

From Warm to Deadly Sea ©



A NOVEL BY

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PART ONE

- ONE -

“**W**e need to talk about the head.”

Boca Raton Homicide Sergeant Lynch stood at my front door. Already sweating in the early morning Florida sun, she had soaked through her blue oxford cloth blouse in some very interesting places. Shoulder length dark auburn hair was beginning to dampen and mat to her head. Wearing a long sleeved blouse and navy wool slacks for a summer day in Florida, she was obviously a recent northern transplant, or just liked to sweat a lot. From her impatient attitude, I guessed it was the former.

“You want to talk about a *toilet* at eight o'clock on a Saturday morning?” I said.

“Lemme in, wiseguy, it's a million degrees out here.”

She pushed by me, walked into the foyer, and was abruptly stopped by the view. The third floor vista opened in front of her. Fifty feet away, an eighteen foot high wall of glass revealed bright sun on the turquoise Atlantic beyond the deck and dune. The living room is filled with a collection of '20's French Art Deco furniture, placed on dark deep pile area rugs, which makes the furniture appear to be floating on the pale parquet wood floor. Not your typical wicker and white Florida room, the effect of the unexpected decor and the striking view stops almost everyone in their tracks the first time they come through the front door.

“You guys always have great places” she said, making the usual assumption.

I've had about seven careers in the past twenty years, but ever since I became a part time interior designer, people who don't know me assume that I'm gay.

As if scripted, April picked that moment to wander sleepily up the stairs into the living room looking for me. Freshly awakened and not expecting company, she was attired, as usual, in the perfect suit God gave her for her birthday.

Pushing wisps of white blond hair away from bright blue eyes, she said "Billy, who was at the..." She stopped dead when she saw Sergeant Lynch and me in the foyer.

The three of us froze. Ten seconds flew by like a lifetime. Outside, tides changed. Planes landed and took off again. First graders grew up and started families. I grew a beard. I bought a dog. The dog had puppies. Day turned to dusk turned to night turned to day again. I had never experienced such total stillness and quiet. We were like a high school gym class split into teams of "shirts" and "skins", and I in my "Snoopy" boxer shorts didn't know to which of these two women's teams I belonged.

This was going to be an *interesting* day.

Finally, April broke the silence. "I'll go make some coffee." She did a perfect pirouette, and bounced out of sight.

Sergeant Lynch and I remained motionless, still staring at the space where April had appeared. She turned slowly to me, and said "Do you think she'll get dressed first? ... And by the way - nice shorts, Sport."

I looked down at my boxers, then back at Lynch, who was still staring at them. Counting the "Snoopys", I supposed.

I said “She won’t keep her clothes on. It’s a habit I am trying *not* to break her of. The shorts were a Valentine’s gift. I have sort of an obligation to wear them.” I decided my attire was also a bit too informal. “Why don’t I show you to the breakfast room. Then I can get dressed myself, and you can tell me why you’re here.”

I led her down the three steps from the foyer, through the living room, on through the formal dining room, to the south end of the house. The breakfast room faces the ocean, in front of but open to the kitchen.

On the way, I said “What did you mean ‘You guys always have great places’ ?”

“Oh. Well, you being a decorator...”

“Designer.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“You assumed I was gay. I get that a lot from strangers because of the business.”

“Well, now that I’ve seen your “Roomie”, you won’t get it from me. And I just learned something about myself, too.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m never gonna be gay, either.”

“And what caused that revelation?”

“I just saw the most perfect woman I’ll ever see, and she didn’t interest me. Maybe as art, but not sexually.”

We walked into the breakfast room. I said “She’s not my “Roomie”, she’s a guest. I’ll go change, and if we’re lucky “The Most Perfect Woman” might make us breakfast.”

Just as I finished talking about her, April joined us. She had put on white very short shorts, new white Keds, and a snug pale pink tee shirt, all perfectly colored to accentuate her flawless lightly sun-kissed skin. She looked almost as fabulous with clothes on. I could see that Sargent Lynch was relieved. I myself had mixed feelings about the clothes part.

Now April took charge. “Bobby, why are you still running around in your undershorts? Go get dressed. I’ll make us some breakfast, then I’m going to the gym. You two can talk about the gross stuff after we eat and I leave. It’s Saturday, Sergeant Lynch, you can stay for breakfast, can’t you?”

