first morning, just out of the can, I took this same route, wondering how I’d pull this off for three more years. Dressed in a cheap, ill-fitting suit, greasy hair hanging in my eyes, I passed slickly attired professionals with their Naugahyde briefcases and London Fog coats, feeling small and powerless, and now here I was, looking over the bay to Angel Island, feeling big and strong.

The roads clear to the west and east, sparse traffic whizzing by overhead on the freeway overpass, we crossed Embarcadero into the parking lot of the pier, where

Borkowski came out of his office shack to greet me, his manner courteous and professional. In my new position, he had to pay me some respect.

I introduced Buick and the three of us made our way up the dock. Borkowski informed me that the Hondurans hadn't arrived yet but had radioed in and would be there shortly.

Borkowski's set-up featured a long dock leading from the gravel parking lot, angling a sharp right behind the warehouse, which ran vertically, the building a hundred yards long and maybe fifty wide. The dock came to a dead end seventy yards or so later. This way the big ships could pull alongside, like the ones did during my week working there, dropping the cargo over the hold, the warehouse shielding the Embarcadero. There were two narrow wooden walkways, one that connected to the back of the warehouse, and another smaller one that led to a tight clearing between the warehouse and Borkowski's office, a garage-sized, one-story unit. To each side, other docking houses and offices began immediately, their backyards cluttered with junk, fragmented hulls, clumps of buoys, steel traps, tangled fishing lines, deep sea hooks, and the like.

We approached the dock's right angle, and the faint glimmer of fishing boat lights, as though arriving from the edge of the earth, shone through the midnight mist. The air had a winter bite to it, that clean, crisp smell like it could snow any moment. Except that it never snows in Bay City.

"That them?" Buick asked, rubbing his hands furiously together. "Fuckers better hurry up. It's cold as shit out here."

I pulled the bottle from my inside pocket and took a pull. Over my shoulder, the city behind me wasn't asleep; it was dead, the night too quiet.

Ten minutes went by and the Hondurans finally glided into port. Borkowski guided the boat to dock under the walkway. Then Borkowski's kid, Henry, emerged from the office and dragged himself toward us, and I could've done without seeing that. He still had both arms, all right. They were in full plaster casts, clumsy rods affixed on each side to his ribs pushing his busted arms out, frozen fingers pointed downward, so that he ambled more than he walked, like a drunken gorilla. When he saw me, he nodded with a look of pure submission, and it made me feel like an animal.

The North Bay Bridge was illumined against the black sky, glowing through the fog and steam rising off the breaking waves, which slapped methodically in syncopation, and I got a sinking feeling.

There were four of them, the Hondurans. While two stayed aboard to secure the latches, two came ashore, M60 automatics showing inside long trench coats, which flapped open and shut with the swirling winds.

We shook hands curtly. Their expressions never changed.

One Honduran started up the dock, hand inside his coat, his finger on the trigger, watching the road. I sent Buick with him. The Honduran snapped something short and terse back to his partner in Spanish that I couldn't catch, before he and Buick continued slowly toward the parking lot.

I retraced their footwork, backwards past where I stood, all the way to the dock's blunt stop at the bay's choppy waters.

It was a lousy set up for drug smuggling. Because you wouldn't be able to hear anyone come. And you wouldn't have much of an escape route if they did.

And we didn't.

I heard the first shot, and my head snapped up to see Buick fleeing the scene, right arm extended, firing into the headlights of a black and white as it screeched to a halt, kicking up gravel and dust through its beams. The Honduran backpedaled and crouched behind a post. Automatic at his hip, he unleashed round after rapid fire round, hot sparks skipping off the cruiser's roof and hood. Two more units skidded in, reds and blues flashing, sirens whirring. A white searchlight switched on, trying to fix on us.

All the Hondurans now opened fire, the other one on land and the two still in the boat, with the cops returning. Buick blew past, knocking to the floor Borkowski, who began slinking for the boat and cover. Poor Henry didn't have that option. As I pulled my .44 and ducked, duffle bag clutched tightly, bullets slicing through the night, Henry thudded in front of me, plaster casts splintering, limp arms flailing in wrong directions before coming to rest lifelessly at my feet, a bullet hole between his eyes.

I took after Buick for the dock's dead end and the shelter provided by the warehouse's back side jutting out.

From the corner of my eye, I could see the boat twisted around, rope still fastened, rising with the swells. Any hope of using the boat for a getaway was gone, as two more sets of water unit headlights fast approached from the northeast. The two Hondurans spun, firing wildly into the darkness.

The cops and Hondurans kept exchanging fire behind us, the machine gun rattle versus the pop-popping of department-issued. But the mismatch in firepower was rendered moot: the police had their cars to hide behind; the Hondurans had nothing.

The only way off the dock was the thin walkway leading to Borkowski's shack, a course ripe for an ambush. I reached for Buick's shoulder and tucked him behind me, as

we took the walkway full bore. To my right, I saw the first Honduran go down. I craned my neck to see the second one drop immediately thereafter.

Bag under my arm like a footballer, Buick close behind, our footing shaky on the thin partition, both our guns out, mine aimed low, his high over my loping shoulders, we had to make fifty before the cops got wise and showed—because once they did, the only choice left would be to dive and swim for one of the islands through the arctic cold, shark-infested waters. And inmates on the isle prison had been trying that for years, and nobody had been successful yet.

Automatic fire rippled from the boat, and then there was a loud explosion, and the automatic fire stopped.

Ten feet from the walkway's end, a cop jumped out from behind the shack, two hands on his gun. Buick fired, the cop did too, four shots in rapid succession, and Buick and I jumped in unison, hamstrings coiling and overextending, over dinghies and bobbing barrels. We hit the dirt hard, our speed carrying us tumbling all the way to the back of Borkowski's office.

I could now see what had transpired behind us. The boat burned brightly, flames shooting plumes of charcoal. Two sets of roving headlights from police water units cast dirty searchlights through the thick smoke, which drifted with the wind blowing in, obscuring Buick and me from the police now running up the dock toward the fire, the remaining two Hondurans, along with Borkowski, burning alive.

We were pinned, our backs to the wall. To the left police, to the right a maze of jumbled clutter, copper spools, disengaged engines, sharp propellers jagging every which

way, all along the waterfront. It would take hours to navigate tentatively through the hazards.

“Mutherfuckers!” Buick snapped.

“Shut up,” I whispered. “You all right?”

He took a moment to check. “I think so. You?”

I felt a sharp stinging just below my rib cage, but I didn’t remember being hit. I looked down and there was blood. “I’m fine.” The bag lay between us. I motioned for Buick to pick it up.

The sound of a fire truck wailed from faraway. Footsteps tentatively approached, crunching stone.

I held a finger to my mouth.

I waited for the elongated shadow, timed it, and swung my right holding the .44 around the edge of the shack, blunt end catching the sneaking cop square on the bridge of his nose, blood spurting like a piss arc.

The noise brought the attention of the other cops, who looked over through the smoke. I heard more of them coming up the warehouse gravel fast.

Getting to my feet, I grabbed Buick by the sleeve, and we took off into the metal wasteland. Over discarded engine parts and oil barrels, between propellers and loops of barbed wire, we ran as bullets whizzed past. I heard the bag fall, and I grabbed Buick’s arm before he could retrieve it. Adrenaline pumping fire through my veins, jumping and ducking, darting and bobbing, never losing a step, the cops right behind us, all along the water’s edge, under and over, in and out of cover, we ran.

We didn’t stop running until we hit the freeway overpass and knew we were safe.

Chapter Twelve

The bullet had gone in and out, missing anything important, or at least that's what the doctor Gabriel called to the Kitten Club said.

All of us were there, Figgs, Petersen, Buick, Gabriel and me. Everyone was on edge, Petersen especially. He kept pacing around Gabriel's office, never shutting up about the cops who were going to be beating down the door any moment.

"No cops will be coming," Gabriel said with steadfast resolve.

He was right. They'd gotten what they wanted, to stop the transfer and cripple Gabriel's business. The Sandman was working for the other side full-time now, and Gabriel was worse off out of jail. He'd have to answer to men far more dangerous and competent than the cops. Sooner or later, they'd want their money or their product. Excuses be damned. He was a sitting duck. Borkowski and Son were dead. The Hondurans dead. The money and the drugs seized. A boat burned and no witnesses left. It had been a set up from the start.

Gabriel told everyone to go home, not to worry, but the worry wore all over his face.

And as strange as it sounds, I felt like I had let him down.

When I got back to my room, there was a message from Tulane, telling me to come out and see him, that he'd gotten the information I wanted.

I headed out for his place as soon as I woke Saturday afternoon.

We sat at his coffee table, documents, press releases and business applications, licenses, fanned across, next to his stacks of files from his days at the *Oracle*. He'd fixed me some black coffee, which I could use.

When I bent forward to take a sip, I winced, the pain from the bullet rattling my back teeth, the adrenaline having long worn off.

"Everything OK?" he asked.

"I tweaked something. So what did you find out?"

"I went down to city records yesterday, to check the renewal applications for the clubs and businesses he owns, or co-owns, or supports in one way or another. But there aren't any."

"No renewals?"

"No. No, businesses. Besides the *Oracle* and hospital, there are no other enterprises, Collie. That's what I am trying to tell you. When I was at the paper, I had paper chains connecting the Old Man to everything from antique importers to the dockworkers' union. He had his hands *in everything*. I don't get it. Like overnight. He let go of *it all*, liquidated, opted out. Whatever he didn't sell, he signed over to Gabriel—the Palm, Big Dolls, the Cocodrie. We are talking about a great deal of equity that he just gave to his son."

"I suppose there are stranger things than a father giving his son a gift."

"You've heard the saying about Greeks and their gifts?" Tulane raised his brows.

"The *Oracle*, we know about, so I picked up all the documentation I could on the hospital. I spent all day yesterday, reading the plans and medical licenses filed for the

place that he and a partner, Nathaniel Murdock, wrote up, the set-up on the non-profit. I can't find a thing out of order there, either."

I remembered something.

"What is it," he asked, catching my change in expression.

"It's probably nothing. But this Murdock. His name is in the foyer with the Old Man's, listed as co-founder, on a big bronze statue."

"Well, Murdock *is* the co-founder."

"Except I looked at some other, more recent reading material on the place where it just lists the Old Man."

"Just like the Old Man to take all the credit," Tulane said.

"That's what I thought, too. But it seemed strange to me. Kind of a glaring omission to leave off the co-founder from your brochures, no?"

"Did you take a look at the hospital directory? Does Murdock still work there?"

"Didn't occur to me. I remembered it just now. Why? You think it means something."

Tulane stood up and went to his desk, flipping through the Yellow Pages, lifting the phone from its cradle and punching in numbers. He peered out the gray window, at the droplets rolling down the glass outside.

"Yes," he finally said, "can you put me through to Dr. Murdock?" A pause.

"No? He doesn't? For how long? OK, might you be able to tell me where I could reach him?" Another pause. "Thanks for your help anyway."

Tulane came back. "He is no longer affiliated with the hospital. The woman couldn't say for how long nor where I could reach him."

“What do you think it means,” I asked.

“It’s strange a co-founder would duck out of a project like this after having invested so much time in getting it off the ground. I’d like to talk to him. Perhaps he and the Old Man had a falling out.”

I splashed some bourbon in my coffee. “What did you find on the research center?”

“It was opened a year after the hospital.”

“What is it for?”

“The proposal states researching pain medications for children.”

“That’s it?”

“It’s a legitimate field of research. Pain medications work differently on children than they do on adults.” Tulane bent down and sifted through his paperwork. “I have the press release here somewhere...”

“I’ve been camped out watching the traffic through it lately. There’s this red-haired nurse I’m always seeing, wheeling sick kids in and out.”

“That is what hospitals do. Nurses wheel around the sick.”

“Sure. But I followed this nurse the other day. She was taking a kid somewhere far away from the other rooms.”

“And?”

“She went into a room. I tried the handle. It was locked.”

Tulane laughed. “Colin, there are lots of locked doors in hospitals.”

“I also got firmly escorted out by security guards for being somewhere I shouldn’t.”

“That’s why hospitals have security guards—”

“I understand. It gave me a funny feeling, is all. You’d have to see this red-haired nurse. She looks so cold, and then I look at these kids’ faces she wheels in, and they look so scared, eyes filled with terror. But when they come back they seem, well, stoned.”

“What do you mean ‘stoned’?”

“Y’know, stoned, out of it, sedated. I mean, it’s a marked difference, which is why I noticed it. I don’t know, this red-haired nurse gives me the creeps. I’m probably fishing, getting desperate. Things aren’t going well at the office. The campaign launch is only six days away. Maybe I’m letting Gabriel’s paranoia get to me.”

“Give me a day or two,” Tulane said. “I’ll see if I can track down this Dr. Murdock. Perhaps, he could help shed some light. Go home and get some sleep. You look like you could use some rest.”

I went back to the Coat of Arms, redressed my wound, poured a stiff one and passed back out.

Chapter Thirteen

Mid-morning Sunday and well rested, I was back outside the Old Man's high-rise, watching the fat man wobble into the driver's seat of his Eldorado. I loved the tinted window touch. Like anybody would want to look at the ugly bastard anyway.

Like last Sunday, he headed for the North Bay Bridge, and I wondered what made these trips up north so special that he drove himself.

Staying several car lengths behind, it was easy for me to keep up, Sunday traffic flowing nicely.

He got off at Mars Beach, heading for Seaside again, down Highway 1 and then onto Bridgeway like before. After Robin Sweeny Park, he took a slow left onto Bee Street, where the neighborhood instantly turned more upscale, stone apartments giving way to little houses and vegetable gardens.

He pulled in front of 1417, a yellow and pink two-story, with wild flowers in full bloom along the base of the house and lining the concrete steps leading up.

I pulled short, coasting into a spot on the corner. The fat man got out, and his car sprung up with the relief. He was holding something behind his back. I dropped the hatch on the glove compartment and grabbed the binoculars. It was a toy. An airplane.

The screen door slammed and a small boy ran out, bounding down the steps, and the Old Man crouched to receive him. The kid couldn't have been more than five or six. The Old Man lifted the boy and gently set him down, handing him his airplane.

The Old Man had a lovechild.

I headed into the Kitten Club to see how Gabriel was handling things following Saturday night's debacle. I felt a flicker of hope concerning this Murdock character, and I wanted to give Gabriel some hope, but my head swirled with thoughts of the Old Man having another child. Gabriel couldn't have known about it, or I would've heard about it by now. And I sure as hell wasn't going to be the one to tell him.

It was well after noon when I got there, North Beach bogged down by the rain and slop that wouldn't leave the town alone. Only one girl was on the stage, the place practically empty with but a few customers, only one of whom was awake. The girl dancing was a large girl perhaps better suited for another line of work, thighs rippling when she shimmied, breasts slung low, heavy like lead balloons.

Figgs sat at a table by the bar, a watered down glass of liquor in front of him, looking as tired as a man can look. His cap was off, his few remaining hairs tangled in disarray.

No bartender was tending. I called over to Figgs. "Who's serving the drinks?"

He turned to me slowly. "I've been."

"Where's the pompadour?"

"Didn't show."

Petersen shot pool by himself, refusing to look up. Buick sat moodily in a corner, scribbling his pictures.

I went behind the bar to fix myself a drink, and discovered broken glass all over the place and a half-ass sweep job. A few bottles were still in tact, but more needed to be brought up from the basement. "What happened back here?" I asked Figgs, now noticing the main floor was missing more than a couples tables and chairs.

He dragged a heavy paw over his forehead. “Gabriel,” he said. “Gabriel happened.”

“Where’s the hand-truck?” I said. “We need some more liquor.”

“Isn’t any.”

“Come give me a hand then and we’ll carry some up.”

“I mean there’s no liquor,” Figgs said. “Gabriel forgot to order it from the distributor.”

“What do you mean there’s no liquor? This is a strip club. How did he forget to order alcohol from the distributor?”

“That’s what he said. Musta ‘slipped his mind.’” Figgs swallowed a mouthful from his watered down glass, leaving behind a big, sloppy ring on the table.

“Where is he?”

“Where he always is these days. Locked down in his office. Won’t come out. Won’t let anyone in.”

“I’ll go talk to him.”

I rapped my knuckles on Gabriel’s door.

“Get the fuck out of here!”

“It’s Collie.”

I heard him trying to catch his breath. “It’s not a good time, Collie.”

“I know. Can I come in?”

I heard a loud snort before he shuffled to unlock the door.

Gabriel looked like shit. He hadn’t shaved, and it was clear he hadn’t slept. The office lay in shambles, wine bottles smashed, pictures dangling on the wall. On his desk

rested a half bottle of scotch, a mirror and a straw. There were trails of white residue everywhere, over the desk, on his nostrils, the edges of which flared irritated and red.

He found his chair and fell into it, groaning. He shook his head, pathetic and slow.

“Jesus, Gabriel,” I said. “You’re losing it.”

He spat out an unhinged laugh. “Brother, I’ve already *lost* it.” He hefted the scotch and guzzled it, passing over what was left. “This one was bad. I needed this one. God, how I *needed* this one.”

“It’s a set-back. Temporary. They happen.”

“They shut down Big Dolls this morning.”

“On what charge?”

“Does it matter? Came in on a raid. Confiscated the merchandise. Chained the doors.”

“There had to be a charge. They can’t just shut it down for no reason.”

“Made one up. Selling sexually explicit materials to a minor. Bullshit. Like I said, doesn’t matter.” His eyes widened maniacally, his pupils giant black holes. “It’s like I can see the darkest edges of my life, literally *see* them, surrounding me, closing in on me.”

“Man, you’ve got to pull it together.” I jabbed a thumb upwards. “You still run this show. You got people counting on you. You’re Gabriel Christos, remember?”

At the mention of his own name, his expression became mystified, like he was hearing that of an old girlfriend or some long lost childhood pal whose place in the memory teeters precariously.

I sent Gabriel to his apartment to get some sleep and called the distributor.

A few hours later, the joint still dead, I sent Bertha home and closed up early.

I should've been annoyed with him like everyone else, but I wasn't.

If I thought about it too much, of course it grew all muddled, but if I thought about it just enough...

We weren't all that different, Gabriel and I. We both lived in the shadows, I of my past, he of his old man. It was a connection, of sorts. My pop split when I was young; Gabriel never had a normal father. Neither of us knew our mother. His whole life, Gabriel learned to take what he wanted by force. It was the precedent set and the one rewarded. Such power I'd discovered first hand to be an aphrodisiac. When viewed in that light, Gabriel ceased being a ruthless cutthroat and became just another man doing the best he could with what he had, warts, tics, and all. If nothing else, such rationalization made bitter pills easier to swallow.

Maybe I was overanalyzing things. All I knew for sure was that during the time I'd been in his employ, something had happened, something I never would've expected in a thousand lifetimes. Lately he'd needed me, because he was falling, and I, in turn, wanted to be there to hold him up. Not long ago, I'd have let him fall. Hell, I would have been the one throwing him out the window and doing a jig over his rotting corpse. These days I was doing everything within my power to save him.

At the hotel, I tried Langley, but he wasn't around so I left a message. He called me back late. He said Roberto was working the cages at a drag show in the Castro, at a club called the White Swallow. I thanked him and said I was heading there now. He said to cool my jets. Roberto had Sundays off.

Chapter Fourteen

Tulane rang the next morning to say that he'd found Murdock. The doctor was running a dry-out tank and addict rehabilitation center along the East Bay wharf. I picked up a few egg and sausage sandwiches and a pint of bourbon on my way to the Richmond.

As we crossed the East Bay Bridge, stuck in morning gridlock, I told Tulane about the lovechild.

He seemed appalled at the notion. "Are you certain the child is Cephalus's?"

"Looked that way to me. He gave the boy a toy airplane like a doting father. I've never known the Old Man to be that affectionate."

"How old was the boy?"

"Young. Tiny thing. Maybe five. I don't know." I pointed to the glove compartment. "You mind getting the bottle out of there?"

Tulane flipped the compartment and grabbed my bourbon next to the binoculars, passing it to me.

"Thanks."

"Colin, I don't mean to sound like your father, but do you really need that at 10:45 in the morning."

"*Need?* No." I took a long pull and tucked it in my inside pocket.

The traffic picked up at the freeway split. We took the Emeryville exit, dipping beneath the crisscrossing, myriad intersecting passes above, and followed the access road along the wharf.

Homeless campsites under the bridge soon came into view, ramshackle, tin homes and grounded, gutted vans, which could sleep a dozen, up on cinder blocks, pigeons perching on makeshift clothes lines, which hung slack from rearview mirrors. The smell of low tide and wet dogs filled the air. Wispy trails floated from the charred remnants of barrel fires that had been set to survive the cold night.

It was all tall weeds along the waterfront, tall weeds and displaced peoples in hobo jungles, standing in stark contrast to the towering hills and riches of Bay City framed so neatly on the other side of the water.

Soon the jungle gave way to the odd fishmonger road-stand or granola, hand-carved furniture outpost.

We drove another mile or so, and Tulane pointed to a mailbox at the end of a narrow drive leading up a short hill to a stout brick building surrounded by tall chain links. "That must be it."

Halfway up the drive, there stood a guard shack, and a fat Mexican with a look of bored bemusement on his face came out, dressed in orderly white, flabby arm motioning us to stop.

He bent down and stuck his moon face inside my window.

"I'm checking my son in," Tulane said, matter-of-factly, before I had a chance to speak.

The Mexican directed us where to park.

"What did you say that for?" I asked, pulling into a spot.

"Think, Colin." Tulane pointed to two more big orderlies guarding the entrance.

"What did you plan on doing? Smacking them around until they let us inside?"

I sized the men up. It wouldn't be too difficult.

“You have to start using your brain. Finesse goes a long way. This is a rehabilitation center, a *lockdown* unit. You've got a lot of desperate people inside those walls wanting to get out, and big men like that making sure they don't. It works the other way, too. All we want to do is talk to Murdock, right? The best way to get inside is to pretend you need some rehabilitation, and that I'm just another father bringing his son to sober up.” He cast a glance at me, snidely. “And judging from the booze that's always on your breath, that wouldn't be such a stretch, would it?”

I limped behind Dad.

Of course he was right, his method proving painless and successful. When the lady at reception passed over some forms to fill out, Tulane said that he wanted to make sure the place was right for his son, insisting that he speak with the doctor first.

Soon, a grave and cadaverous man came to the waiting room. Loose department store brown suit and tie, gaunt features and deep sunken eyes, his unkempt hair graying, he reminded me of a scarecrow. My first thought was that the man could use some sobering up himself.

He introduced himself as Dr. Murdock, and we followed as he schlepped down a worn brown-carpeted hall and into a small cramped office, taking the two folding chairs, which were situated in front of a desk overrun with bulky olive green charts, physician guides, and prescription drug manuals.

“What questions can I answer for you, Mr...?”

“Church.”

“OK, Mr. Church,” Murdock droned, issuing the perfunctory sales pitch, “let me first tell you, Spruce Acres is a top-notch facility. Your son will be in very capable hands. It is an intensive thirty-day program. We use the twelve steps to treat not only the physical symptoms but also the environmental and behavioral conditions that contribute to addiction. Of course, the real work is done by the patient.” He dragged his attention to me. “Be honest, son, aren’t you sick and tired of being sick and tired?” Before I could even process the question, he redirected his attention back to Tulane. “Now what kind of insurance do you have?”

“Dr. Murdock, my name is Tulane Church.”

Murdock’s ashen face twisted up, like he were probing the recesses to make the connection he knew existed somewhere. It came to him slowly. “Tulane Church? The newspaper reporter?”

“Yes.”

“And this isn’t your son, I take it.”

“No. This is my friend, Colin. Colin Specter.”

Murdock’s face took on the same look of remembrance, but he wouldn’t have known who I was. He suddenly grew agitated, reaching for the phone but not picking it up. “Mr. Church, I run a rehabilitation center helping men who have seen drugs and alcohol destroy their lives. I don’t have time to—”

“This won’t take up much of your time, doctor. I only have a few questions regarding your work with Cephalus Christos.”

At this Murdock laughed a dry nervous laugh. “Well then, Mr. Church, you have truly wasted both of our time. I couldn’t tell you a thing about Christos if I wanted to.”

“You don’t even know the question yet.”

He shifted in his seat. “Wouldn’t make a difference. It’s what you folks in the newspaper business call a ‘gag order.’ Part of my, er, early retirement from the Meltemi Children’s Hospital stipulates that I am not allowed to talk about my time there.”

“This is off the record. I am no longer with the *Oracle*.”

“No, I don’t imagine that you are.” He laughed dryly again. “But it doesn’t make a difference. I can’t talk to you. And, furthermore, I don’t *want* to talk to you. Now if you’ll both kindly leave before I have to call—”

“Who’s the Old Man’s kid,” I said.

“Colin Specter,” the doctor said, looking down the tip of his bony nose at me. “I know who you are, too.” When I didn’t respond, he added, “You were just a broken boy when they brought you into General. I was the attending that night, following your— what did you write, Mr. Church? Escape attempt? I don’t know what you two are trying to pull.”

My hands curled around the chair’s arms, but Tulane gestured to stay calm.

“Let me start over,” Tulane said. “We are not interested in your violating a gag order. The last thing we want is our visit here to get back to Cephalus Christos. We’d have just as much to lose as you. Anything said in this room will stay in this room.”

I watched Murdock’s hand, which remained on the phone the whole time, trembling. I looked into his eyes, which seemed unable to stay focused, at his forehead damp with beads of perspiration. Our whole time in his presence, he seemed on edge, like a man in need of a taste.

I slowly brought the bottle out of my pocket. Tulane's face dropped. But Murdock wasn't shocked. He cast his eyes tentatively from Tulane to the bottle, to me and then back to the bottle.

Murdock released the receiver. He stood up and locked the door. Sitting down quickly, he began rummaging through his drawers, extracting three smudged glasses. I passed him the bourbon. He filled each glass, passing them along. Tulane refused, and Murdock snatched it back for himself. As soon as Murdock swallowed a mouthful, some life returned to his eyes. After a couple more, he grew, if not exactly nicer, certainly more loquacious. "That goddamn place ruined my life."

"I see you're interactions with the Old Man have been equally dissatisfying," Tulane said.

Murdock scoffed. "Dissatisfying? I had a good job in Bay City. I was a highly respected physician, a sought-after expert, until I went into business with that man. This"—and he swept a hand over the modest expanse of his dismal, dirty office—"this is where they stick me now. The last house on the block."

"Not a rewarding line of work?"

"Have you ever worked with addicts and alcoholics? Hearts of gold, every one of them, and, oh, they talk a good game. I've seen the husbands pleading with the wives with their purple, swollen eyes when they drop them off. This will be the last time. One more chance. But this poison"—he pointed scornfully at the bottle—"it seeps beyond merely the veins, organs, and brain. It gets into the very soul—" Murdock stopped himself, chest sagging as though remorseful. "I shouldn't say that. Every day is another chance to turn it all around. There *are* rewards in this business. I am a doctor, and every

doctor loves to see his patients recover. Addiction is still a poorly understood field of practice, you have to understand, and we need to remain optimistic, eternally vigilant. But at this point, many of the men are too far gone to help. They were born into it. Alcoholic parents, a genetic predisposition, social factors. It is frustrating. To really help people you need to—”

“—get to them before it is too late,” Tulane said, reassuringly.

“Exactly,” Murdock concurred. “Get to them while you still have the chance to make a real difference.”

“Like when they are still children.”

Murdock dragged his long fingers through his hair. “He didn’t have to sell me on the idea. Starting a children’s hospital that catered to that particular faction of society was a lifelong dream of mine. Shortly after bringing me that woman and her child, he offered me that dream on a platter.”

“What was the woman’s name?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Murdock responded, before bringing the glass to his lips. “It said Christos on the paperwork. She didn’t say. And it was made very clear to me that I was not to ask.”

“So it *was* the Old Man’s child?” I said.

“I don’t know that either. I assumed so. I had gone into private practice by then, but I was still struggling to get it off the ground. The Old Man brings me a woman and child, a baby, says he thinks the boy is sick. I run some tests. The boy has a blood disease. I could give you the name, but it wouldn’t make a damn bit of difference to you.

It's rare, hereditary. And it's deadly if not treated. The Old Man wanted everything kept quiet. And he gave me a lot of money to do my job and not ask."

"What happened?" Tulane asked.

"What do you mean 'what happened'?" Murdock snapped, his mood swinging with each pull, the last of which coming directly from the bottle. "I was put on the Old Man's payroll, what do you think? I had one patient. I treated that one patient. That's how he suckered me in."

"Suckered you in?"

"You know how the Old Man made his money. Well, there's a lot more where that came from. Pharmaceuticals are big business, boys."

"But you didn't know that at the time," Tulane said, compassionately.

"Of course not! I'm a doctor. A *good* doctor. The Old Man comes to me one day, says he wants to do something good, help the children. Within a year, we were up and running. Hell, we had free publicity with that paper of his. And why should I suspect a thing? We're not in it for the money. We're helping those who truly needed it, state cases and the poor, children born to addicted mothers and fathers. It was a chance to end the cycles of abuse. I made myself believe he was just a guy who'd gone down the wrong road once upon a time, and now he was making it up to the world." Murdock's eyes began to droop.

"What made you change your mind?"

"One day," Murdock said, "a couple years in—we'd just opened the research center—I see that the Old Man has increased a medication order—he's not a doctor, he can't do that!—and we are talking about kids! They can't handle pain medications like

adults can. I bring it to his attention, thinking it must be an oversight, and the next thing I know, I'm accused of 'mismanagement.' The Old Man's lawyers come in with a severance check and gag order to sign—" Murdock stopped, realizing he'd said too much. He sneered at the bottle. "Goddamn poison, I tell you. Poison."

We rolled past the guard tower and back onto the access road.

"I can see why you were so good at your job."

"Most people want to talk, Colin. *Especially* about themselves. You just have to ask the right questions." Tulane grinned. "Although I'm not sure it would've worked with Murdock without, um, a little coaxing. How did you know to bring out the bottle? Rather risky move in a place like that."

"I've seen those eyes."

"I wouldn't get too excited. Murdock didn't exactly give us anything we didn't already know. We knew the hospital wasn't the charitable project alleged."

"No," I said, "but now we have some confirmation. And maybe an ally."

We headed back to Tulane's, where we spent the rest of the afternoon discussing events and seeing what we could "stir up" on the hospital front. We placed a couple anonymous calls to watchdog groups like California's Hospital Association, making generalized inquiries, hoping something might ooze up from the cracks. Tulane said he was going to talk to a friend he still trusted at the paper, try to dig up what he could on the Old Man's campaign, perhaps get an advanced copy of any speech.

As day wore into night, I excused myself. I had a meeting uptown with a dancer.

I like to consider myself a tolerant man. I know folks come in all shames and sizes. But I had my fill of fairies on the inside. And the Castro is filled with nothing but.

I parked on Sanchez, withdrew my piece and locked it away. I wouldn't need it with this crowd. Then I rolled in for a quick bite at the Hot 'n' Hunky, and I will hand one compliment to men of that ilk: they sure make a tasty burger.

Crossing onto 18th, I was greeted by the long line of gay bars, and you had to love the names: Moby Dick, the Over the Rainbow Room, Adam and Steve's, and, of course, the White Swallow.

When I was a kid scouting out Bay City, I never ventured to these parts. Men in leather. Men dressed like giant teddy bears. Skinny men holding hands with fat men. I'll never get it.

The Swallow was tucked on a side street, with a plush white seagull in Dutch Boy britches, its gullet puffy, affixed over the door. A burly mustached man in skin-tight blue jeans with a shirtless, hairy chest gave me the look-over as I breezed past.

The things you do for love.

Inside displayed a cross between French revisionist cabaret and leftovers from *The Wizard of Oz*. Only I didn't see any munchkins. I did see some cages, like the ones the Wicked Witch imprisoned poor Dorothy in, where men wearing women's undergarments gyrated their slight bodies to the beat.

Thumping sounds pounded overhead, and boys prettier than any boys should be eyed me, smiling winsomely, batting lashes.

I hit the bar and ordered a bourbon. The guy who took my money had bright yellow hair the color of a canary.

“Where can I find Roberto?” I said.

He looked at me like I’d just stolen his prom date, then pointed across the floor to one of the cages. “You can’t bother him while he’s performing, though.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. When’s loverboy get off?”

The canary pursed his lips, then, moving his eyes over my body, said, “Well, now, that all depends, doesn’t it?”

I checked my watch. I wasn’t waiting around in there until two.

Bullying my way through the snarled, dry-humping legs, I maneuvered the dance floor.

In front of Roberto’s cage, I tried to convey my intentions, but it was impossible to hear yourself even think in there, and the guy seemed caught up in the moment anyway, silky wig flinging around as he ground himself against the bars, eyes rolling back into his head like he was lost in spiritual rapture.

I felt a tug at my coat sleeve and turned around to find the burly mustached doorman and an equally hefty pal, this one in crotch-less chaps. I had no choice but to assume this is what passed for muscle in the joint. I wasn’t exactly shaking. Like a favorite author of mine once quipped: no matter how big, those boys got no iron in their bones.

When I swatted the hand away, I was hit with two stiff crosses and my knees buckled. I tried to swing a right but it got caught in the cage’s bars, and before I could load a left, I took a roundhouse and hit the floor.

I looked up at the lights, thinking how my favorite author was wrong. It wouldn’t be the first time.

I struggled to my feet, looking to return the favor, but by then the music had stopped and the floor had cleared.

“It’s OK,” I heard a voice behind me say, “I know this man.”

Roberto exited his cage, took me by the hand and led me through the club, while I checked my jaw and ate some crow, onlookers clearing a wide path. He snatched a plum satin robe from a hook, hanging the tawny wig in its place, tying the sash tightly around his small waist. We left via the back door.

“You got a cigarette?” Roberto asked in the alley among the big dumpsters and fire escapes.

I passed him one and lighted it for him.

He struck a pose and inhaled dramatically.

In the floodlight shining above the back door, you could see the wrinkles around the eyes, the tight black curls of a receding hairline. He was thin, too thin, delicate, really. But there was a sensuality in that face. He had a couple years left wiggling that pretty for pay. And then this thought hit me: in all the heartache of this world, is there anything sadder than the aging drag queen?

“It’s been a while,” I said. “It’s a good thing you still recognized me.”

“Oh, I think you would’ve been OK.” He puckered a kiss. “You’re a little bigger than I remember. Gruffer. But not many men have a lovely memento like that sliced across their throat. No offense. And I gleaned, hopeless romantic you were, that I might be seeing you again.”

I hadn't known Roberto all that well. Didn't really like him then. He was one of Zoey's friends, from *that* part of her life. But he'd helped us exchange letters while I was laid up. I was starting to like this guy now.

"But I'm afraid I can't help you," he said.

I looked hard into his eyes.

He took a step closer, hands on his hips. "Bay City is not a big city. You are not invisible, you know."

"Where is she?" I growled.

He took a step back, leaning against a brick wall. "I used to screen her calls at the hotel. She was such a sad girl. And the men she tramped around with... I remember when she met you. Watching someone fall in love, really and truly in love—when they fall in love with a good person who deserves their love—it's a beautiful thing. That girl sure did love you. And you did a good thing for her. But that was a long time ago. You should leave it there. There are people in this town who won't appreciate the past being stirred up."

"I don't give a damn who cares about what."

"For her sake, you should."

"I'm getting the distinct impression you know more than you're telling me." I took a step closer.

He continued to puff on his cigarette, pose unaffected, before shaking his head solemnly. "You really don't know what you're doing, do you? You shouldn't ask questions, Colin, unless you know the answer is going to be in your favor."

"Where is she?"

“You’ve heard about sleeping dogs?”

I waited.

“I wish I could help you,” he said, and then tenderly reached out to touch my arm.

“But the Zoey I know is too tough for her own good. The last thing she needs is you filling her head with hope of a fight she can’t win.”

“I’m not looking to win her back, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“No, that’s not what I’m *getting at*. You are a bit thick, aren’t you?” He sighed.

“How’d you know where to find me?”

“Why does that matter?”

“It matters a great deal. It speaks to your agenda.”

“I don’t have an agenda. I just want to find Zoey.”

Roberto shook his head dramatically. “Colin, we all have mementos from those days, it isn’t just you, y’know. Skeletons and memories, it’s about all we have. Now, I don’t know if you’re really as ignorant as you play, or who told you what. But you come sniffing around, asking questions like you are—knowing the axe you have to grind—it makes me suspicious. And if it makes *me* suspicious, think about those who actually have something to lose. Big men are moving and shaking this town these days. Men much, much bigger—and smarter—than you. And little girls, no matter how old, are always looking for a hero.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

He smiled. “Sorry, but I’ve said too much. Besides, it looks like some friends of yours are here.”

I turned. Three of them approached, hands reaching inside their coats. I recognized the walk. A cop walk. I couldn't believe I'd be getting the collar for having a tussle at a bar like the White Swallow.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Roberto backing into the club.

We were just off a residential section of Sanchez, and it was late. The street was quiet except for the muted thumping within the club and the approaching footsteps. Few lights were on. No cars were moving.

They formed a circle.

"Can I help you, officers?"

"Just gonna take a little ride, is all," the one in front said.

He was the biggest of the three, a square-headed Irishman, shoulders like a longshoreman. The other two were smaller, though no slouches.

"Don't get any crazy ideas," the Irishman said, as the other two kept their hands on their hardware.

I'd heard this rap before. And I wasn't about to get into the back seat of anybody's car and go for a ride to who-knows-where.

I curled a fist. When I went to unload, I turned into a muzzle pressed squarely against my nose.

In the Mission, the tough boys hang in the alleys behind South Van Ess and Shotwell, the crawlspaces of Harrison and Folsom, in the heart of Little Mexico. This is where you'll find the newly released dogs from the pen. These aren't teenagers scraping together change to send to *su familias* picking strawberries in the Motherland; these are

the gangbangers, *Los Diablos*, the cold-blooded killers who'd just as soon slice you open, tear out your innards, and, with a little jalapeño and *frijoles*, fry up a midnight snack, as they would look at you.

Normally nobody treads down here after midnight, not even the cops. A cop hears there's a ruckus in these parts, he switches off the CB, grabs a donut on the other side of town.

Tonight was a different story. The cops corralled me at gun point into the back of an unmarked car. They took turns zapping and beating me with backjacks until I was fairly subdued. Then they drove me to Little Mexico and kicked me out of the car for *Los Diablos* to have their fun.

I don't remember how I got back to the hotel or why nobody stopped a man in my condition along the way. I couldn't believe the savagery I proved capable of. The anger coursing through my veins, fighting all those gangbangers to get out... All I felt was hatred for everything. Just for being born.

Stumbling to the bathroom at the Coat of Arms, I dabbed a warm wash cloth on my cuts, and then passed out.

I woke with a start. What the hell had that been about? Why had Roberto been so cryptic? Was the cops' visit about Murdock? Did the weasel sober up, get scared and make some calls? The shipment that got pinched? I felt like Gabriel, getting it from all sides.

I checked the clock. It wasn't yet 8:00 a.m., which meant I still had plenty of time to catch the fat bastard at his high-rise for his weekday departure. The campaign

kicked off in three days, this Thursday, a grand festival planned on the MCH grounds. Maybe we hadn't learned anything new from Murdock, but the confirmation meant we were on the right trail, and I wanted to keep on it.

Chapter Fifteen

I pulled onto Jackson and killed the engine. I checked my watch. The scheduled pick up time came and went. At first, I thought maybe I missed him. On weekdays, the man was a clock, never deviating from his schedule.

I waited. Time passed. I had a strange feeling sitting there, the sound of slick tires on asphalt spinning by, the heavy slate skies, the sea wind whistle racing up from the bay. I was unsettled, nervous, shaky. I reached for my bottle in the glove compartment but I was out. There are no corner packys in the Heights, and I didn't want to leave my post for fear I'd miss him, that was if I hadn't already. Morning wore into afternoon and I was about to leave, when I saw him, his bright white attire shining through the murk and drizzle. He went to the valet.

Normally the Old Man only drove himself on Sundays for his visits up north. Today must be a special occasion. He's going to visit his lovechild.

I hatched a plan to wait until he left and then go talk to the mother, or whoever was caring for the boy. I needed to find out more about this kid, the why and when and whatever else she could tell me. I wasn't relishing encountering the sort of woman who'd spread her legs for the Old Man. I could only imagine the type, but I had to try. And I'd have to find a way to keep her from telling the Old Man I'd stopped by. I wasn't sure how I'd do that last part.

As I drove, my nerves grew worse, tremors in my hands, each cigarette only adding to my anxiety.

Crossing the North Bay Bridge, three hundred feet above the sea, I gazed through the grisly mist to my right, out over the harbor to the island prison, the rough waters' high crests plowing hard against the prison's jagged rock foundation, as smoke stacks belched into a leaden sky.

Most people look at a prison and feel peace that the bad guys are locked inside, garner some sense of satisfaction from the justice behind it all, and maybe I used to too, but I didn't feel that way anymore.