“Well, technically, it is my day off. I guess so, thank you” Lynch said.

I showered, shaved, put on well worn khakis and an old purple T-shirt that said “*Dive Naked*” in small letters over the left chest, and “*Wear Your Original Wet Suit*” across the back.

When I returned, the women were both busily involved in cooking, and talking like old sorority sisters. I learned that I had guessed right: Sergeant Lynch had recently moved to Florida from Boston, knew no one but other cops here, and was having trouble with the transition. I sat at the table, watched them working, and listened in on the conversation.

“It’s just so fucking hot here. And I can’t find a gym I like that isn’t either a cop gym or full of players and roid-raged jerks. People drive like they’re pissed off *and* on drugs - and that’s just the Mom’s in vans and SUVs. There’s not a decent deli anywhere. Everyone’s so goddamn rich. I miss skiing. And the men are all assholes, I haven’t had a date in the three months I’ve been here!”

I leaned my elbow on the table, propped my chin in my hand, and thought: "Okay, she's managed to sum things up quite well. Lets all give up and move to Tahiti."

April, the only real Florida native I'd ever met, laughed, took a deep breath, and defended her birthplace, point by point:

"You'll learn to handle the heat, eventually. We'll find you some more suitable clothes."

Lynch sneaked a glance at me that said "*Her? Clothing?*" I smiled back and shrugged.

"Come winter, you won't believe how beautiful the weather is."

"Tell me what kind of gym you like, and I'll tell you where it is."

"The "Soccer Mom's" speed while on their cell phones, and the immigrants can't drive at all. Just relax, stay out of the way, and watch them run the red lights and bash each other."

"There's a great deli on East Palmetto right near the beach. Studly here can show you. He eats lunch there nearly every day. Became part owner so they can never close... oops, I'm not supposed to tell you *that*", she deadpanned.

"Most of the "rich" aren't rich, just creatively in debt. Some of the really rich ones," (here she looked over at me) "you'd never know it."

"I'll set you up with SCUBA lessons, so you won't miss skiing. And if you have to ski, take your vacation in winter and go to Colorado, like we natives do."

"I probably can't help you with the date part, because you're exactly right about the men here, I found the only decent one."

"I must be doing something right" I thought. "At least I *hope* she's talking about me".

And so it went. I barely got a word in for the next hour, but I learned a great deal about women. Which, added to what I already knew, equaled *Next to Nothing*. I was too busy eating to talk, anyway. They had cooked a breakfast worthy of a hotel buffet. Apparently, April had grocery shopped. She never thinks I have enough food. I know I didn't buy all that stuff. The detective was obviously enjoying her first home-cooked meal in months. April as usual hardly ate anything. And, being a guy, I felt obliged to finish the rest. Maybe today I wouldn't be having lunch at Jo's Deli.

We finished with fresh brewed Starbucks (that, I did buy), and sat contentedly looking at the view. It was a typical Florida summer morning sea: sunlight bouncing off blue water shiny and smooth as glass, the Gulf Stream as close to shore as it ever gets, warming the water to eighty-six degrees. There wasn't much wind out there, but a few boats were out for a beautiful morning's sail anyway. A single dive boat was tied to a buoy over the first reef line, about a quarter of a mile offshore. This time of year all of it's customers were surely Florida residents - competent divers glad to be diving without crowded boats of dangerously inexperienced tourists. It would be another humid ninety-two degree day, with a brief rain shower at four o'clock; a day to be under water or working inside in air conditioning - which is what I had planned.

Finally, April stood and said "I have to get going. You two can talk business now. Buddy, you clean up the kitchen - we did our part. Kathleen, call me before your next day off, and I'll show you around." She kissed my cheek, and left.

I looked glumly over at the kitchen. They had used every pot, pan, utensil, and most of the dishes. They even used the copper pots and pans that were supposed to hang from the rack just for decoration. All the counters and the stove top were a mess. It would take me the rest of the morning to fill the dishwasher, clean up what wouldn't fit, polish the copper pots and pans, and put the place back in order. I swear, sometimes I think April makes a mess on purpose.

Sergeant Lynch stood, too. “Look, maybe the weekend isn’t the best time to do this. Just because I don’t have a life, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t either. It’ll wait ‘til Monday.”