I wasn't the first innocent bloke to get a rap he didn't deserve, and I wasn't going to be the last, and even the ones in there who were guilty as sin, the murderers and bank robbers, the sexual deviants and sociopath maniacs, I didn't feel good about their being in there. I felt nothing but pity for the whole damned lot of them.

Through the Rainbow Tunnel, we dropped into the Grade and it became nearly impossible to see, the fog tumbling down from the Headlands like mortar smoke, infesting the lowlands at sea level, thick and heavy as the weary day. I could just make out the Eldorado's taillights and the black of its windows. The tall sea weeds swayed along Highway 1 as we took the Mars Beach exit, looping through the fishing village. All that fog, I felt like a ghost. And my hands wouldn't stop shaking.

We traveled north on Bridgeway, the fog and weather so bad I couldn't even see the brightly colored houseboats less than fifty yards away floating in the North Bay.

Soon he was curving around the park and pulling onto Bee Street. I coasted into a fire hydrant parking space at the base of the intersection.

The Old Man exited his car. I pulled the binoculars. Another toy. This time, a robot. The screen door from the yellow and pink house flung open and the lovechild ran

out, down the steps, and like before the Old Man crouched to receive him, hefting the tyke into the air. He handed the boy his robot. The boy hopped happily.

Then I looked back up at the house. And I saw her.

She stood on the porch, dressed in a sweater and slacks. Her hair was shorter and lighter than it used to be. But even from that far away, she was still beautiful. She looked grown up. She looked like a woman.

The boy ran in circles, making his robot fly and crash against imaginary walls, the Old Man standing there like a proud papa. The boy ran into the house. The Old Man lumbered up the stairs after him.

And Zoey followed them inside.

For a long time, I sat in the car, not knowing what to do. Zoey and the Old Man? A child together? It wasn't possible. My mind went numb. I began to shiver, the back of my neck chilled with the cold sweats.

I pulled away finally and headed back into the city.

I made for the Kitten Club. I needed a drink.

Light rain had returned with the afternoon fog, following me from Seaside, and North Beach again absorbed the bright lights of a city muted, everything in danger of being submerged, swallowed for good. I couldn't recall the last time I saw the sun shine in this town.

Pulling in front, I spotted a couple cars that didn't belong. The club wasn't open.

I pulled my gat and used the side entrance.

No lights were on in the main room. Lights were on downstairs, and I could hear men talking. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but it wasn't friendly talk.

I stayed along the perimeter, inching forward. It was a foreign language. Spanish. The accent. I'd heard it before. In fact, I'd heard it a few nights earlier.

Hondurans.

Curling around the basement entrance at the foot of the well, I saw the back of a man standing guard in the hallway, outside Gabriel's door. I'd be hard pressed to get the jump on him.

Somebody was getting slapped around inside Gabriel's office. And it didn't sound like Gabriel was doing the slapping.

For all the brutality I'd proved guilty of lately, I still hadn't fired my gun. I'd thrown a lot of fists, pistol whipped a man, been shot once, but I hadn't shot anybody. I wasn't about to pop my cherry busting a cap in a man's back. But judging from the sounds, Gabriel was getting a hell of a work-over, and at that rate he wouldn't be around long. I had to move fast.

Tucking my .44 in my pants, my back to the wall, I palmed a cuff tightly around the edge of the wall. I torqued my upper body and did a slingshot, feet first, catching the Honduran squarely in the chest as he turned. I picked him up, flipped him over, crotch and neck, using him like a shield, as two more Hondurans raced out of the office toward me. Slamming forward, I took a swift hook to the ribs. I dropped to the floor, side-swiped some legs and brought my elbows down on guts, knocking the wind out. Back on his feet, the Honduran guard stood over me, whipping a gun from a shoulder holster. Before he could lower it, I shot my knee into his balls. He dropped the gun. I caught it.

I could see Gabriel in the corner of his office, slumped against the wall. I popped myself up and ran inside.

Gabriel had taken a bad beating, but he was breathing. Commotion stirred in the hallway and I fixed the gun on the doorway. But they were heading the other way, for the stairs. I started to give chase. Gabriel sank to the floor and let out a cry. I let them go.

Ten minutes and a couple glasses of cold water splashed on his face later, Gabriel was sitting up in his chair, holding an ice pack to his head.

“Why did they run?” I asked.

“Because this was just a message being sent,” Gabriel said, searching the room casually like he was trying to remember where he last set down his car keys.

If it was a wreck before, the office was now a certified disaster zone, those lovely paintings on the floor, gut sliced with a knife, sofa upturned, the bottom of which had been repeatedly stabbed, tufts of cottony billows spread over the floor like freshly fallen snow. There were empty bottles of booze on his desk, more mirror, straw, and residue. The phone was off its hook, belly up, on the ground. I couldn't tell what had been done by Gabriel's hand and what was done by the Hondurans.

I retrieved a bottle of scotch still intact and took a stiff plug. I kept drinking until my hands stopped shaking. I passed the bottle to Gabriel.

He laughed nervously, the tail of end of which left him quivering like a toddler about to cry. Then he locked on my face. “You too?”

“Cops picked me last night, dropped me off in Little Mexico. Forget about me. What did the Hondurans want?”

“We never got that far.”

I loosened my tie and took off my jacket.

He slowly stood and winced, massaging his shoulder. He came nearer and grabbed my hand. “Thanks.”

Gabriel took a deep breath, spat on his palms, and smoothed his hair in place. “I can’t do this alone,” he said. “I’m gonna set up a meeting with the Sandman. Tonight. I need you and the boys to meet with him. Take a peace offering.”

“Think it’ll do any good?”

“I’ve got to try something.”

The rains fell hard as soon as I left Gabriel and struck concrete. Once in the car, the storm erupted into a torrent.

I headed back to the Coat of Arms to clean up. I looked at myself in the mirror, my body a canvas of destruction. Bullet holes. Knife punctures. Cuts and scrapes and deep contusions coloring my flesh all shades of black and purple, red and blue.

I took a long, hot shower, letting the pulsating stream massage my overworked muscles. I dried off and then fixed a drink at the bar. I was about to call Tulane, when Gabriel rang.

“Ten p.m. tonight, the abandoned paper mill behind Cow Palace. The Sandman wasn’t happy about it, but he’ll be there. I need all of you to make the drop-off. And Collie?”

“Yeah?”

“You better pack heat. I don’t know how all this is gonna play out.”

I got dressed and went to pick up the boys.

There were the four of us, I behind the wheel, the Giant in the front seat, Petersen and Buick, scratching his stupid pictures on a notepad, in the back.

We’d been sent with some money, a peace offering to throw sand on a fire. The meeting was meant to quell tempers. But this felt more like a showdown. I checked my Special and clicked her in place.

Buick leaned forward, right behind my ear. “How come you don’t like me?”

“Because you talk too much and don’t listen enough.”

“Why should I listen?” he said. “I already know everything I need to know.”

Nineteen and already he knew everything he needed to know.

Buick flung himself back. “I need a cigarette. Who’s got a cigarette? Where is this guy? I’m ready for some action! Somebody gimme a cigarette.”

“Collie’s right. Will you calm the fuck down?” Petersen said. “You’re giving me a headache.” Petersen pulled out his pack, flicked his wrist and slid one up. The boy leaned over and greedily pinched it. The Giant passed back his lighter.

“What time’s this joker showing up?” Buick asked, hitting and holding the tobacco like he was toking a joint.

“Don’t worry about that,” Figgs said. “He’ll be here. You just stay in the car, understand?”

“Why do I got to stay in the car?”

I turned around. “Because that’s what we’re telling you to do.”

Cigarette dangling, he tried to look mean. “I know why you don’t like me, Collie.”

“And why’s that?”

“‘Cause I’m so pretty.”

He was pretty all right. Too pretty. Flowing, flaxen hair, alabaster puss like a porcelain doll, smoldering greens, he was a real heartbreaker. And that was the problem. With the ugly ones you know what you’re getting. You can’t do anything to a face when everything’s already been done to it. Petersen may’ve been getting old for this line of work, and he had a nervous disorder that could make him unbearable to be around when the heat was on, but with one of the ugliest mugs I’d ever seen—complexion like chopped beef, nose smushed down from one too many brawls, nasty harelip scar—you could count on him come throw down. Same thing with the Giant. Faces like that have character. You can count on character. This Buick was pretty, and pretty boys in this business don’t last long.

“Now, ladies,” Petersen said, “play nice.”

Buick sucked on his cig. I could feel him softly bumping his head against the rear window, like a hyperactive kid on a long car trip. Christ, he couldn’t sit still. He must’ve been a joy tit-feeding as a babe.

Car headlights spread across the open field, lighting up the makeshift dump, used as such since the mills closed down, erupted couches and springs, abandoned washer and dryer sets, stuffed black trash bags and shopping carts, hollowed out television sets and big truck tires.

The car pulled in front of ours.

Without turning off the headlights or killing the engine, four men got out. They strode forward in practiced synchronicity. I recognized the walk and the men walking it. Three of them were the same lot that picked me up outside the White Swallow.

“Showtime,” Petersen said.

Buick started to open his door but I shot him a look, so he fell back, folding his arms and snarling.

“Hey,” I said to him. “Keep an eye out. This could get ugly.”

The Giant took the middle. Petersen and I flanked him on each side. The Giant carried the satchel.

“Well, ain’t this a motley crew?” the Sandman said, lighting a smoke. In addition to the fat caterpillar mustache, the Sandman had grown rounder since the old days, the cherubic countenance of a man living fat off the hog.

His three boys had his back, hands inside jackets. Cops don’t know the meaning of the word subtle.

The Giant tossed the faded leather bag at the Sandman’s feet, kicking up old paper dust, which swirled with the tornado effect created from the fast wind rushing through two open, concrete silos.

“Gabriel said to tell you he don’t like being threatened,” the Giant said.

The Sandman gestured for one of his men to pick up the bag. “Open it.” The Sandman leered inside. He scoffed. “Gabriel don’t like being threatened?” the Sandman said. “Well, you tell Gabriel that as of this minute we are done. Through. Kaput. He burned his last favor on that crippled sonofabitch over there.”

He meant me.

The Sandman took a step closer, his boys moving with him. He adjusted his belt, a two-fisted pull, belly rising and then falling just as fast.

He stood a mere four feet from Figgs. I moved up. We all did.

Like his boys, the Sandman was dressed in civilian clothes, the middle management tweed and tie look, strictly low rent, dark ironed-on patches at the elbows. I could picture him in that get-up, taking his darlings out for a swell night on the town and an all-you-can-eat buffet at the Crab Shack, thinking that he looked sharp.

Our eyes locked. I had a good five inches on him. He only had to make the wrong move.

The Sandman dragged his attention back to Figgs. “Let me make this clear, my abnormally tall, sideshow friend. You tell Gabriel exactly what I’m telling you. And I’ll use small words so you can understand me. Gabriel doesn’t have the pull around here anymore to tell me—or anybody else in this city—how to do a goddamn thing. He’s all but through. You tell your boss, in the business world we operate under the simple premise of supply and demand—and if you’re going to demand something, you better make sure as shit you’re supplying. And that”—he thumbed disgustedly back at the satchel—“ain’t worth getting out of bed for.” The Sandman sniffed hard. “You tell Gabriel, the next time he calls me at my home, barking at me to jump at ten o’clock, when I have to get up early to greet my cunt ex-wife when she drops my girls off for my four fucking days a month, I’m going to personally stomp his Greek dick in the dirt.”

“You should watch your mouth,” I growled.

“Frankenstein’s Monster talks.” The Sandman took a step toward me. “That so?”

“Gabriel wouldn’t like hear it.”

“Get this through your head, you ugly mutant fuck. I don’t care what Gabriel likes or doesn’t like.” He slowly extracted the burning cigarette hanging from the corner of his fleshy lips, pinching it with finger and thumb, staring down at the ember. “And, Collie, you tell Gabriel one more thing.”

“What?”

“He’s nothing without the Old Man.” And with that his hand jerked.

Thinking he was throwing a fist, my right hand shot up on reflex and I caught his flicked cigarette, and lit cigarette now in hand, I delivered a stiff jab into his eye.

He covered up, screeching. I pulled my gun.

Petersen and Figgs were on the others before they had a chance to do the same.

I bopped the Sandman with the butt of my Special, on the top of his head, just to get his attention. The Sandman dropped to hand and knee. I stepped on his hand and he yelped.

Buick had run out of the car and now stood behind me. I held him back with a stiff arm.

I squatted down, firmly keeping pressure on the back of the Sandman’s hand, and told Buick to take away his piece, which he was all too happy to do.

Wind raced through the ravine. I took the bent cigarette and made like I was going to put it out on his arm but instead took a drag.

“I wouldn’t go making threats, Mr. Sandman,” I said.

“You ugly mutherfucker!”

I grabbed a tuft of hair and yanked his head back. I wanted him to see whom he was talking to. “My boss pays you a lot of money to look the other way. It’s called a

partnership. You go making threats, and it makes it seem like you don't like him any more. It makes everyone uneasy. And that's when people get hurt."

"Who do you think you're talking to? I'm the Chief—"

I crushed my heel harder, jerked his hair tighter, and he did his best not to whimper.

"After all that bastard did to you!" he cried out. "You put your life—"

I'd just about twisted his cap off when Buick snuck around me and brought down a hard heel against his jaw, and the Sandman was out, face in the dust.

I looked up at his partners. "Better get him home. Maybe when he wakes up he'll remember his manners."

"After that episode, we can sure as shit be expecting a visit," Petersen moaned, running his fingers through his frizzy clown hair.

I'd had to listen to him all the way back to the club, fretting like a nervous Nelly, all worked up about the massacre Buick and I had invited following our display. He was a housewife, not a gangster.

We'd done our job. Sort of. We'd dropped off the satchel. We relayed a message. But we'd also left the Sandman unconscious in an abandoned field in the shadows of Cow Palace, to be carried home by his boys, bruised and battered. No shots were fired. But it hadn't been pretty.

It was after hours at the Kitten Club, the last, empty vestige in what had once been an empire. It was the Kitten Club, and only the Kitten Club.

The Giant wasn't saying a word. The man stood like that palm tree in the corner that never stopped growing, limbs and roots shooting, gnarled every which way. They made quite a pair, he and that goddamn tree, both tortured and contorted.

When we got back to the club, we found Gabriel upstairs sitting alone at the bar. We gave him the skinny on our meeting with the Sandman, and he took it in stride. In fact, given his precarious mental state, he more than took it well; he was almost lighthearted about the whole affair. Petersen, however, was a wreck. It was understandable in a way. He'd split with Gabriel when war with the Old Man had been declared. Lately he could see the handwriting on the wall. So many others had already jumped ship. We were a divided house.

"Gabriel," Petersen implored, "the Sandman is not some low level pusher in the Point. We're talking the goddamn chief of police here. That hothead project of yours stuck a lit cigarette in his eye! And that other little shit practically curbed him, probably broke his jaw."

"And what would you rather they done?" Gabriel said, spinning around. "Stand there with their dicks in their hands like you? Let that fuck talk about me like I'm some pissant?"

"If the Old Man was here," Petersen muttered.

"What was that?" Gabriel said, striding up and bumping against Petersen's broad chest.

Petersen held his ground. “The Sandman isn’t gonna sit back and take this lightly. Your muscle boy over there degraded him. In front of his own men, like he was a little bitch.”

“He had it comin’.”

“Gabriel, he’s gonna come after us, and he’s gonna come hard.”

“The Sandman isn’t gonna do a goddamn thing! He’s all talk, and I’m telling you, relax, I’ll handle it. It’s a misunderstanding. He knows better than to screw with me. I have more dirt on that fuck— You let me worry about that, OK? Now go home to your cats.”

I took a seat at the bar. Buick stood smoldering beyond the pool tables, tapping a cue. He was all amped up, giddy from the attention.

I reached behind the counter and grabbed a bottle. The bourbon tasted good.

“Petersen, I said go home.”

Petersen swiped his keys off a table, and slammed out the door.

Gabriel came beside me.

“I appreciate the way you handled yourself out there tonight, Collie. You let a man like that think he can step on you, he just steps harder. I don’t know what I’d’ve done without you around here lately. You’re about the only one I can count on, the only one with any balls.”

I grunted.

“Petersen’s getting too old for this. He’s losing his stomach for the game. My mistake sending him out there. But I’m a loyal guy, y’know? You and Figgs take the kid with you next time. Just you three.”

“Sure.”

He didn't need me to tell him that Petersen wouldn't be coming back or that there wouldn't be a “next time.”

He sniffled and rubbed his nose. “You up for taking a ride with me?”

“Where to?”

“Let's go,” he said, and headed toward the door.

I picked up the bottle and followed.

He told me to drive and head for the Great Highway and the beaches.

“This city isn't what it used to be,” he said, lighting a cigarillo.

Atop California Street, I took in the tall spires and gothic churches lining the trolley path, the whole city unfurled beneath us, snaked black roads leading to a black sea.

“Different set of people moving in,” he said. “Different kind of money. This used to be a place where a man could go about his business, make a buck, have a good time without worrying about getting the squeeze.”

“It's called gentrification.”

“What?”

“Gentrification. It means bohemian gets replaced by well-to-do, Mom and Pop shops bought out by the big chains. The white collar and professional push out the no collar and working class, that kind of thing.”

“Yeah, that's what it is. Generic...”

“Gentrification.”

He didn't say anything for a while, just puffed away on his smoke. He seemed so gone. With the Old Man's stature growing, Gabriel had been made irrelevant, which for a man like Gabriel can be a bitter pill.

“Sometimes I think I should pull up stakes,” he said, “head down to Mexico. Open one of those little tourist trap bars, maybe a hotel.”

We entered the Sunset, and the fog rolled in from the ocean, draping the Burmese wholesalers and Indian restaurants with its thick coat.

“What'd'ya say? Me and you. Just blow this place. Why not?”

“I don't know, Gabriel. This is our home.”

“Home.” He spat the word funny. “I don't know what that word means anymore.”

He grew real quiet and hung his head in his lap.

“What's eating you?”

He looked up and over, a deep hurt welling in his eyes. “You know what Petersen said back there, about the Old Man and things not being right without him around? It's true. I can't do it without him. The bastard doesn't even take my phone calls anymore. His own son? Hasn't for a long time. Back in the day, when I'd tell him we needed to branch out, you know what he'd do? Laugh at me. He's been laughing at me for as long as I can remember. And look at him now. Everyone's willing to look the other way, forget where he came from. I'm the shit, the fuck-up, the pervert. They're saying he's gonna win. An elected official, my old man. Mayor of Bay City. They're coming for

me, Collie. I can feel it. When I close my eyes. When I take a shower. When I eat my breakfast. They're coming for me. And I got nowhere to run."

There were pockets in the night sky where the clouds had thoughtfully parted, revealing peppered white dots. They looked close to each other but were, in fact, a million light years away. From us, from each other, from this city.

"Truth is, Collie, the Sandman's right, too. I got nothin' left around here. I'm washed up. I haven't done anything but louse things up for a long time." He was struggling to find the right words, the liquor and drugs hitting him hard.

He leaned over and awkwardly tried to put his arm around me. It was uncomfortable, two men in a dark car like that, my driving and all.

"After everything that's happened," he said, "you're the only one I trust."

I told him that was nice to hear.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm losing my mind, like I don't know what I've become or what I'm chasing but I keep chasing it anyway." He slid back in his own seat, a gesture for which I was grateful. "You got anything to drink?"

I passed him the bottle.

We came upon the Great Highway and the world seemed to drop off its edge, the Pacific engulfing our little car in its infinite vastness.

There wasn't a soul on the road, the city and all its light fading behind us. Brown round hills and high brown grass, the fog dipping low to Pacifica and the cliffs. Cutting through the headlights, we bounced along, heading south.

I lighted a smoke. "What you said back there, about the Sandman not exacting revenge, you think that's true?"

“I don’t know. He’s got a temper. You know that. Always has. And he don’t scare easily. We’ll find out tomorrow when he wakes up with his eye swollen shut, tasting his own blood in his mouth.”

I inhaled, the smoke, the salt air, the night. “You think it’s wise to wait?”

Gabriel turned his head. He was past drunk and stoned. He was in another world. But that seemed to sober him up.

His mouth slowly upturned into a grin.

Chapter Sixteen

After visiting the Sandman in the wee hours at his Daly City home, I brought Gabriel somewhere safe. We needed some time to figure out how to play it from here.

I sure as hell couldn't go back to the Coat of Arms. I thought of heading for Tulane's, but it was late and I only needed a couple hours of sleep, somewhere I could hit the pillow and wake up with a clear head. Most of my money was back at the hotel, a few measly bills in my pocket, and I didn't want to chance running in.

I took the Fifth Street exit off 101 onto Mission, my eyes bleary from lack of rest. I was planning to crash at one of the fleabags along the strip. On Sixth I saw the *Casa Loma*. It would do as well as any of them.

I woke in the morning to the low rumble of a commuter bus caught between gears, the forced friction of metal on metal.

Sliding on my overcoat, I hit the rainy Mission Street, patting down my pockets for my keys, when something struck me. The boy, Zoey's son, and how old he was. He was small, but he could've been older. Sure, he could've been pushing seven. The math worked out. Had I been making matters more complicated than they needed to be? Like Tulane, was I letting my hatred of the Old Man cloud my judgment? Maybe the simplest answer made the most sense. It certainly made more sense than thinking Zoey would let a monster like Christos into her bed.

Reaching for my car door handle, feeling good for a change, hopeful, I was hit from out of the shadows. A sharp pin stab to the neck. My world went blinding white, and then it turned black.

I came to somewhere that smelled really nice, like expensive cigars and rare roasted meats, my vision slow to return. I was lying on my back and could spy blotchy shapes above, soft gray light filtering in from high overhead slots.

I rolled over on hands and knees and coughed a fit. I pinched my eyes, which stung like chili pepper juice had been rubbed in them. I tasted gasoline and low tide. Whatever tonic they'd loaded up in me sure packed one hell of a wallop. I thought I heard planes taking off and landing, so I gathered I had to be by the airport. Then I realized the whirring was only in my brain.

Opening my eyes, the world grew brighter. I faced a wall made entirely of glass, a high-rise view of Bay City, looking down the backs of lesser buildings to the water's edge.

I quickly discovered I wasn't alone.

Turning, I saw plenty of muscle, bodyguards, the professional kind, Wayfarers and polished shoes. They were everywhere, on the winding staircase, snacking in front of the big television, walking across the marbled floors. I recognized one as the Rat and Raven patron who'd warned me that first day about sticking my nose where it didn't belong.

He was the least of my worries, I soon realized. I had a bigger problem right in front of me.

Struggling to my feet, I came face to face with the Old Man.

As always, he was dressed all in white, with matching cane, shoes, and vest. The only splash of color: a dangling gold fob chain and a red kerchief where a heart should be. A wholly unoriginal look. The cane wasn't merely for show. The old boy was really fat. It seemed Rotunda grew more rotund by the day.

His hat was off, exposing a noggin abnormally bulbous and shiny, with waxen rolls of skin where a neck should be, like cookie batter slathered across a pan. Balancing two pudgy paws on the cane, sagging udder belly, legs spread slightly, he strained little grunts, as though he were about to defecate.

"I assume you know who I am," the Old Man said. His breathing was laborious, every syllable garbled in translation. "You should," he continued. "Been following me around long enough. Yes, Mr. Specter, I am well aware of your spying practices. Seems you fancy yourself some sort of private dick. I advise you to seek another line of work. I know you are a fan of detective stories so you should appreciate this one: you belong like a pearl onion on a banana split." He chuckled at his own joke, then wiggled his cane. "I've been keeping my eye on you, too," he said. "I must say, you seem to be doing all right for yourself, financially speaking at least, working for my son."

"Can't complain." My jugular pulsated from where I'd been stuck, sound spectrum shaky as a Wurlitzer.

"You must not be the type to hold grudges, Mr. Specter."

"You can call me Collie. And what I do or don't do is none of your goddamn business."

“Well, then, let me get to the point of our meeting so you can be on your way.” His doughy visage pinched his eyes all but shut. What remained visible was grey as frigid water. “That was a real stupid move on my boy’s part last night.”

I didn’t bother denying it. But I didn’t jump to cop to it either.

“The murder of the Chief of Police is not something that gets filed under ‘unsolved,’ if you know what I mean. Of course, for my own personal reasons, my campaign namely, I have chosen to take care of my son’s latest misguided escapade. When you open tomorrow’s edition you will read all about the unfortunate suicide of Mark Sandman, former Bay City Chief of Police, who leaves behind an ex-wife and two daughters, ages ten and twelve. Heart wrenching. But there are more where he came from. I will not, however, be put in this position anymore.”

Out the corner of my eye, I saw the Secret Service fixing theirs on me. They were there to make sure the show stayed civil.

I thought, If the Old Man had meant to snuff me, he’d have done it by now. And he wouldn’t have brought me into his nice home to get blood stains on these expensive carpets. I’d let him have his peace. Then I intended a get a few answers. This visit wasn’t getting away from me. I’d wring it out of him if need be, and those jacks had better be prepared to empty clips and reload fast if they hoped to stop me.

“Gabriel,” he continued, “has become a major liability. He’s my boy, but he’s dumb as a stump. Stupid. Always has been. Done nothing but fuck up everything he’s been handed since he was a pup. I am no longer willing to endure the ramifications of his incompetence. It has to stop. My current aspirations demand that it stops.”

“Well, chubs, I’ll be sure to tell him that.”

“I’m afraid we are beyond the talking stage. From what I understand, you and my son are very close, closer than he is with his other men. I find this interesting, considering”—he made a lazy gesture toward my face. “You’ve played into his hand all along. Really, Mr. Specter, who do you think arranged for your job on the docks with Borkowski? You do know Borkowski has been my son’s importer for a long time, no?”

“And what’s your point?” I said, trying to keep my face straight.

“I’ve been informed that Gabriel, following last night’s shenanigans, is no longer at the club or his apartment. Apparently, he’s gone into hiding. Which doesn’t surprise me. He’s a coward. After dealing with those other two buffoons, the Giant and the Redhead, I’ve come to the conclusion that they are telling the truth when they say they don’t know where he is. I am banking, Mr. Specter, that you *do* know where he is, and I am prepared to pay you handsomely if you make my problem go away.”

“Your problem?”

“Gabriel.”

“You mean, your son.”

“Yes, my son.”

I laughed. These money types are all the same. Think they can throw a little payola at your feet and you’ll dance like Bojangles.

“I would think you’d jump at the opportunity for avenging your horrible disfigurement.”

“I’ve been down that road. Gabriel told me who ordered that. You.”

“And you believed him?” He withdrew his kerchief and tamped his brow, chuckling. “So Gabriel told you it was I who ordered you maimed and imprisoned. And why did he say I did that?”

“I think you already know the story. But I’m game.” I calculated my chances of getting to the fat man before his boys put holes in me. Five feet, six shots, seven guns, I didn’t like my odds. “Because of a drug shipment. You needed a patsy or it would all come back to you. You can read all about it in the paper you own.”

“I thought you were smarter than that, Mr. Specter, to be taken in by such a ruse. I suppose this is why you spared his wretched life? I never get my hands dirty with that sort of thing. I do admit my son came to me that fateful night your once promising career was so tragically cut short, and I will admit that I told him to handle the problem however he saw fit. He created it, he could fix it. The fate of a small time lounge lizard hardly concerned me then. Just as you do not concern me now—except as far as what you can do for me.”

I scoffed. “What makes you think I’d do your dirty work?”

“Because I will pay you.”

“Your son pays me.”

“Not for long. And it is irrelevant because I can pay you more. I’m sure it will come as no secret that Gabriel is just about finished. All he has left is that titty bar and his dwindling drug business, the profits from which, I hear, go straight up his nose. Quite frankly, I’m surprised he spends what little he does have on the creature comforts for the likes of you. But I imagine, given your heinous appearance, and his role in it, he feels

somewhat guilty.” He shifted his hefty frame and grunted; a gurgle of phlegm dislodged from clogged pipes. It was enough to make you puke.

I felt for my cigarettes. I didn’t have any. He motioned to his man, and the Rat came over and offered me one of his. I clamped it with my teeth, sneering up at a sharp, expression-less face. He lighted it for me and then resumed position along the perimeter.

I drew on the cig stiffly; the nicotine hit the bloodstream, my senses sharpening a tad. The smoke wafted in the Old Man’s direction and he twitched one of his flabby paws, a tired inconvenience.

“Let me share with you a little anecdote about my boy,” the Old Man said. “Perhaps that will illuminate things for you. When he was a tyke, Gabriel was very temperamental, much like he is now, given to prolonged, violent outbursts without apparent rhyme or reason. He had a most peculiar hobby: hunting stray dogs. Lots of children, I suppose, stone the occasional bird, pin a cat by its tail, rip off butterfly wings. But what Gabriel did was quite different. He would methodically stalk his victims, these stray dogs, cornering the vermin in an alley or beneath a stoop. Then, with a lead pipe or sledgehammer, whatever blunt instrument on hand, he’d beat them to within inches of their lives, torture them, cut them, set them on fire, do unspeakable things. I’d watch him from my window, and it was admirable, the sheer brutality of his actions, although that wasn’t what I found so captivating. It was what he did *afterward* that added the macabre twist.

“When Gabriel was finished butchering these creatures and he’d see what he’d done, he’d start to cry. Like a switch had been tripped. And so he’d set about nursing these poor dogs back to health. Or at least he’d try to. Most of the mangy mutts had so

many broken bones and such severe internal bleeding, they died within hours. But that didn't deter his efforts. He'd feed them, put ointment on their burns, bandage their wounds. And something peculiar occurred with the dogs that *did* survive. Even though Gabriel has been the instrument of their torture, the stupid beasts were so grateful for the love and care he'd given them afterward that they seemed willing to forget the role he played in their tragedy in the first place. It was pathological. Both tormentor *and* redeemer. Crippled and disfigured, these dogs would follow him wherever he went. After a while, he had an army of them. An army of mutant, savage, limping beasts. And they'd defend him to the death. I'll leave you to make the connection."

"That's a cute story," I said, coughing. "Every dad should have a cute story about his son." I felt like I was going to choke, my throat closing up, muscles convulsing involuntarily. I had to keep my head straight. "So Gabriel's just about tapped?"

"Yes, Mr. Specter. Gabriel's recent string of 'set backs' has been nothing more than me protecting my interests."

"You've got nothing to worry about then. I mean, if this crock you're spewing is legit, he'll be broke and you can run the city in peace."

"Impoverishing him will solve nothing! He is an embarrassment! As long as he remains in this city, he is bound to make some noise, cause a row. I thought by giving him his own jiggle girls and dope I could keep him out of my hair. He couldn't even do that right. Last night was the final straw. No, I've made up my mind. Gabriel must be eradicated."

I'd often wondered what made a man like Gabriel the way he was. The answer was standing in front of me, in the form of a three hundred and fifty pound gargoyle,

negotiating the price on his son's head with as much invested interest as a man ordering deli meats.

"Now, you just pick a figure—"

"No dice. You want to take me out, you better make sure your boys are a good shot. 'Cause I'm getting to you first."

"I see the dog is still loyal to his master," he said softly. "I feared that might be the case. So I brought along a contingency to sweeten the pot, call it an x-factor."

"X-factor?"

"Giving you back what was taken from you."

"And how are you going to do that?" I rasped. "You can give me back my looks?"

"No."

"How about the seven years that were stolen?"

"I'm afraid I cannot go back in time."

"What then? My youthful optimism?" I chuckled. "What can you possibly give me?"

"Your voice."

His expression didn't betray a joke.

"Surgery? You don't think that was the first question I asked the doctors?"

"You're misunderstanding me. These aren't doctors you find in the prison infirmary telephone book. The sort of money required to repair what you call a voice would be beyond the means of most men. It is not, however, beyond me."

It was a bluff, a ploy, a shameless appeal to sentimentality. I was having a tough time swallowing.

“Think about it, Mr. Specter: you would be able to sing again. For the right price, there are doctors who could repair those vocal cords, give you back what was so wrongfully stolen. You are doubtful? I suppose that is understandable, having been cursed to growl like a freak among the beautiful, cursed by the cruelty of the son to whom you now blindly pledge your allegiance. Fair enough. I will arrange for a consultation with my men. Lawyers may be present. Papers signed and notarized. You may even bring your little newspaper friend, Mr. Church, if you so desire. He seems to have become something of a father figure to you.”

I reached up and felt the scar on my throat. I didn't believe this fat man. It felt thicker, more raised, like an infection spread, planter roots boring deeper. I didn't believe him at all. I couldn't swallow.

The Old Man waddled closer. “You were a wonderful singer at one time. As you so rightly point out, I cannot give you back your face, nor can I give you back the years you lost. But I can give you back your voice.” He handed me a business card. “My launch is tomorrow. I don't want this matter interfering with my campaign.” He gummed out his bloated, pale pink tongue, and I caught a whiff of his pork rind breath.

“I don't need your help, Old Man,” I said, doing everything I could to stay upright and keep breathing. “I can get my old life back without it.”

“And how are you planning to do that?” he asked, amused.

“You're forgetting I've seen the boy. How old is he? Almost seven?”

“Yes, Mr. Specter. He'll be seven in June. Your point?”

“Born about nine months after I went away?” I smirked. “I don’t know what you got on Zoey—”

He looked down on me with pity. “This is the ace you think you hold? I don’t know whether to laugh at you or cry.” He laughed. “I do hate to dash hopes for a happy ending. No, the child is not yours. Nor is he mine. He is Gabriel’s.”

My heart sunk like an anchor into my swollen gut.

He continued, matter-of-factly. “Following your arrest, that whore of a girlfriend threw herself at my boy, begging him to help you. Gabriel promised to do so on one condition, and, well, to make a long story short, they fucked and she became with child. Zoey quickly realized Gabriel had no intention of honoring his word and, discovering she was pregnant, took the pennies she’d managed to save shaking her ass and left town, scraping by for nine months and, I’m sure, hoping against hope that the child was yours. After it was born, it was clear whom the child belonged to. When the boy became sick, Zoey, out of money, came to me distraught, boo-hooing. She told me it was my grandson—and I have the blood work to prove it, lest you worry about that—so I agreed to help her, which worked out well for me in the end. It provided me with a splendid money-making opportunity. But I’m sure you know all about that.

“Now I’ve never been the sentimental sort, but I do have to tell you, Mr. Specter, in my old age, I find the notion of having a grandson quite appealing. It is clear that Gabriel will not be carrying on the family legacy.” He chortled, tried to button his jacket but, realizing it impossible, gave up. “Now don’t go blaming Gabriel about the babe. He knew nothing about it. You might feel better believing that had he known, he would’ve tried to do the right thing by her.” He laughed in short bursts, the sound of the devil

ejaculating. “This will be the last time you deal with me directly. I’m sure you can appreciate how a man such as I has to protect his image and can’t risk dealing with riff-raff such as yourself. That card is for my attorney, Roland P. Cunningham. He has been given authority to handle this matter further. You may have until six o’clock this evening to mull it over, but don’t take longer than that. I have a campaign to manage, a hospital to run, and I don’t need this messy affair distracting me.”

I was frozen, unable to move or eek a peep. My cigarette had burned all the way down to the “v” of my fingers, and I could feel it singeing my flesh, but I couldn’t let go.

“I assume you can find your way home,” the Old Man said.

I must’ve sunken to the floor because next thing I knew I felt two sets of arms lifting me up and escorting me away.

When I passed the Old Man, he took me by the arm. “Really, Collie,” he said, “don’t you think you’ve suffered enough?”

And with that, he bid me good day.

Chapter Seventeen

I blinked at the rain cutting shadows through the headlights, hard splashes on my windshield.

Everything I'd ever tried to be, a son, a lover, a musician, a man, I'd thoroughly failed at. I thought I was playing smart, thought I was staying a step ahead, but I was a chump, getting played. Always had been. Gabriel played me. The Old Man played me. Even pretty Zoey played me. I played myself. And I would always get played. Because I was gullible: as broad shouldered as an ox and every bit as stupid as one.

I replayed the broadcasts in my mental files, all the warnings I'd been issued, from men like Fenster and Tulane, and I'd dismissed their caveats like one does a Midwesterner's take on Middle Eastern conflicts, as though they couldn't possibly understand the complex mechanism that is Colin Specter. What a crock. I wasn't a mystery. I was an open book, easy to read, with predictable plot, a one-dimensional character, and nary a surprise or twist. I thought I was making my own rules. All I'd managed to make was a goddamn mess of things. Three weeks on my own on the outside and I longed for the simplicity of being told what to do again. Hell, maybe I could knock on the gates of Quentin and ask the warden for my old room back. And he'd open up his arms and say, "Hi'ya, kid, we knew you'd be back. Welcome home!"

I stuck the key in the ignition. I had a lot of questions. And only one person could answer them.

You can rehearse these moments all you want, what she'll say, what you'll say; who'll be crying and who'll be regretting, and will any love still exist? Will she recoil when she sees your face? Will she even recognize you? Every day for seven years behind bars, I played out this reunion, despite however many times I fooled myself into believing I'd never see her again. In coffee houses and bars, on airplanes or in beachfront homes with an amazing view of the sunset, perhaps a chance meeting under the Eiffel Tower and the big stars blinking brightly above Paris. It didn't matter. In my mind, it was always tender and it was always heartfelt, and, in the end, it was pointless. Because there's no preparation for something like that.

As I crossed the North Bay Bridge, rain mercifully taking a break, my insides wrecked, I knew nothing in my life would ever be the same after this day. I was trading in the beauty of illusion for the concrete answers I needed. And at that moment, even though I knew I was getting the short end, it was the only move I could make.

Walking toward her door, had I not known all the sordid details, I might've said she'd done all right for herself. Pretty little neighborhood in Seaside, far from where she'd come, community watch signs and neatly manicured lawns. But just knowing the fat man had a hand in it made me nauseated.

I prepared myself for all sorts of reactions when she opened the door. If she cried. If she screamed. If she fell into my arms. I'd run the gamut of six hundred and twelve variations.

The one thing I hadn't anticipated was for the boy to answer the door. And for what little hope I'd held onto to be ripped away with one look in his black eyes. I didn't need to check any blood work; there was no doubt who his father was.

I imagined seeing a scared, hulking thing like me would give any child nightmares, so I crouched down to eye level.

“Hey, little man,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Leo.”

“That’s my name, too. My middle name, I mean. It’s short for—never mind, I’m a friend of your mother’s. Is she home?”

He darted down the hallway, calling her with the enthusiasm only a child could muster for such an unexpected guest.

My hands shook. At first I blamed nerves. Then I realized I hadn’t had a drink since last night. Had it really come to that?

Some neighborhood boys peddled by on their bicycles. For them, it was just another dreary winter day in the North Bay.

Zoey came from down the hall, drying her hands with a dish towel. It only took a moment and then she stutter-stepped, covered her mouth, and I saw her eyes tear up.

All this time, you think I would’ve come up with something to say, but all I could do was shrug.

She wrapped her arms around me and hung on tightly. I held her for as long as I could, lifting the tiny thing off the ground in my big arms. It felt wonderful to have her so close, to smell her hair again, but to hold on any longer, I wouldn’t be able to do what had to be done.

So I set her down, and she wiped her eyes. She kept shaking her head, biting her lip and smiling a sad smile. She couldn’t say anything either. She’d open her mouth but then stop, until finally she took me by the hand and led me inside to the kitchen.

Leo was running around with his airplane and robot, soaring and attacking, making sputtering sounds. He stopped when he saw me inside his house, suddenly turning shy and moving to his mother's side.

"Who's that?" I heard him whisper.

"That's my friend, Colin," she said, bending down. "We were friends a long time ago, before you were born." She stole a glance up at me. "He's grown up a lot since then." She laughed an uneasy laugh, then licked her thumb and wiped a smudge of dirt from his cheek. She pulled a coat from a hook. "Why don't you play outside so mommy and her friend can talk?"

He slid the glass door and ran out onto the porch, descending into the backyard.

"Cute boy," I rasped. I forgot how my voice was going to sound.

She didn't show disgust over my face. At least she acted like it wasn't repulsive. This, she couldn't hide.

"Aw, it's not so bad," I growled. "You get used to it. It's got a certain Delta charm, don't you think?"

She quickly spun and pretended to be looking for something in the cupboard, but I knew she was crying. I didn't want to make it any harder on her, so I let her pretend.

It was a nice home. Hardwood floors. Quaint but cozy. A big kitchen window looked out over a backyard filled with wildflowers and a garden, leading to a small shack at the back of the property. In the middle stood a large waterless birdbath.

Zoey stopped fiddling with the glasses or whatever in the cupboard and spun and leaned against the counter. She looked overwhelmed.

I eased my coat off and draped it over the chair, hand tremors causing the shoulder to slip off. “You have anything to drink?”

“Sure. What would you like? Water? Juice?”

“No. Drink-drink.”

She cocked her head. “You always hated liquor.”

“*No*, I was just underage. I didn’t want to break the law.” That at least made her smile.

“I think someone brought a bottle of scotch a while back. Somewhere around here...” Her voice faded as she entered the adjoining pantry.

I watched her reach up and dig between various canned goods on a top shelf, retrieving a dark green bottle. She returned with it and a glass. The scotch was covered in dust and unopened. She set them down and took a chair, apprehensively, across from me.

I cracked the seal and poured a slug. Then another. Until my hands stopped shaking.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“For what?”

“For not knowing what to say or how to act. For never coming to see you. For everything, I guess.”

“There’s no need to apologize. I understood. It looked bad for me. I was going away for a long time. I was damaged goods—”

“Is that what you thought? Why you pled out instead of fighting the charges? I would’ve waited forever for you, and I didn’t care about a couple scars. That wasn’t it.

After your arrest, things just got so crazy. The police, and Gabriel, and I couldn't get in to see you, and I didn't have anywhere to turn, and then I found out—" She stopped.

"That you were pregnant."

She gnawed on her bottom lip, eye's welling back up.

"And that the baby was Gabriel's."

"I only went back to the club that night to get him to help you. You have to believe me. I *pleaded*. But he wouldn't. He said they'd keep you in there for fifty years, that you'd *die* behind bars, unless I—"

"I know."

She wiped her eyes. "I had to get out of the city after that. I couldn't have Gabriel find out. I wanted to get in touch with you. I did. But by then you were gone, and I had a son to raise. *That's* why I couldn't wait, why I never came. When I found out Leo was sick, I needed Cephalus's help. And by then so much time had gone by, my life was so different, and you were in there...and I thought it best if I let you be."

I told her it was OK. And she talked about being a mother, how one's life takes on different priorities, how Leo was the center of her world now. I said I'm sure she made a wonderful mom.

Then the conversation dried up, and we sat in silence, and she looked away from me, and I knew it had nothing to do with any scars.

What had I come for? To find out that the child was Gabriel's? Once the Old Man said it, I knew it was true, in my heart, despite what I wanted to believe. To learn why she disappeared? The Old Man had answered that, as well. To rehash the past? I'd done too of that much already. And in those rebroadcasts, I was always the victim.

I might've said I accepted my role in it all, the record contract and the affair, the arrogance and vanity behind it, the lives I'd affected with my complete disregard for anything but myself and what I wanted. But I hadn't accepted a goddamn thing. I'd been laying the blame anywhere I could, and I'd used what happened to me as an excuse to become something I was ashamed of. I wanted to do the right thing for once. I could never get back to that boy seven years ago to shake some sense into him. But I could do something *now*. And after my morning meeting, I knew there was only one way to get there, regardless of how unpleasant it might be.

"I've spent the last three weeks watching his every move," I said.

She looked at me, brows clipped. "Whose every move?"

"The Old Man's."

"I'd hoped he was just paranoid," she said softly, as if to herself. "Why on earth are you following Cephalus?"

"It's complicated."

"Maybe you could *uncomplicate* it for me. He came by here yesterday, y'know."

"I know. I was down the block."

She arose, frenzied. "He usually only shows on the weekend. So I knew something was wrong the minute he pulled up. He storms in and starts screaming at me, saying that I better tell my *boyfriend* to stop playing private investigator or I'm gonna be sorry, and I thought he was crazy, why on earth would Collie be following you around? Now you tell me that he was *right*?" Zoey laughed. But it wasn't a happy laugh.

So I explained it all. The job. Tulane. The offer to get my voice restored in exchange for killing Gabriel, who, despite everything, I'd come to consider a friend.

“Why are you messing around with Cephalus?” Zoey said.

“I’m not scared of the Old Man. I have something he wants, something he needs. Desperately. I am in the position to dictate terms, not him.”

“Cephalus Christos is not someone who gets told what to do. *He* does the telling.”

“Not this time.”

“And what is it you plan to do, exactly?”

“Bring him face-to-face with what he wants most.”

“Which is?”

“His past erased.”

“Jesus, Collie, you sound like one of those detective stories you used to read. You just said you consider Gabriel a friend.”

“I do consider him a friend. Sort of. It’s hard to explain what Gabriel and I are.”

“And you could live with betraying that?”

“For my sake—and yours? Yes. What other choice is there?”

She took a seat again and schooched closer, taking my hands in hers. “I appreciate the offer. I do. But you’re being terribly naïve if you think you can manhandle Cephalus. Any deal you make with him, he won’t think twice going back on once he has what he wants. And then where’s that leave you? *Me?*” She petted my head, like I were a big stupid dog. “That’s my Collie, always trying to be a hero.”

I pushed her hands away. “I’m no hero, that’s understood. I made the mistake of overestimating myself seven years ago. I’m not going to make it again.”

“You’re in over your head,” she said. “Roberto called me the other night to say he’d seen you thrown into the back of a car. It was the first I heard you were even out of prison!” Zoey closed her eyes, as though disgusted. “I hate being the Old Man’s messenger, but I’ll relay his message just the same: stop snooping or it’s going to cost us. Both.”

“He says he wants me to stop ‘snooping’?”

“He wants you to stop following him! He was threatening me, ordering me to tell you to knock it off. I told him I hadn’t even *seen* you!”

“The Old Man’s not worried about my following him. It’s the hospital. We’ve been scratching the surface and it’s making him nervous.”

“The MCH? You’ve been snooping around *his hospital*? No wonder why he’s pissed. Jesus, Collie! You’re not a private investigator! You’re a singer! What is it you expect to find?”

“The place isn’t what it seems. The Old Man has never done anything for anybody—unless there was something in it for him. The hospital, what he’s doing with you, it’s no different. He keeps you locked up and dependant, the same as if you were in Quentin yourself.”

“He’s keeping my son alive! He’s made it so I can stay home and raise Leo, so I can home-school him, buy him clothes, get him his medicine, keep him safe. I know about Cephalus’s past. But you’re wrong about this one.”

“I’m *not* wrong. What do you think happens when Leo gets older? Where will you be then? The Old Man wants another shot. He told me as much. He wants another crack at raising an heir. Leo’s his flesh and blood and you’re his mother, so sure, he’s

helping you out. For now. It's not like he hurts for money. But don't kid yourself: he plans on raising that boy. And you've seen the job he did with Gabriel."

Zoey looked exasperated. "What is it you want from me? You want me to pack up, move away, work three minimum wage jobs to pay our bills and get Leo his medicine? No thank you. I don't know why the Old Man started that hospital. But I'm not naïve. I'm sure for him it's just another business opportunity. But he *is* doing good. I know it kills you to admit that. But it happens all the time. Rich people can make their money and still be providing a service to the community. Those kids are sick and have nobody else to take care of them. So what if the Old Man's making money off it? He is *still* helping people."

"Money off orphans, wards of the state, the poor? C'mon, Zo'. The man ruled an empire worth a lot more than he gets from welfare cases and social insurance."

"I don't know how the hospital business works, Collie. And I don't particularly care."

"You should. I've spoken with Murdock."

"Dr. Murdock? Leo's old doctor?"

"Yes, the same Dr. Murdock who got fired from his post at the MCH. And he had a lot to tell Tulane and me."

"Like what?"

"Like the Old Man opened the research center to give pain medications to kids."

"It's what they do in hospitals. They give sick people medicine."

"Not like this. Murdock said he caught the Old Man increasing dosages, without a doctor's consent, and when Murdock pointed it out, he got canned. I *know* the Old

Man. I know his son. I know that family. Something is going on at that hospital. And I'm going to find out what. I've sat in that lobby, watched those kids get wheeled around. This one nurse in particular, this red-haired, cold-as-ice nurse, she wheels these kids into that center and when they come back they are all sedated—”

“Red-haired nurse?” Zoey repeated. Her face lost its hue, her eyes adopting that faraway look, like when unsettling thoughts unexpectedly return to the mind. Then she sprang up and told me to hang on, leaving me alone in that kitchen, and I watched the boy play in the backyard with his airplane and robot.

Zoey returned a couple minutes later, holding something small in her hand. She placed a tiny vial on the table.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

I picked it up, shook it gently, clear liquid rolling up the walls inside.

“When you mentioned the red-haired nurse... A few weeks ago, I brought Leo in for his regular injection. It had been a crazy morning and I was running late. I threw on a pair of sweats and an old jacket, sneakers, racing out the door. My hair was a rat’s nest. I looked like a homeless person.”

“I’m sure you looked lovely.”

“You’re not listening. I looked terrible. I’m telling you this because of what happened at the hospital. Normally, Cephalus goes with us when Leo gets his shots. This day he was busy giving an interview for a story in the *Oracle*, some humanitarian award they were giving him.”

“I read it.”

“Anyway, when I walk into the lobby, this *red-haired nurse* grabs Leo and sticks him in a wheelchair, doesn’t even say a word to me, and whisks Leo down the hall and into the research center. We *were* late. Leo starts crying. I’m always with him for his shots. We never get them in the research center, though. So I run after her, asking what’s going on. She takes Leo down two or three long corridors, and I’m chasing and yelling at her, but she doesn’t even look back at me. She stops at a door and unlocks it, but the door is heavy and before I can catch it, it closes. I start screaming. Maybe thirty seconds go by before the Old Man comes huffing down the hall, pounding on the door for her to open up. And when she does, there’s a needle and a vial on the table. The Old Man goes ballistic, snatches the vial and chucks it in the trash. He yanks the red-haired nurse out into the hallway, leaving me standing in the doorway.

“While he’s busy chewing her out, I instinctively reached down and picked the vial from the trash. I wanted to see what he was so angry about. I stuck it in my pocket. The Old Man came back and said to follow him. We got Leo’s shot and drove home.”

The vial was unmarked. “What do you think it is?”

“I told you, I don’t know. I don’t even know why I held onto it. It was such a weird day. I hadn’t had a good night’s sleep, and it was right around the time the rains started, and I don’t know. I held on to it.”

I turned it around in my fingers. “Mind if I keep this?”

“I’d like to know what that woman was trying to give my son.”

I stuffed the vial in my shirt pocket and grabbed my coat. “I’ll let you know when I find out.” I took her hand. “You can trust me.”

She smiled that sad smile again. “I wouldn’t be giving it to you if I didn’t.”

Chapter Eighteen

I sped along the Richmond Causeway to the East Bay to see Murdock, hoping he might be able to tell me what was in the vial. Of course, I was taking a chance. Something had disrupted the Old Man's routine, and I couldn't be sure of the order of events. The offer might've been legit, a changing of priorities, or a stall tactic. The Old Man's warning could've been a coincidence, the result of a phone call or simply being spotted in the wrong part of town. It could've been Murdock hedging his bets. This last one concerned me the most. But I was operating under the belief the doctor would want to steer clear of the Old Man. Either way, I needed his help, and I knew getting it wouldn't be easy. After he sobered up, having spilled all he did, I figured I'd be the last person he'd want to see. And I was right.

"Are you out of your mind?!" Murdock screamed, bursting into the waiting room after I finally convinced an orderly to call him out.

"Sorry, doc," I said, "but I have to speak with you."

"Well, *I* don't want to speak with *you!*"

The porky orderly grabbed my arm. "You heard the doc. Let's go."

I yanked my arm away. "Listen, Murdock, I have something you're going to want to take a look at."

"Whatever you have, I don't want to know about it. If the Old Man finds out I'm even talking to you, I'm through!"

I extracted the vial from my pocket. “This was taken from the Old Man’s lab. They’re giving it to the kids. I think something is fishy about it. I just need to know what it is, and then I’ll leave you alone.”

“You want me to call the cops?” the orderly asked.

Murdock looked exasperatingly at me, then to my hand and the vial. Finally he shook his head. “No. Everything’s all right.”

In his office, I handed Murdock the vial.

He pinched the top and bottom, inspecting it. “How did you say you got this?”

“A patient at the hospital. Case of mistaken identity. She was somewhere she shouldn’t have been.”

Murdock tilted the vial up in the air, swished around the contents. “And this is *exactly* what it came in”

I nodded.

“Strange that it wouldn’t have a label on it,” Murdock said.

“That’s what I thought.”

The doctor sighed heavily. “Well, I can send it out to our lab. We’ll get the results by the end of the day.”

“Any way to get those results faster?”

Murdock’s face soured.

“Sorry, doc. But things are moving quickly and I’d like to know what I’m holding onto.”

“I can put a rush on it,” he said. “But it’s still going to take a couple hours. That’s the best I can do.”

I called Tulane and told him to catch a cab to Murdock’s, that I’d explain everything when he got there.

About an hour later, I met Tulane’s cab in the parking lot.

As soon as he stepped out, he started in, saying how he’d been worried sick about me, calling my hotel room all day and night. Of course he’d heard about the Sandman suicide and, knowing what he knew about Gabriel’s relationship with the crooked cop, it wasn’t tough to piece together the truth. That had been his job at one time, after all.

Tulane asked a lot of questions. I felt it only right I give him straight answers. He was the one guy who’d been square with me since I got out, the one guy who seemed genuinely concerned about my future. He might’ve been the only real friend I had.

“You look terrible, Collie. You could be bleeding inside. You really ought to see a doctor.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are *not* fine. The Old Man is going to expect an answer, and if it is not one he likes, then he has no use for you.”

“Then I’ll tell him I’ll do it. What’s one more murder?”

“You’re a lot of things, Collie, but you’re not a killer.”

“I got some news for you: the Sandman hit wasn’t Gabriel’s idea.”

“Did you pull the trigger?” Before I could answer, he held up a hand. “Wait, I don’t want to know. And it doesn’t make a damned bit of difference if you did.”

“It does in the eyes of God.”

“In the cases of men like Sandman, I have a feeling God looks the other way.”

“He had two daughters.”

“And don’t you think for one moment they aren’t better off without him. The man terrorized this city. He terrorized *you*. It’s evil gets as evil does, as far as I’m concerned. And at that I consider the matter closed. No one will be crying for the untimely departure of Mark Sandman, I can promise you that. We have bigger problems to deal with.”

“Why do you care so much what happens to me?”

“Because you’re my friend. And right now you are lost and need some guiding.”

I chuckled at the thought. “A lost and misguided monster.”

“You’re not a monster. I told you before, what you see in the mirror isn’t what the world sees. Men like Sandman and Gabriel and Cephalus use that against you. What you need to heal, son, I’m afraid isn’t on the outside.” He said it so tenderly, so sadly, it made me want to cry. “Listen to me, we need to come up with a plan for you. I was able to get my hands on an advanced copy of the Old Man’s speech for tomorrow’s launch. He is expanding that hospital of his, statewide. He’s got big plans, and he is not going to let his son—or you—stand in his way. Whatever you do, agree to help the Old Man or not, as soon as Gabriel is dead, so are you.”

“I’m as good as dead now.”

“No, you are not. You are living and breathing and you feel. You feel too much, in fact, despite however much you try to kill the pain with your booze and juvenile antics.” He reached for my hand, speaking softer. “I have some friends in LA. They are

good people; they can be trusted. I want you to hop the first train out of here and don't look back. This town isn't a home to you anymore."

"You want me to run?"

"I want you to cut your losses."

"And let Gabriel and the Old Man get away with it?"

"I've got some news for you. There are Cephaluses and Gabriels in every city, all over the world. Always will be. Men who are meaner and nastier than you can ever dream of being. You can grow as tall as a redwood, as powerful as an earthquake, and they'll still beat you. Because, loathe though you may be to admit it, you *do* care, you *do* want to do the right thing. To do wrong you must fight against your very nature. The wicked prey upon that. You stay in the middle of this war and you will become a casualty. It's as simple as that." Then he paused, taking a gander around and realizing where we were. "What are we doing at Murdock's, by the way? I can't imagine the doctor will be too happy to see us."

So I told him about going to see Zoey after my meeting with the Old Man, and about the red-haired nurse. I showed him the vial.

"What do you think it is?" Tulane asked.

"I don't know. But whatever it is made the Old Man very nervous according to Zoey. I had Murdock draw up a sample to send out to his lab. I didn't want to let it out of my hands. Not that I don't trust the doc. We should have the results shortly."

Back inside Murdock's office, the doctor returned holding a file. He looked flabbergasted.

“What was in the vial?” I asked.

“Phenatyl,” Murdock said, almost disbelievingly. “A highly concentrated opiate, basically a synthesized form of heroin. About eighty times as strong as morphine. Which is why it is always diluted, made into a powder or gel. It’s an analgesic. Used for heart operations, those sorts of procedures. *Extreme* cases of pain management. What was in the vial was *undiluted*. It’s not something you’d give to children.”

Tulane turned to me, quizzically. “This nurse must’ve been getting ready to dilute it then. Any child injected with something that strong would surely die.”

“Not necessarily,” Murdock said, holding up a bony finger.

“You just said the drug is much stronger than morphine. How could it not kill a child?”

“Opiates are tricky,” Murdock said. “Most overdoses occur when a user experiences a sharp increase in purity.”

Tulane looked befuddled.

Murdock continued. “Normally street heroin is around, say, fourteen percent pure; the rest is material they use to cut it with, anything from aspirin to baby laxative—filler. Now, every once in a while a batch will be insufficiently cut, and when that is passed along to the street, addicts receive something much stronger than they’re used to and it’s a shock; respiratory systems shut down, hearts seize up, and they die.”

“And these are *adult* users you’re talking about,” Tulane said.

“Right, but like I said, it isn’t the drug that kills them; it’s the drastic increase in the drug’s purity. Let’s put it this way: if the same user were to be gradually exposed, dosages increased incrementally, over time, that same fatal dose wouldn’t necessarily kill

them. The body develops a tolerance quickly to opiates, which is why addicts continually have to use more and more to achieve the same effect. Heroin, morphine, these street drugs kill because of the impurities in them, or for the reasons I just mentioned. Opiates themselves, in pure form, if administered correctly, monitored, they aren't that harmful. The user gets constipated, and of course addiction occurs almost instantaneously, but basically it's the lifestyle, the lack of proper nutrition, the drastic measures addicts take to procure the drug that leads to junkies looking the way they do."

"And this phenatyl works the same as heroin?" Tulane asked.

"Sort of," Murdock replied. "There isn't that sharp, euphoric high. It's more of a prolonged sedation. Users might appear more stoned than anything else."

"Which is exactly what those kids look like coming back from the research center," I said.

"But what would the Old Man have to gain pumping this stuff into kids?" Tulane asked, butting in. "I hate to be the devil's advocate. Sure he's got an endless supply of test subjects, and half of these kids are perfect candidates for getting addicted, but getting a bunch of kids with welfare insurance strung out doesn't seem like a terribly great money maker in this new respectable line he's in."

"But that's it," I said.

Tulane and Murdock shifted their gazes to me.

"Don't you see? The Old Man still has all his old contacts, channels. The man peddled dope for years. Who better to push a new super drug? Think about it. He's found a way to eliminate the middle man. He doesn't have to broker meetings with Hondurans, doesn't have to deal with suppliers. He *is* the supplier. And it's virtually one

hundred percent profit. *And* it's legit now. Nobody is going to question a children's hospital, especially not when the guy running it has become the toast of the town. He doesn't have to buy the ingredients on the black market. He's got all the paperwork, the licenses to buy the chemicals. It's a hospital, after all. As long as they stay on top of it, do what Murdock is saying, gradual increases, monitoring, the Old Man can build the perfect beast. All he'd have to do is manipulate the paperwork so that the FDA or whoever doesn't get suspicious, but, hell, how hard could that be with the team he has? He makes the drug, tests the drug, and then peddles it out the back door." The Old Man wasn't pushing Gabriel out of the drug business because he was an embarrassment to his campaign; he wanted Gabriel out because he didn't want the competition.

Murdock wagged his finger. "You may be onto something there. We've had a rash of patients lately who've tested positive for opiates, but they aren't responding to the usual treatment. It's like they're impervious. We keep upping their doses, but they keep complaining of still being sick. I didn't think much of it because junkies usually want more, but it's been happening *so often*. If that—" he pointed to the vial I held—"were being turned into powder and peddled on the street—"

I remembered something. "When I was on Kearny the other day, a dealer came up to me, boasting about having some really strong stuff—*deadly* stuff."

"Overdoses *have* been up," Murdock said, "all over the Bay Area, not that that is exactly front page news."

"It adds up," I said. "But we need proof."

“The police must’ve made seizures,” Murdock said. “They’re bound to have some in evidence. Get your hands on that and we can run some more tests, compare it to what we have here.”

“Yeah, except the Old Man has every crooked Bay City cop in his pocket,” I said. “And it’s not like we can waltz into an East Bay precinct and ask to see the evidence room.”

Tulane grimaced. “So what do we do?”

“Only thing we can do,” I said. “We go to the source.” I looked at Murdock. “What about you, doc? You in?”

Murdock took a moment to deliberate. “I can’t fathom somebody doing this to children. And these patients of mine have a hard enough time without someone like the Old Man making it harder.” He leaned forward in his chair. “Whatever you two need me to do, I’m in. I maybe legally can’t talk about my time at the hospital, but you get your hands on the evidence, and I sure as hell can be your medical expert about what’s going on there now. I’d love nothing more than to blow the whistle on the fat prick.”

Tulane and I headed back into the city.

“I knew it,” he said. “A tiger that vicious doesn’t change his stripes.”

I lighted a cigarette, stewing. “Y’know, when I came out of the joint, Tulane, I thought I’d sunk as low as a man could sink. You’re right: Gabriel is slicker than I am. He spun stories about how the Old Man called the shots, how the Old Man was my enemy. It was enough to get inside my head, buy him some time.

“When that crook Borkowski tried to swindle me, I took it all out on him and his kid, so now I have the cops after me. So I tell Gabriel I’ll take his job offer, and I’ll bide *my* time till I can figure out something better.

“Only I don’t. Because I have nowhere to go. I’m feeling worthless, ugly, unable to avenge my own murder, might as well get paid, right?”

“But a funny thing happened on that ride. With every man I sent to the floor writhing in pain and sniveling, I discovered I enjoyed it. It’s rotten to admit but I did. It was the exact opposite of being a singer. Instead of delivering beauty, I stripped it all away, leaving only hurt in its wake. With every pat on the head, all that money coming in, the power that went along with the post, it was one hell of a high.”

I flicked my smoke out the window into the lashing wind and rain. “When all this shit with the Old Man starts coming to a head, Gabriel’s falling apart, leaning on me, and like a good dog, I defend him.” I spat these last words. “I took his handouts, Tulane, and

I took his blood money because I felt like I didn't deserve anything better. Well, not anymore. You know what they call revenge in the joint?"

"What?"

"Black pudding. And they say ain't nothin' taste sweeter. I'm *owed* a taste. Gabriel wants to point fingers at the Old Man, the Old Man at Gabriel, let them. Way I see it, they're both guilty as hell, for what they did to me and to everyone else. I'm no saint, and maybe one day somebody comes gunning for me, and when they do, I'll be waiting. But right now I say it's time those two paid back their debt."

Tulane let go a whoop and slapped an open palm on the dash. "That's more like it, boy! Glad to see you're finally coming around." He grinned, ear to ear. "Let's take stock of our situation. What do we have working for us?"

"You're a washed up newspaperman. I'm an ex-con built like a truck who's good with his mitts. We have some very incriminating evidence and an offer on the table. We have one strung-out son on the verge of a mental breakdown in hiding, and only I know where he is. The real question is what we're up *against*: the biggest cheese of them all: Cephalus Christos, the Old Man, who, for all intents and purposes, owns this town, with full backing of the BCPD. He makes up the news before it happens and prints it in the newspaper he owns. The public believes he's a swell guy, and when he's not feasting with the glitterati or announcing intentions to run for office, he spends his free time housing and healing orphans."

"Pretty grim when you put it like that."

We looked at each other, trying to suppress a smile, and then burst out laughing.

I laughed harder than I'd laughed in a long time.

We discussed plans.

Back in Bay City, I abandoned the car on a side street south of market, and we split up to pursue different ends, agreeing to meet up again at nine, downtown.

He had a favor to call in. I had to call Zoey and tell her what I'd learned about the hospital.

Then I had a deal to accept.

"Mr. Christos told me I could be expecting you," said Roland P. Cunningham, the Old Man's attorney. He gazed at his watch. "Although we were growing rather impatient. The offer was about to be rescinded."

We were in a well-lit, spacious office, high in the 101 Davis Building.

"You can drop the strong arm," I said. "You're forgetting, only I know where he is. Gabriel may be down, but he's not out."

"Very well, Mr. Specter. No need to go through this charade." Cunningham flashed a grin. He was a smooth one, could've been a politician himself. He reached into his desk, extracted a folder, leafed through and located a contract, and slid it over to me, poking a spastic finger at the legalese. "Everything's here. The doctor's name—"

"That isn't necessary. I'll trust the Old Man to keep his end of the bargain when the job is done."

"Very well. You have his word." Cunningham slid off his spectacles. "And when can I tell Mr. Christos he can expect delivery on your end?"

"Tell the Old Man he can expect a worry-free campaign launch tomorrow."

I made a quick pit stop at the Coat of Arms to pick up some cash. I knew that once I left Cunningham's I'd probably have a tail.

Leaving the Arms, I took my time walking a few blocks, stopping at a corner pub.

Inside, I asked the barkeep for a bourbon and to use the phone. I called Figgs to set up a meeting with him and Petersen for later on, and slid the phone back.

A minute went by and I spied a couple Joes follow me in. They sat by the door. They pretended not to notice me, and I pretended not to notice them. I savored another cocktail or two. Then I went to use the head.

Stay in the can too long, they think you gave them the slip. So the first one comes in. When he doesn't come back out, the other comes looking.

I used the back door. When I was sure I was alone, I caught a taxi for the Castro.

Not quite eight o'clock and the show hadn't started yet at the White Swallow, the houselights still up. I wasn't three feet into the club when the burly mustached man got in my face. I held up my hands, making it clear I wasn't there to start any trouble. I'm not sure my jaw could've taken another punch.

I asked if I could buy him a drink. It took a minute but we made our peace.

He brought me to Roberto, who was getting dolled up in the dressing room.

"I thought I told you to leave Zoey be," Roberto said curtly when he saw me in the mirror, which was lined with bright white bulbs and glossy photos of Judy Garland.

"Just answer one question for me," I said.

He continued to gaze in the mirror through mascara-slathered eyes, gently applying rouge. "What?"

"Can you play a nurse?"

Tulane and I met up at nine in the alley on Jesse, a few blocks north of the *Oracle* building on 5th and Mission, facing east through the slim clearing of Annie Street.

“That’s him,” Tulane said.

Tulane and I waited a few, then headed down Annie, swinging a left onto Aldrich and ducking into a tiny tavern called Hannos.

“I think it’s best if I talk to him alone,” Tulane said. “I’m sure you can understand if he’s a little skittish.”

No other customers were in the bar. I grabbed a stool at the counter, checking the door in-between peering over my shoulder at Tulane, who’d sat down with a slender young man dressed conservatively in a turtleneck under a sweater, with neatly cropped hair, at a table in the back.

Tulane casually passed along a slip of paper, which the man picked up without a word, slipping it inside his breast pocket. The man collected his coat and walked past me without paying heed and out the door.

Tulane grabbed my elbow at the bar.

On the street, I turned to Tulane. “What’s his name again?”

“Thomas Bowler. We worked together briefly, just as my time was coming to an end. I bailed him out of a jam once. He’s an honest, dedicated journalist. I know he’s as fed up with what has happened at the paper as I.”

“So he’ll be there?”

“He’ll be there. And he’s going to get the word to some folks who’ll want to be there, as well.”

Trudging through the fog and murk, I entered the dregs of Chinatown.

Little Buddha is an old time bar, the kind you don't find much anymore, in the city or anywhere else. Maybe in old LA or Hell's Kitchen. But as far as Bay City goes, there's the 500 Club and Bruno's in the Mission, a couple others maybe, places where the drinks are cold, the bar is dark, and rubbing elbows isn't on the menu. But like bohemia in this town, such bars were becoming a dying breed.

I ducked inside, recalling the last time I'd been there, that fresh-faced kid whose future seemed so bright. For the first time in a long time, I didn't miss him so much.

Figgs, Petersen, and the kid were already there, gathered around a scarred table at the rear, stained purple lamp, bulb flickering dimly, hanging overhead.

"I thought I told you not to bring him," I said to Figgs.

"He was with Petersen."

Buick glowered at me.

I checked the door. "You're certain you weren't tailed?"

"Yes, I'm certain," Figgs said.

"What's going on, Collie?" Petersen asked. "Your face looks like it's been used for batting practice."

"I'm fine. Listen, I want you guys to clear out of town for a while. Something big is going down, and when it does anybody associated with Gabriel is going to be a target."

"You didn't want me to know that?" Buick snapped.

"The message would've been relayed, kid. Relax."

"You can't tell us what this 'something' is?" Figgs asked.

“For your own good? No.”

“But it involves the Old Man?” Petersen said.

I didn’t respond.

“He had his boys corral me and the Giant earlier this morning,” Petersen said.

“They wanted to know where Gabriel is. They tore the club apart looking for him.”

Petersen paused. “Is he OK?”

I returned a nod.

“Collie, you don’t want to tell us the particulars, that’s fine,” Figgs said. “We trust you to handle this right. But going up against the Old Man alone is a suicide mission.”

“You know I’ve been critical of Gabriel,” Petersen interjected, “but that don’t mean I don’t still got his back. There’s no love lost between us and the Old Man. Me and the Giant here made a decision a while ago to follow this to the end, y’know? We’re not about to run now.”

I looked at all three of them. Buick still had a choice. He was young enough that if someone could shake some sense into his thick skull, he could go off and draw his pictures in peace, maybe do something with his life. For Figgs and Petersen, this was all they knew. This *was* their life.

“If you’re takin’ on the Old Man,” Figgs said, “we want to help.” He looked at the other two, who both nodded. “You *need* our help. We won’t have it any other way.”

“OK,” I said. “Let’s just say there’s going to be an ambush.”

Chapter Twenty-One

“And you never told the Old Man about it?”

“No, I only showed it to you, that one night, remember? We had a good time that night, didn’t we? Like a couple pirates.”

“And you got everything you need down there, enough to hold you over a few?”

“Food. Booze. Some magazines. I still go down there sometimes when I want to hide. It’s like a bomb shelter.”

“All right. That’s the plan, then. You hole up there while I scope things out. You don’t leave until I come back for you. Understand? We just took out the Chief of Police. This isn’t going to be swept under the rug, Gabriel. The club is the first place they’ll look, and when they don’t find you, I imagine they’ll bust the joint up pretty good, which makes it probably the safest place for you to be. Stay put. Got it?”

“Sure, yeah. I mean, you’re gonna—”

“Don’t worry. I’ll come back for you. Promise.”

“Thanks, Collie.”

Around midnight, after having met with Figgs, Petersen, and the kid at Little Buddha, I slinked along Chinatown. Interior yellow lights shone on Peking ducks hanging from hooks, illumining the onion-skinned, late night customers huddled over bowls of egg drop soups like carefully guarded secrets.

In North Beach, I got off the main drag and ducked onto Saroyan, an overrun little alley cluttered with milk crates and bicycle skeletons. Halfway up, I found the faux sewer.

I crouched, dropped down into the hole, and replaced the grate.

I pulled my lighter and crawled inside the rum-runners' cave, following the ghastly shadows projected, which danced like distorted ghouls on the rocky walls.

"I thought you'd forgotten about me," Gabriel said when I entered the storage vault. He lay on a tiny bedroll, girly magazine folded over his chest. He'd practically sprouted a full beard since I'd seen him last. Despite the discomfort of a day spent underground, a little sleep and some time away from the coke had done wonders for his complexion.

"I told you I'd come back."

"Yeah, you did."

It wasn't a bad little spread he had down there, like a spelunker's bachelor pad. The vault was as big as a decent-sized living room. There were boxes of granola bars, cans of fruit cocktail, jugs of water, retsina. A bunch of battery operated floor lamps lit up the room enough. It had been close to twenty-four hours, and without indoor plumbing, there were some questions I preferred not asking.

I tapped his foot and he slid up the bed. "I got some good news and some bad news for you, pal."

“Give me the good news.”

“The Sandman hit has been taken care of. The police ruled it a suicide. Your father had it off the books by morning.”

“The bad news?”

“Your father wants you dead and he’s hired me to kill you.”

“You got a smoke?”

I passed him one. He lighted it, taking deep-throated drags.

I’m sure somewhere in his mind he knew this day was coming. Funny thing about those days’ coming: you never expect them to be today.

“That night at the marina—”

“Gabriel, we don’t have to talk about that night.”

“I want to talk about it.”

“I don’t. It’s buried. That time is buried. That man is buried. We move ahead because that’s all we can do. You said so yourself. Feeling bad is a luxury we don’t have.”

“I’m not a monster, Collie.”

“I know you’re not.”

“I’m not a monster.”

“I know.”

Gabriel dropped his head and his shoulders sagged. “So where’s that leave us,” he asked, peering at me meekly.

“I have no intention of killing you, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

He let go a terrific sigh, clasping a hand on my shoulder and bobbing. He kept opening his mouth like he wanted to say something, but as soon as he'd start he'd just smile and shake his head and chuckle, squeezing tighter.

"I had a chance to do that when I first got out, but after all we've been through these past few weeks, I couldn't do that now. It'd be rude."

I joined him in a cigarette, and we sat in silence.

The elation soon wore off and Gabriel realized the gravity of the situation. "But that only means he'll be sending someone else to do the job."

"I'd bank on it."

"What should I do?"

"Trust me."

I filled Gabriel in on what he needed to know. It was about one in the morning when I left him.

I receded into a dark doorway at the end of Saroyan for a while, to be certain I hadn't been followed.

Then I stuck to the shadows, which is easy to do in Chinatown. Aside from the main strip, at this time of night, the whole place was nothing but.

It had been a long day but there was one last thing I needed to do and one more person I needed to see.

Outside the bus station on 2nd, I found a payphone and rang her up, asking if it was OK if I stopped by. She said she had the night off and to come over.

Billie's place was in the panhandle, outside the park, a little studio apartment she rented on Willard Street.

When Billie answered the door, I was backlit by the hallway lights, so I could see her but she couldn't see me so much. The lights inside were off and red candles burned in spread out clumps. She had on reading glasses, her hair now dyed black. She looked as sweet and wholesome as any college student in her oversized pink sweater and bare legs.

She smiled big and asked if I wanted something to drink. I said sure, coffee, and she headed off to the kitchen.

On the bed, face down, was a book. I picked it up. It was a textbook. *The Times in Which We Live: Sociology in America*.

I slid off my coat and draped it over the back of a white padded chair, taking a seat. I gazed through the bay windows that looked out over the street, catching the edge of the park and its tall redwoods and big branches swaying.

Billie came back with the coffee a couple minutes later. She handed it to me, then plopped down on the bed, crossing her legs Indian style. Realizing the candlelight was insufficient, she leaned over and pulled the lamp chain on the nightstand, and she saw my face, covering her mouth. "What happened?"

"I got into a fight. No big deal."

"At least tell me that you won?"

I nodded, and she giggled.

I motioned to the book. "What're you reading?"

"Just a textbook from a class I was taking back in Minneapolis. Sociology."

“You like that stuff? Sociology?”

“Oh, yes! I mean, I don’t know much about it. But the class was great, and I find all that stuff fascinating. The way people gravitate toward one place or another, and especially how cities are formed, how they become, like, almost human.” She picked up the book and flipped through the pages. “Like this here. It shows how cities actually *are* living things, with subways and trains like the circulatory system, and telephone wires like neurons, and—” She stopped when she realized how excited she was getting. She laughed. “I guess it’s kind of silly, huh?”

“Not if you like it, it’s not silly.”

“No, I mean, me reading a sociology textbook when I’m not dancing naked in some club. I’m not even in school anymore.”

“Why’d you quit?”

“A boy I was dating in Minneapolis. His name was Rex. I was *so* in love with him. His parents were divorced, and his dad lived out here and had a company and wanted Rex to work for him. Anyway, he came out here and I stayed there, but I missed him so much, I dropped out and moved to Bay City.”

“Didn’t work out?”

Billie laughed. “We weren’t the same people we’d been back home. Last I heard he was dating some girl who worked in the mailroom.”

“Why did you stick around, not go back to Minneapolis?”

“Embarrassed, I guess. When I was moving, everyone said I’d be back. I actually grew up just outside of Minneapolis, in a small town called Edina, the kind of

town people don't leave. I didn't feel like giving them the satisfaction. Plus, I thought, you know, this is *Bay City*. It seemed so glamorous."

"And that's when you started working at the club?"

"Not right away. I waited tables in a coffee shop for a while, but that's not exactly going to get you a nice place in Bay City, y'know?" She stopped. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You remind me of somebody I used to know." I leaned in. "Answer me something, Billie."

She bit down on her lip.

"Why did you quit the Kitten Club?"

"Who told you I quit?"

"Gabriel."

She laughed. "*Gabriel* fired me. After you and I spent the night together, I went in the next day and he put the moves on me. When I told him no, he threw me out." She cocked her head. "I thought you knew that."

"I didn't."

"Collie, I did what I did with you that night because I *wanted* to. I liked you. I don't do that with everybody."

"I'm sorry. I just thought—"

"I'm a dancer. That's it."

"Do you like *that*? Dancing, I mean?"

"It's not so bad, really. I don't think about it much. It's a job. I mean, what little girl wants to grow up to be a go-go dancer?" She giggled. "Everyone's got to pay bills,

right? I think about going back home. I'm sure I will someday. I'll get some money saved and probably go back. I miss my mom."

I grabbed my jacket and reached inside the pocket, pulling out the ticket I'd just bought, passing it over.

"What's this?"

"A bus ticket back to Minneapolis. I'm guessing that will get you close enough." I took out my wallet, extracting several bills. "And that will get you the rest of the way."

She looked at me, big blue eyes like moon puddles. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because, Billie, you don't belong here. I'm not anybody's preacher, but you have more to offer the world than what you're doing." I pointed to the book. "You like that stuff, go learn it, do something with it. That textbook is right: Bay City *is* like a person. And she might've been young and beautiful once, but she's grown old and mean."

Billie came off the bed and threw her arms around me.

We didn't say another word about Minneapolis, and soon we were tired. I fell asleep in the chair. I woke up in the middle of the night, and she'd covered me with a blanket. She was curled up under her covers, the wind gently beating its wet branches on the window above her head.

I woke early in the morning, about half past six. Billie was still asleep. I quietly gathered my coat and crept across the floor, out the door.

At a corner market, I picked up the *Oracle*.

Cephalus Christos to Kick Off Mayoral Campaign Launch to be Held this Morning on MCH Green

Thomas Bowler, *Oracle* Staff
Thursday, January 22nd

Cephalus Christos will officially kick off his campaign to become Bay City's next mayor on the green this morning of the Meltemi Children's Hospital.

Christos first announced his intentions to run earlier this month at a SOMA art opening at the Michael Henry Gallery. The announcement cemented rumors that had been swirling around Bay City that Christos would vie for the position.

Local leaders say they are thrilled.

"Cephalus Christos is that rare individual: compassionate, determined, and respectful of traditional family values," said Artimas Black, hospital chaplain. "His hospital has touched countless lives."

The hospital itself will be very much involved in the campaign launch, according to Hospital spokeswoman Sally Ferraro, with rides and games for the young patients.

"We are going to bring out as many children as we can to partake in the

festivities," said Ferraro. "Cephalus insisted on it. He wants this launch to be a celebration for all the hospital stands for. He often calls them his 'little beacons of hope.'"

Several prominent social and civic leaders also figure to be in attendance at the event.

With a healthy lead in the polls over incumbent Garrison Paddock, Christos would seem a lock to win the election this November. Should that prove correct, it is rumored that Christos plans to use the influence of his post to open more hospitals like the MCH statewide.

Though she said commenting on such was premature, Ferraro did add that with all the good the MCH has done "other communities throughout the state ought to be able to reap the benefits from [the hospital's] lead."

The launch is scheduled for 9 a.m., with festivities slated to last into the afternoon...

I'd read enough. I couldn't take anymore of the self-congratulatory platitudes, especially in light of what I'd learned.

Up by the panhandle everything was still, morning having just broken, the whipping winds of last night abated.

It took a while to find a cab, but eventually I flagged one down and went to meet Tulane.

Downtown, I found the coffee shop on Front Street where we'd agreed to meet. At the payphone outside the café I tried to call Zoey, to let her know everything was in motion. She been worried when I talked to her last, and I wanted to assuage any fears.

She didn't pick up right away. Being so early, I didn't want to let it keep ringing. Besides, I thought, If everything worked out the way I hoped, the news would be that much sweeter later on.

I checked my watch. A few minutes till eight. I turned and saw Tulane walking toward me.

He held up his copy of the paper. "Hell of a write-up, eh?"

We ordered some coffee and sat at the small table outside.

Soon a white van with the words "Spruce Acres" plastered along the side pulled up in the bus zone.

"Now let's go over the plan one more time," I said. "I've made a couple small amendments. I need you to keep an open mind."

The hospital looked like a carnival when I arrived, reporters and cameramen, television vans with bulky antennas, supporters with hand-painted signs boasting the new prosperity about to be ushered in; they were everywhere.

At the back of the property, organizers had set up a little fair, with a miniature Ferris wheel and one of those rocket ship rides, six or seven little cars attached to a flashing pole in the middle, going up and down, spinning in a circle, and there were some game booths, too, the kind where you can toss a ring around a bottle or cover a red circle to win a stuffed prize. A clown walked around on giant stilts handing out balloons. There was also a little caged petting zoo for the kids, droves of whom were already being escorted around the grounds by hospital staff. It struck me that maybe touching bacteria-carrying goats and ponies might not be the best thing for a sick kid, but, hell, maybe I was being cynical.

To my left, by the old gnarled tree, I spied the red-haired nurse coming out for her cigarette.

On the hospital green, a platform had been erected, with an awning stretching over it and a banner across the top reading "Four Years of Promise." Rows of multi-colored streamers, along with balloons ready to be launched on cue, lined the long posts. Bullhorns aimed from the four corners. There was a lectern in the middle, microphone perfectly positioned, and seats for the esteemed guests at the rear.

The red-haired nurse returned inside, and I watched through the lobby's glass doors as she wheeled the first patient by. And then the second. When she passed the third time, I got in position, just as the Old Man's tinted Eldorado Brougham was arriving.

Supporters applauded enthusiastically, as all eyes fixed on the grand entrance.

Right on cue, I saw pull into the parking lot the Spruce Acres van, which came to a stop outside the chain link, by the side walkway leading in, about ten feet from the gnarled tree.

I stood on the other side of the gnarled tree smoking. The red-haired nurse came outside, my back to her. She lighted up, not taking any notice of me.

The grounds were noisy, the crowd boisterous. Cameras flashed, field reporters straightening ties and fixing make-up, rehearsing run-throughs, children yipping in the distance as wheels clanked and gears churned methodically.

His white suit pristine, matching bowler cap donned, the Old Man emerged, and was quickly joined by his team, the Rat leading the way, clearing a path, members of the BCPD aiding. The campaign staff came up from the podium to greet them as well, passing out big blue and white buttons along the way. Bulbs popped. Reaching through sawhorses and police stiff arms, the multitudes shrieked in glee.

And that's when I grabbed the red-haired nurse and threw her into the van.

"I look ridiculous!" Tulane snapped as soon as I climbed aboard and slid the door shut. He sat in the back, in the wheelchair Murdock had brought, dressed in a black and orange long-sleeved Giants shirt, ball cap pulled down tightly. "Why on earth couldn't you mention this part *yesterday*?"

I spun around, hand clamped over the nurse's mouth. "Because I knew you wouldn't want to do it. We need someone who looks the part, and who knows what

we're looking for. There is no way I am passing for a kid. I am six-two, two-hundred fifty pounds! You're what? Five feet?"

"Five-one! If we get caught and my picture gets paraded across newspapers—" Tulane flopped, arms folded across his chest.

I was about to tell the red-haired nurse not to scream, when I caught her eyes, which were open wide, fixed in awe. I followed her gaze to her mirror image sitting a couple feet away. Red wig, white nurses' uniform, sensible black shoes, the right complexion, Roberto was a spot-on match.

I slowly uncovered her mouth. She didn't scream. Didn't let go a peep, just stared at Roberto, mouth agape.

Murdock pivoted in the driver's seat. "He's taking the stage. We need to get moving."

"OK, sweetheart," I said to the red-haired nurse. "Hand over the keys."

She slowly reached into her pocket and extracted a large ring of them.

"Now which one opens the door where the phenatyl is?"

She fumbled through, holding one up, before returning her attention to Roberto, who was finishing his touch-ups, checking all angles.

Feedback hissed gratingly through the bullhorn, a sharp seismic spike.

What an honor to be here today for this momentous occasion. It gives me great pleasure to introduce the next mayor of Bay City!

"OK, Roberto," I said, "showtime," handing him the key.

After lowering Tulane and Roberto, I tossed Murdock my gun to make sure the red-haired nurse didn't get any funny ideas, and told him to try to talk some sense into her. She could help us, or we'd throw her to the lions.

Fingering the clip in my pocket, I leaned against the van door outside, watching the show.

Sifting my vision through the media circus, past the Action 8 and Live on 9 news' teams, the assorted *Oracle* personnel, I found Thomas Bowler, standing slightly away from the pack. He returned a terse, knowing nod.

The ecstatic applause ceased, the rocket and Ferris wheel rides cut short, and now everyone watched with bated breath as the fat man shook hands with the esteemed panel, before planting his massive girth at the microphone. The Rat and his comrades stood guard at the base of the stage.

"It seems only fitting that we launch my campaign here," the Old Man said, his thick voice blaring from the PA, "at this hospital, which has offered hope to so many."

Behind me, in the parking lot, I heard the rumbling sound of angry voices chanting in unison. It grew louder.

"And this is only the beginning," the Old Man continued. "When I am elected your next mayor—"

The chanting mob now descended onto the green, voices squawking, picket signs jabbing violently upwards, phrases like "The Poor are not Guinea Pigs!" and "Voices for the Voiceless" slapped across. The protestors were all dressed alike in big yellow T-shirts reading "Children Now!"

Everyone turned to see what the commotion was.

Onstage, the Old Man covered the microphone with his fat hand, barking something over the edge to the Rat.

One of the protestors, a shapeless, earthy-looking woman in a woolen muumuu carried a hand-held speaker box in one hand, an attached microphone in the other. “This hospital is testing dangerous drugs on children!” the muumuu bellowed.

Some from the crowd booed but most remained deathly silent. Police tried to push in from the sides, batons raised, but couldn’t cut through the throng.

“They are giving small children *phenatyl*, a deadly painkiller!” the muumuu continued. “And then peddling the drug on the black market!”

Action 8 and Live on 9 reporters immediately split up, half racing to the protestors, the other half toward the Old Man, cameramen bobbing behind in each direction.

“How do you respond to these allegations?” a reporter shouted.

“Is it true you’re testing phenatyl on children?”

“Has your hospital sold its drugs on the black market?” another asked.

“How do you respond to the charges?”

Just then I saw Roberto, red wig flying off his head, rapidly wheeling Tulane out of the hospital. On his lap, Tulane held a tray. Behind them a team of security guards gave hot pursuit. I rapped my knuckles on the van door and went to help.

The Old Man spat a mocking laugh into the microphone. “These accusations are ridiculous! Pure nonsense!” he jeered, as a steady buzz built throughout the crowd.

I heard the van door fling open behind me, as I rushed past Roberto and Tulane and lowered a shoulder into three angry security guards, bowling their legs out from under them, a mass of twisted bodies tumbling to the ground.

I looked up to see Murdock, the red-haired nurse by his side, meet Tulane and Roberto and take the evidence.

“Please,” the Old Man implored to the police, “remove these malcontents!” He turned his attention back to the crowd, sweat wetting his bulbous noggin. It was hard to hear over the din. “There is not one ounce of proof!”

“I have your proof right here!” Murdock blurted, pushing his way through the melee. In one hand, he held the red-haired nurse, in the other, the tray of phenatyl.

Everyone redirected his or her attention to the doctor. The grounds simmered to a murmur.

“My name is Dr. Nathaniel Murdock. I have in my hand vials of phenatyl—the drug Cephalus Christos is manufacturing inside the MCH and testing on children, before selling on the streets of Bay City! And Miss Gutierrez, who works as a nurse inside the hospital, will confirm these allegations.”

The scene erupted into pure bedlam.

Reporters bumped into one another racing to get to Murdock, while others scurried to get a quote from anybody connected with the hospital. The board members and foundation players onstage recoiled.

The media were like sharks smelling blood. The Rat and his men tried to maneuver through the crowd but got tangled up in the sea.

As the police tried to disperse and regain order, the campaign team escorted the Old Man from the stage. At the bottom of the steps, he slapped at hands holding microphones stuck in his face. The Old Man lost his balance and was forced to take a knee, his white suit grabbed at, disheveled, sullied.

The Old Man pushed himself up and searched through the madness, his eyes eventually settling on me. They whittled down mean.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Walking down the pathway to the Kitten Club, I could see what I hadn't the other night by going in the back way, that somebody had broken in and gone to town.

I pushed through the splintered door. The Old Man's crew had busted the club apart pretty good looking for Gabriel following news of the Sandman. You could smell the fresh char lingering, like smoldering briquettes after a Fourth of July picnic. The bulk of the structure, however, was concrete, which made burning her all the way to the ground impossible.

I sloshed through standing water from the sprinkler system and the broken glass and wood at my feet. Lighting fixtures hung by sinewy, roped cables, electrical hot ends sizzling on the pass by.

I found a bottle that wasn't broken, pulled the stopper, and gave a toast. Good riddance to the eyesore.

Gabriel wasn't coming back to run this show. And the Old Man was finished.

Despite the war-torn, refugee décor, one piece remained: that goddamn palm tree in the back of the room, charred but still standing after the fire, its leafy fronds singed, skeleton branches brushing against the high blackened ceiling, the only living entity among ruin. The building would be condemned now, and soon this would all be gone. The club bulldozed, live/work spaces erected in its place, rents tripled, and that palm, like the rest of it, would be history, carted away to be burned on a beach somewhere while dirty-faced teens danced around a bonfire.

I headed for the stairwell, water trickling past my feet and down the steps like a slow burbling brook waterfall.

The door to Gabriel's office had been attacked with a hatchet. Inside it looked like they'd taken a flamethrower to the place, yawning craters in the dry wall, erupted plaster and exposed water mains. What Gabriel hadn't destroyed by his own hand, the Hondurans and the Old Man's crew had taken care of, the wet bar smashed, serpent rack bent and toppled, statue fountain nothing but pebbles. It was clear they'd been looking for something, the long, mahogany desk whacked to bits.

What I needed would still be there. Burning wouldn't hinder its use. And it wasn't something anybody would've wanted, just an everyday, ordinary pen tip, which I stuffed into my pocket.

I heard a ruckus and turned, and there they were: the remaining loyal crew, the Rat leading the pack, his gun pulled and aimed for my heart.

I showed my hands. "It's over, boys."

The Rat circled his men in, four of them, dressed in their slick suits. One flicked open a long switchblade.

"And what is killing me going to get you, huh?"

"Where is Gabriel?" the Rat said, calmly.

"Your boss is done in this town. Just walk away."

"Who do you think you're dealing with?" the Rat hissed. "You can't double-cross the Old Man and expect to get away with it."

"I already have."

The Rat cocked his gun.

A blast ripped from the chamber, the first bullet searing through the back of a knee, blowing out the cap on the other side, the second tearing off a significant hunk of mandible, leaving a jaw unhinged and its owner gasping. The man with the blade flopped to the floor.

The Rat and company spun to confront the assault, and I crouched and leapt, smacking the Rat with a swinging elbow to the ear, as I curled my arms around two offenders and crashed to the ground.

Figgs was the first one through the door, pistol smoking, and he took one in the shoulder. As big a boy as he was, the Giant wouldn't be taken out with just one bullet. Peterson wasn't so fortunate. As I was rotating fists on the two guards I had pinned to the floor, Peterson took a shot to the brain from the Rat, another five added to the sternum and groin for good measure. Petersen toppled over like a sack of wet meal.

Having the clip emptied had one positive effect: it spared Buick's life. Eschewing steel for lumber, he was the last one through, a howler monkey wielding a Louisville Slugger. While the Rat fitted a new clip, Buick connected to his skull, the deadening thud of brains bashed and consciousness eclipsed.

Figgs was tussling one on one, and in the constricting space the Giant's greatest asset, his reach, was too significantly hampered. He was in trouble. I had my two men bloodied and battered, the last wallop on each snuffing out the sounds of life.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the switchblade picked up. I got to my feet but I couldn't get there in time. The blade lacerated the Giant's carotid, a torrent of blood spraying wildly. I caught the stabber's arm as it recoiled, twisting it around and delivering the point deep into his gut, yanking higher till I heard heart, lung, and spine

split, a gurgle drawing forth from his lips, bright pink artery blood frothing, eyes rolling back into his head, and his body went Jell-O.

I dropped to my knees. The Giant was feebly trying to plug a finger into the entry wound, blood spurting everywhere. He took my hand and was trying to say something, but no words were coming out. I told him I understood anyway, and he smiled best he could with those thyroid-ravaged eyes, and then a light was flicked off, and he was gone.

I snatched the bat from Buick's hands and threw it to the ground. "Jesus, I wanted you guys to cut them off at the pass! Not this!"

"That *was* the plan. We were watching the front. Just like you said. We saw you come in. We saw a car pull up. But only one guy got out, just standing there. Then he takes off for the door, and four more join him, like from out of nowhere, running in fast before we could stop them."

My hands shook, covered in blood. I gathered myself. "The car you saw, it had tinted windows?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Get out of here, Buick," I said.

"What if more come?"

"I said, Get lost!"

Buick scowled and huffed out of the room, heading up the well.

I listened to Buick's steps fade across the floor. Then I slowly stepped over the carnage, out the office, the other way.

Down the darkened hall, I rounded a corner, past where the kegs had once been stacked, metallic clutter, out-of-commission fixtures and broken pieces of furniture now

in their place. Ducking a low hanging arch, I felt along the wall for the tin sign. My eyes slow to adjust, I flicked my lighter and found what I was looking for, barely legible and rusted.

I located the knot in the concrete. I extracted the pen tip, wiggled it in.

I left the door open.

Faceless, anonymous rum-runners, decades earlier, in an attempt to conceal their illicit trade, had unwittingly spelled my end. But the universe naturally strives for balance. These tunnels had portended my undoing. It seemed only fitting they should foster my rebirth, too.

“What the hell is happening? I thought I heard gunfire,” Gabriel said when I walked in.

I swatted the dust from my knees, cleared the cobwebs from my hair. “Your father sent some of his boys. But it’s all taken care of.”

“What’s taken care of?”

“All of it. Every goddamn bit. The Old Man is ruined. His hospital has been exposed. He couldn’t buy an election in Bay City. There’s just one thing left to do.”

I reached for the .44 Special tucked inside the front of my pants.

Gabriel’s face turned white, his eyes fixed in shock and resignation.

“I told you before, Gabriel, I’m not going to kill you—but the Old Man will. We’ve got to get you out of here. Now.”

Gabriel stood up from the bed roll.

“Here’s the deal,” I said. “You’re going to get out of Bay City—you’re going to get out of Bay City and never look back. There’s nothing for you here anymore.”

“OK, Collie. Whatever you say.” He started to take a step but froze.

“This is very cute, Gabriel.” It was the Old Man’s voice behind my back. “A secret fort for you and your little friend. A man your age. Will you ever grow up?”

Gabriel looked at me, his eyes widened in horror.

My back still to the door, my hands and gun in front, I slowly cocked my piece and began to turn. And from the corner of my eye, I saw the Luger the Old Man held in one hand. That didn’t concern me as much as what he was doing with the other, the one clasped over Zoey’s mouth.

“Drop the gun,” the Old Man said to me.

I did.

“Now kick it over.”

I kicked the gun and it came to rest between Zoey’s feet.

“I had her picked up yesterday, in case you tried to go back on your word.” He uncapped Zoey’s mouth. She opened wide to suck in air. The Old Man quickly refastened his hold with a headlock. He waved me aside with his gun, splitting me from Gabriel. “But I underestimated you, Collie. Perhaps you’re not as stupid as you look. Of course, following the stunt you two pulled at the hospital today, taking away everything I care about, now I get to return the favor.”

“And you get to raise your grandson in peace,” I said.

“Yes, Collie, that is precisely what I plan to do.”

“Grandson?” Gabriel eeked.

I turned to him. “It’s true, Gabriel. You and Zoey have a son. Ask her. Your father has known about it all along. He’s kept him from you.”

Gabriel took a step forward. “Zoey?”

“His name is Leo—” Zoey started to say but the Old Man tightened his choke hold.

“You’re too stupid to care for a child, Gabriel,” the Old Man said. “Perhaps that is my fault. But I will get it right this time.”

Color returned to Gabriel’s face, which began to pulse angry red. “A son? I have *a son*? And you *knew*?”

“Careful, boy,” the Old Man said. “You got no right. You smeared my name today. My campaign is ruined!”

“You took my son from me?”

“He’s not *your* son!”

“You ruined my life!”

“Shut up! You’re nothing but a fucking mistake!”

I caught Zoey’s eyes and she caught mine. I motioned toward Gabriel.

As the Old Man bellowed and frantically shook his gun at Gabriel, whose fists curled and whose temple veins throbbed, Zoey bit down hard on the Old Man’s arm. He jerked back and she slid down the front of his distended belly, kicking the gun at her feet across the floor to Gabriel.

I dove for her, just as Gabriel picked up the .44 and the Old Man recovered to aim his Luger.

I wrapped my big body around her, shielding her.

Both chambers were emptied, their violent screams turning to haunting echoes that died in the thick slabs of the tomb.

They stood on the porch. Rainwater dripped from the shingles above the doorway, as the heavy, gray skies churned overhead.

The big man had his arms wrapped around her, her small body cradled against him. They stayed that way for a long time, until she broke the embrace and gazed up.

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“Don’t worry about anything,” he said, “I’ll make sure your name stays out of it. I imagine there will be the usual inquiries and people wringing their hands. But when it’s all said and done, the blame will fall where it should: on the shoulders of two dead men.” The big man tried to smile. “And I think you and the little guy might have a newspaper to run.”

She laughed quietly. It wasn’t a happy laugh. “I meant us. What do we do.”

“I know what you meant,” he said.

The rain started to fall hard around them. They stared into each other’s eyes, and he wanted to believe at that moment he knew what she was thinking, the same as he, of carefree, cool summer days along the waterfront, long walks beneath the bright lights of a city at night, of the plans only young hearts can make. But he could not stay there any longer. Nothing he could ever do would get him back there. Maybe some pieces of the heart are reserved for the young and irresponsible. And maybe that isn’t a bad thing.

“I guess you keep being a mom,” he said. “And I...”

“What?” she said, quickly. “What do you get out of all this?”

“I,” he said, slowly, “I get to look myself in the mirror and not hate what I see, for the first time in a long time.”

She stood on her tiptoes and, taking his face in her hands, kissed him gently on the lips. It was a slow and burning, lingering kiss.

“Thank you,” she mouthed, as she fell back on her heels. She took his hand and gave it a tight squeeze, before letting it go.

She retreated inside and softly closed the door.

The big man stood still for a moment, feeling the afternoon cold move in from the Pacific, over the Headlands.

He lifted his collar, stuck his hands in his pockets, and descended the stairs out into the rain.

3. PART THREE

Nine Dead in North Beach Massacre;

Mayoral Hopeful Cephalus Christos among Fatally Wounded;
Police Seek Ex-con for Questioning

Thomas Bowler, Oracle Staff
Friday, January 23rd

A bloodbath erupted at a North Beach strip club yesterday morning leaving nine people dead and a lot of unanswered questions. The bodies of Cephalus Christos, 62, and his son, Gabriel Christos, 37, were among those found, theirs in a secret subterranean vault beneath the club.

Police are still investigating the cause of the slayings, which occurred following Cephalus Christos' aborted campaign launch yesterday morning.

The launch at the Meltemi Children's Hospital was disrupted when protestors accused the hospital of illegally manufacturing and distributing the drug phentanyl, a highly addictive opiate with a potency 80 times that of morphine.

No charges have yet been filed, but police have taken into custody Consuelo Gutierrez, a nurse at the MCH, and the hospital's research center has been temporarily closed down.

"This is one of the strangest cases I've ever encountered," said acting Police Chief Edmund Roth. "All of it, the alleged hospital improprieties, the campaign fiasco—Christos went from favorite son, to goat, to dead, literally overnight."

The strip club where the murders took place, the Kitten Club, was owned and operated by Gabriel Christos. However, recent financial setbacks had forced its closure. Police found

evidence of a fire inside and are looking into the possibility of arson.

Police say they believe Gabriel Christos was hiding out in an underground labyrinth beneath the Kitten Club. During prohibition, bootleggers frequently constructed such tunnels to aid escape.

Cephalus and Gabriel had long been mired in a public feud, with the former's crusade to clean up Bay City and the latter's link to organized crime well established. What prompted Cephalus Christos to pick that morning to physically confront his son remains open to speculation.

In addition to the two bodies found in the vault, seven more bodies were found upstairs in a Kitten Club office. Two of the deceased were identified as Ezekiel Figgs, 50, and James Iver Petersen, 54, employees of the club. The names of the remaining victims, many of whom were former police officers, are being withheld pending notification of the family.

Roth declined comment on why so many former BC cops would be involved, adding only that the matter, like that of the hospital allegations, "would be investigated further."

Funeral services for both Cephalus and Gabriel Christos are pending.

Police seek ex-convict Christopher "Buick" Harmon, 19, for questioning.

Details Begin to Emerge from North Beach Massacre

Thomas Bowler, *Oracle* Staff
Friday, January 30th

A week removed from the shootout beneath a North Beach strip club that left nine persons dead, including mayoral hopeful Cephalus Christos and his son, gangster Gabriel Christos, investigators now claim to have a more accurate picture of the events that transpired that fateful morning.

“Cephalus Christos appears to have been involved in a murder-for-hire scheme,” police spokesperson Tibby Wolf said. “And the intended victim was, in fact, none other than his son, Gabriel.”

Wolf refused to get into specifics as the investigation is ongoing but did add “both men were up to their arms in illicit narcotics” and that “[Cephalus’] hit on his son was apparently issued to settle a family dispute over territory.”

The Meltemi Children’s Hospital, which was founded by Cephalus Christos, had its research center permanently shut down earlier this week when investigators discovered large quantities of phenatyl. The ingredients for the drug had been obtained without proper documentation.

How a man like Cephalus Christos was able to operate on both sides of the law, while garnering such immense public support, remains baffling, though many are quick to speculate.

“Unfortunately,” spokesperson Wolf said, “Christos had the sort of money that could make a lot of problems go away.”

When informed of the recent discoveries, Mayor Garrison Paddock was outraged.

“Money is not an acceptable method of absolution,” Paddock said in an issued statement. “We are talking about unethical behavior, drug trafficking and cover-ups attempting to infiltrate the highest levels of government. This administration will not rest until the truth is revealed and the wrongdoers punished to the fullest extent of the law.”

Many pundits are quick to point out the role the *Bay City Oracle* played in the Christos’ charade. As owner of the paper, Cephalus Christos had been the subject of several feature stories, which chronicled a young man’s migration from Greece to America and painted the portrait of an upstanding businessman and not that of a common criminal.

Despite the recent controversy, the Meltemi Children’s Hospital plans to remain open.

While many are quick to point out Christos’ faults, one man, Artimas Black, MCH chaplain and minister of the First Methodist Church on Davis, cautions against rushing to judgment.

“Who among us has a free hand to throw stones?” said Black. “In continuing our work with the hospital, we honor neither the man nor his failings but the vision promised of a brighter tomorrow.”

Oracle Changes Ownership; New Editor a Familiar Face

Thomas Bowler, *Oracle* Staff
Wednesday, February 4th

Hot off the heels of scandal, the *Bay City Oracle* changed ownership yesterday, as the reigns were passed to the only living heir of former owner Cephalus Christos. Because new owner Leopold Christos, age 6, is still a minor, his mother, Zoey Krois, 30, will run the paper until her son is old enough to take over the day-to-day operations. Krois' first order of business was to replace former editor-in-chief Daniel J. Jewett, who resigned after nearly thirty-four years of service following controversy. Her choice, Tulane Church, is a former *Oracle* reporter and esteemed Bay City columnist, thus prompting the return of a city favorite to the paper that helped forge his name.

An Open Letter to the Readers By Tulane Church

It has been a long time since I've been able to ascribe my name to a byline in this newspaper. And I have to tell you, friends, it feels wonderful.

Following recent events, I have been asked if I feel vindicated, now that many of the allegations I levied all those years ago have proven true. And my answer is always the same: like any respected newspaperman, I'll let the facts speak for themselves.

Those unfamiliar with but interested in the aforementioned allegations are of course free to peruse the microfiche back issues and editorials of the *Oracle* at the public library. The tale of a gadfly

doing battle with a behemoth of the underworld, admittedly, might make for a tantalizing read. For me, however, the past is the past, and I have no interest in revisiting those trying times. Instead, I choose to focus my efforts on the future and, more specifically, the solitary goal at hand: to once again make the *Bay City Oracle* a paper for, by, and about the people, one that is committed to excellence, community, and truth.

That is our revamped Mission Statement.

For too long our great city has been hampered by special interest groups, hogtied by industry's giants, bankrolled and paid for by a handful of individuals whose only desire has been to pander to cronies while lining their own pockets, regardless of the moral, ethical, or societal cost for the rest of us. Well, no more! No more will this newspaper coddle the privileged purveyors of speculation. No more will this publication serve as a mouthpiece for the personal promotion of the elite. No more shall it turn a blind eye to the truth.

From here on out, the *Bay City Oracle* pledges to devote its entire newsgathering team to securing the facts, however difficult that may be at times, and to let the reader make up his or her own mind. We guarantee that every person, regardless of race, wealth, or status will receive the daily news, foreign, domestic, and abroad, in an unbiased, balanced, and fair fashion.

This is our promise to you.

Sincerely,
Tulane Church
Editor-in-Chief,
Bay City Oracle

Two Weeks Later...

Saturday night and the *Café du Nord* was filling up nicely. Word had gotten out about the new group performing, creating a buzz about town with those in the know and the true music aficionado. The band, Sparkle Plenty, had been signed on as house act shortly after the New Year following a string of triumphant if small scale performances. Indie credibility on the line, the city's alternative bohemia had painted the café the hip place to be.

Although it would be a while before the band took the stage, the bar was already bustling, raucous with raw weekend energy. Young hipsters, boys in bowling shirts with chained wallets, drained pints and told jokes, their dates sitting close by, with tightly curled bobs and naked knees.

A group of men who definitely were not hipsters gathered at a corner table, slightly removed from the action. The men, Tulane Church, Derrick Fenster, and Thomas Bowler, a young reporter for the *Bay City Oracle*, appeared in good spirits, if somewhat out of their element. Tulane and Fenster were much older than the rest of the bar's patrons and, although considerably younger than his friends, Bowler, with his neatly cropped locks, dress slacks, and tie, stood out as a square among beats.

"I want to thank you both again," Tulane said.

"You're welcome, but it isn't necessary," Fenster said, setting his fedora on the table. "You say Colin Specter was in your employ, renting a room from you for the past month, who am I to question the word of a revered newspaperman when authorities come knocking? I merely provided the appropriate documentation to the police."

“And I’m afraid,” Bowler interjected, “that after the lies I’d been spoon fed and forced to print as fact, getting the word out to an advocacy group is hardly tantamount to bravery—*boss*.”

All three men laughed.

“Speaking of which,” Fenster said, “congratulations on your recent appointment. Must feel nice after the wringer you were put through.”

Tulane took a sip of his gin and juice. “I am a man who prefers to leave the past in the past.”

“A renowned journalist *and* a modest man,” Bowler said.

Fenster scoffed. “Really, Tulane? *Nothing* to say on the subject?”

“I didn’t say *that*. Yes, avenging one’s personal injustices does provide a certain satisfaction. And that goes doubly when we are talking about a beast like Cephalus Christos.”

Fenster reached for his soda water. “Perhaps we should thank *you* then,” he said, “for ridding this city of a scourge.”

A cold gust of wind blew down from the upstairs Market Street entrance, and Tulane Church eyed the doorway. “I can assure you, I couldn’t have done it alone.”

Colin Specter hit the last step and now stood at the base of the stairs. His was a commanding presence, a man among boys, maroon sweater snugly hugging massive frame, forest green khakis and polished, black shoes, looking especially sharp with a fresh shave. Two more men walked in behind him, Dr. Nathaniel Murdock and a Mexican dancer, Roberto Cancun.

Colin located his friends, and a slow grin crept over his hard face.

“Speak of the devil,” Tulane said.

Colin poked a thumb out. “Look I what I found.”

The men all shook hands, and some more chairs were added to accommodate the new guests.

A cocktail waitress, a spunky Asian pixie with spiky, purple hair and pierced nose, came over to take their order.

“Bourbon,” rasped Colin.

“Glad to see you’re cutting back,” Tulane said.

“Put a splash of soda in there, will you?” Colin turned to Tulane. “Happy?”

“And for you?” the pixie asked the doctor.

Murdock extracted a white poker chip, holding it up proudly.

The men at the table with glasses held them up.

Colin addressed Fenster. “How’s the ex-con relocation program going?”

“Still a thankless job, but thanks for asking,” Fenster replied, his face unable to conceal the pleasure of seeing his old charge in the better light.

“I was just telling Mr. Fenster and Thomas here,” Tulane said, “how much we appreciated their, how shall we say, discretion with certain bureaucratic proceedings.”

“And like I told Tulane, just doing my job,” Fenster said.

“Trying to advance up that career ladder,” Bowler added.

“Either way, thanks, guys,” Colin said.

“So who’s this band playing tonight?” Tulane asked, clasping his tiny hands together, “the one you keep raving about?”

The pixie brought Colin his drink. She was wearing an extra large graphic tee, faded donkey kicking an old man in the testicles, and the phrase, “Kick ’Em where it Counts,” in peeling, green felt underneath.

Cocktail in hand, Colin relaxed. “They’re called Sparkle Plenty.”

“Cute name,” said Roberto.

“Four piece outfit. This chick Samantha Darling is the voice. My old horn man, Langley Langley, blows saxophone.”

“Langley Langley?” Fenster replied. “Now, I’ve heard never trust a man with two first names, but...”

“How’d you hear about them?” Murdock asked.

“I stumbled in here a while back, caught their set. The two of them together were dynamite. The rhythm section was strictly the pits, but they’ve since replaced those two clowns, brought in a couple pros. I’ve seen them since and they’ve rocked the house. They have this whole ethereal, spacey jazz thing down. Not exactly a market for that material these days. But she’s something else, and does she have a set of pipes on her.”

Fenster pulled out his wallet. “This round is on me, boys. I’m sorry to miss the show. She, I mean, *they* sound terrific. But the life of a state employee doesn’t afford one many late evenings.”

Bowler slid his slender arms into his sports coat. “Count me out, too. Got a story I have to get ready.” He leaned over to Colin and whispered, “The new boss is a real slave driver.”

They shook hands goodbye.

“So what brings you out this way, doctor?” Tulane asked.

Murdock clasped a hand on the slight Mexican's shoulder. "Roberto here has somebody he is concerned about, a dancer friend at the club who is enjoying Bay City's nightlife a bit too much, it you know what I mean."

"He's a terribly sweet boy," Roberto added, "but I *am* worried about him. I called Colin to get the doc's phone number. When he mentioned meeting you here, I asked the doc if he wouldn't mind stopping in first."

"I wasn't sure you'd stay in the business," Tulane said to Murdock.

"You boys caught me at a very rough time. I realized after my own bout with the bottle that I need that job as much as it needs me. I'd been feeling sorry for myself for so long, I lost track that there are so many others out there hurting, fighting the same fight. Sounds crazy, I know, directing a rehab center like I do, but that's what drugs and alcohol can do to a man." Murdock turned to Colin, adding, "No offense."

Colin lifted his glass.

"I hate to be spoil sport," Roberto said, pointing down at a make-believe watch.

Murdock and Roberto made ready to leave.

"It was good seeing you both," Tulane said.

"I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again," Roberto said. "Colin has promised to come visit me at the club—and to bring you along."

Tulane blushed.

"Knock it off, Tulane," said Colin. "After dressing up like a ten-year-old, are you really embarrassed to be seen in a Castro club?"

The men all laughed.

After Murdock and Roberto exited, Colin turned to Tulane. "Pays to have friends in high places, I guess."

"Yes, it certainly does. *And* ex-girlfriends whose sons are willing to give an old codger another chance."

"Seven-year-olds are hardly interested in running a newspaper. And Mom just wants to be sure it's in good hands."

Colin and Tulane made their way through the crowd, relocating on stools along the bar.

Extracting the pack of Camels bulging in a T-shirt pocket underneath his sweater, Colin slid out a cigarette, tapping it on the counter.

Tulane looked over. "With all the craziness of these last couple weeks, we never did talk about what happened between you two. Afterwards. That morning."

"Saying goodbye on her porch, I realized I couldn't stay there any longer," Colin said, striking a match off the counter.

"On her porch?"

"No, trapped in that time." Colin lighted his cigarette. "Every day of every year I was away, I blamed my not being with her for why I was miserable. But the truth is, Tulane, I didn't want to grow up. I wanted to stay twenty forever. A singer in love, with no cares or worries. And time doesn't work like that, man. It goes forward."

"So tell me something. What does Colin Specter get out of all this?"

Colin chuckled under his breath.

"What's so funny?"

"I seem to be getting asked that question a lot lately."

“I’m not trying to pry,” Tulane said, “and I’m sure you’ll tell me if you don’t want to answer. But it seemed like you were doing this for her, and that now everybody else has gotten what they wanted. Except you.”

“I didn’t do anything for anybody, Tulane. Except me. I had my own reasons. And as far as ‘happy endings,’ I’m not sure it works like that. I’m glad you got your old job back. And it’s good for Bay City. It’s my home. But Zoey still has a very sick boy who demands all of her attention and will for a long time. A lot of people I’d grown to care about are dead. And I am still me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means the things I’ve seen and done don’t get erased so easily.”

“Don’t you think you ought to give yourself a break?”

“I give myself a lot of them.” He looked over at his friend, grinning. “It’s nice that you see good things in me.”

“Because they are there. A lot of other people will see them, too. If you give them the chance. You know, you need to allow yourself the room to be happy.”

“I’ll settle for brief moments of levity.” Colin took a swig of bourbon.

Due to the escalating din of smacking cues and laughter, Tulane moved closer. “On a different note, why were you so insistent on keeping that boy out of it? What was his name? Something strange and automotive.”

“Buick.”

“Yes, Buick. From the way you described him, he sounded simply dreadful. Perhaps a few years behind bars would’ve straightened him out.”

“He was just a dumb kid. Nineteen years old and he thought he wanted to be a gangster. Did two-months for stealing a car in Denver. Kids that age don’t know much. Best place for a boy like that is with his mama. Besides, prison doesn’t straighten anybody out, Tulane, you know that. It’s a rotten place, filled with vicious, hideous thugs, and it only teaches a man how to hate. Police pick up a scrub like Buick, throw him in Quentin or Bruno, and it’s kill or be killed. Then what chance does he have?”

“Such bleeding heart sentimentality. There may be hope for you yet. And where is our Mr. Buick now?”

“I sent his ass back home.”

“Think he’ll stay put?”

“Let’s say, I was pretty convincing.” Colin winked.

The crowd in the bar area was beginning to thin, as patrons made for seats in the adjacent theatre where the band would be performing.

“One more question,” Tulane said. “Does Colin Specter have *any* idea what he wants to do for work next?”

At this, Colin smirked. “I think I’d like to get back into the music business.”

Tulane raised his eyebrows in mocked flippancy. “And leave behind the glamour of the private dick? Perhaps you could combine the two: the city’s first singing PI.”

“No, no more singing. I’m talking producing, recording, promoting. *Other* bands. *Other* singers. The business end of it. Saw a space for lease the other day in the Southern District. Big warehouse by the tracks. I’m thinking about renting it, soundproofing, opening a little studio down there.”

“Intriguing. Any band in particular you have in mind?”

“I’ve got my eye on a few.”

“I bet you do.”

Langley Langley and Samantha Darling emerged through the crowd, heading straight for them at the bar. She wore a sleek black evening dress, slit up the side, with silver sequins adorning the low cut front, her long legs gliding gracefully beneath the thin fabric. The big black man wore his trademark turtleneck and Cheshire cat grin.

Seeing them approach in the mirror, Colin stamped out his cigarette and spun on his stool to greet them.

Introductions were given, hands shaken.

“Miss Darling, my friend Colin here has been raving about you,” Tulane said.

“It’s nice to finally be able to put a face with the name.”

Colin cast his eyes askance. Samantha wouldn’t let him look away, though, and the large man grew self-conscious.

“Yes, Colin has certainly proved to be one of our biggest fans,” Samantha said.

“So, Langley, Colin says you two used to play in a band together? The saxophone, that it? He said yours is unparalleled.”

“Would you care to see it, Tulane?”

“Why, Langley, I’d love to.”

Tulane and Langley smiled at one another, and Colin thought he caught his friend wink but he wasn’t sure. Tulane hopped off the stool. “Samantha, would you be a darling and keep an eye on Collie.”

“My pleasure.”

Tulane and Langley disappeared through the crowd.

Colin immediately slid out another smoke, thoughtlessly offering the pack to Samantha, who politely refused. Striking a match, he lighted the cigarette and tried to remain a cool customer.

“How do you know your friend Tulane, if you don’t mind my asking? He seems like a great guy.”

“He wrote a piece about me. Long time ago. When I got out, we started talking.”

“He appears quite fond of you.”

Colin mussed his crew cut. “Feeling is mutual,” he growled.

Removing a dangling black wick from her eyes, Samantha gnawed at her bottom lip, which reminded Colin of sweeter days.

She turned over her shoulder, panning the emptying room. “I have to tell you,” she whispered. “I’m not going to pass up the support, all these boys bringing their dates here, night after night, but have you ever seen such a lot? I mean, look at them. So slick and polished. Such...pretty boys.”

Colin scoffed. As a man devoid of most social graces, he could appreciate whenever someone practiced the sentiment. “Not a fan of pretty boys?” he grumbled.

“Call me old fashioned, Collie,” she said with a slight twang, “but I prefer my men look like men and not baby-faced, porcelain statues. Not a big fan of hipsters, I suppose. A face ought to have a little character, y’know?”

“That’s nice of you to say.”

“What is?”

Their eyes met but he couldn’t read a hint of sarcasm or a trace of placation in her expression.

Colin finished his bourbon and soda with a swift swish. Left too long, the drink was watered down, too much caramel and not enough burn.

“I was just telling Tulane,” Colin said, “I’m toying with the idea of, well, maybe opening up a little music studio.”

“That so?”

“And I was thinking, maybe one of these nights, I mean, if you’re ever free, we could, y’know, get together and talk—”

“Yes, I would like that.”

Colin shifted in his seat, casting a sideways glance, suppressing a smile. “I have to tell you, when we first met, I really didn’t think you liked me all that much.”

“No, Colin,” Samantha said slowly, “I liked you fine. I just saw a man who had a lot more to offer the world than what he was doing.” She smiled. “It’s nice to see the chip off your shoulder.”

Langley and Tulane returned. The lights dimmed, wild chatter simmering to a murmur.

“It’s about that time,” Langley said.

“Any requests?” Samantha asked, elbow perched on the bar.

Colin perked up. “Actually, yeah. Do you know the old Tommy Pitts and his Short Dogs’ song, ‘All I Need is Bourbon—’”

“—if You Take Away my Baby.’ Of course. A classic and one of my favorites.” Samantha looked at Langley, who nodded. “On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“That you play it with us.”

Colin looked to Tulane and Langley, who offered no help, which made him suspicious the two had been in on it all along.

“I know you’ve given up on the singing,” Samantha said, “but Langley says you play the guitar. We don’t normally perform with one of course, but I keep my Martin backstage to warm up with.”

“No. Thanks, but I couldn’t. I haven’t played in years.”

“It’s three chords, Collie. And they’re not the tricky ones.” She put her hands on her hips, affecting a pout. “I’m afraid that’s the final offer. No play, no date.”

“Date?” Tulane chirped.

Colin quickly spun around, nodding and grumbling, gesturing with a frantic, backhanded wave. “OK. Fine. Deal.”

The theatre was packed and there weren’t any seats left, so Tulane and Colin stood at the back of the room, while the hipsters sat anxiously, arms around their girls.

Tulane kept grinning, stealing glances up at Colin. “Date, eh?”

“Shut up, Tulane.”

A spotlight switched on, shining down onto the small stage, a soft white light radiant in an otherwise dark room.

The drummer sat behind his kit, twirling his sticks, the bassist stretched his pug digits, poised and ready to thump. Langley was two-fisting his saxophone, which dangled from his thick turtleneck, rocking back on his heels.

Gently lifting the microphone from its cradle, Samantha swayed as the crowd clapped politely.

“Before we get started tonight,” she said, “I want to thank you all for coming. For a band that never entertained any illusions of making it big, to see so many familiar faces night after night means a great deal. For our first number, I want to call on a friend.”

The spotlight trailed up the tiled linoleum, over the tables, booths, and chairs, the uneven haircuts and freshly scrubbed dates, and settled on Colin, who rounded his broad shoulders and sheepishly waved.

He leaned down to Tulane. “I didn’t think it’d be the first song,” he muttered.

“Quit being so coy,” Tulane said with a swat and shove to the back.

Samantha opened her arms. “Come on, Colin. Don’t be bashful. Colin Specter everybody.”

Colin meandered through the slew of tables and chairs toward the stage. Backlit, casting a large shadow, he began walking faster toward Samantha and Langley, who stood smiling, awaiting him.

The crowd stirred and the applause grew steady, and from somewhere deep inside, Colin Specter started to feel good, so good in fact that it became hard not to grin like a fool. The nearer he came to the stage, the more overcome with joy he felt, until, hardly able to contain himself from laughing, the big man felt as though he were weightless.