I looked over the kitchen mess again. There was my morning - who said I’d have a life today?

“I’ll walk you out” I said.

On the way to the front door, I could see Lynch gathering in every detail of the place. A big breakfast hadn’t changed the fact that she was here as a police officer.

When we got to the foyer, she turned to me and said “I like your friend. She’s the first real person I’ve met since I came to Florida.”

“Everyone, without exception, likes April. You can’t not like her; that would be like not liking Santa Claus or something.”

“She doesn’t seem to know your name, though.”

“Oh, that’s her little running joke. She’s pretending she doesn’t think about me enough to even remember my name. Trying to get a rise out of me. I just ignore it, and answer to whatever she calls me, which makes her try even harder to come up with something outlandish. Sometimes it gets pretty damn hilarious, and I have to leave the room so she won’t see me laugh. It’s like, if I laugh, she wins.”

She grimaced and said “And you’re the only decent guy here?”

“We have a very good time together.” I gave her my best Cary Grant smile.

“We do need to talk business” she said seriously, leveling pale amber eyes on mine. For the first time, I could see the cop inside her.

“Okay, but I don’t know why. All I did was find the thing.”

“Just some questions I need to ask. Maybe you know more than you think. It’s my job to find out. My boss wants me to try to solve this thing, and I’m the new detective on the force, so I need to look good. We’re trying to keep it quiet until we figure it out. That’s why we haven’t told the press about it. If we had, your private beach would be swarming with reporters and camera crews by now. I’ll be in touch on Monday.”

I watched her go down the steps to her car. View from the back as good as from the front. Miss Universe as a policewoman. I decided to keep that thought to myself.

I had a kitchen disaster to deal with, then Dominic and I were going to work on rewiring one of the older cars.

- TWO -

At two o'clock the following Monday afternoon, April greeted Sergeant Lynch at the beach house door. Today, Lynch had conceded some to the heat, and was wearing a tan business suit with a skirt, and a white sleeveless cotton blouse. April had on an old chambray shirt of her boyfriend's, sleeves rolled up and the tails tied above her tight midriff, and a pair of long baggy khaki shorts. Her hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail, stray escaping strands framing her perfect face. While most women would have looked sloppy in that outfit, April looked like a model ready for a Banana Republic photo shoot. She was barefoot, and had a calculator in one hand, and an impossibly sleek cell phone in the other.

"Didn't expect to find you here at this hour. Aren't you working today?", Lynch said.

"You keep odd hours in my business. And it doesn't really matter if I'm in the office, I'm the only employee. Anywhere I can get online is good enough, and I forward my calls. Lately, I've been using the computer here quite a bit. And, if it's not too hot, I take my laptop and cell phone out on the deck and do business in the shade under the umbrella."

"Is MacKenzie here?"

"No, he's not. I was working, so he went out to lunch, and he hasn't come back. He didn't say where else he was going, and if he doesn't volunteer, I don't ask. I don't want him to feel like I'm keeping tabs on him. So I can't tell you when he'll be back."

"Can you reach him on his cell phone?"

"He won't carry one. Do you want to come in and wait for awhile?"

“Alright, I’ll give him a few minutes. I need to talk to you anyway, and it’s nice and cool in here.”

“Lets go sit in the living room.”

April led the way down the foyer steps, to the north end of the living room. The furniture in that area had been arranged in a more intimate way, less formal than the rest of the room, and oriented toward a large flatscreen home theater and fireplace that occupied most of the outward curving north wall of the house. An Art Deco bar was next to a large built in glass front wine cooler, and several rows of wine bottles filled racks below a marble counter top with an adjacent built in sink. The bar was valuable, Mac had found it in Paris, and it’s use was primarily decorative. This entire area was sheltered from the sun, the relative darkness broken by soft light from recessed lights far overhead and torchiere lamps on either end of the wall, all creating the illusion of a small separate room. A long sofa faced the television and fireplace, flanked on either side by two club chairs - all five pieces in their original burnished chestnut brown leather, nearly seventy years old and just comfortably broken in. A large cocktail table with a thick glass top sat on an area rug of champagne colored leather, and filled the U formed by the sofa and chairs. Behind the sofa was a long console table with a lamp at each end. Conor had made all the tables from imported Deco era iron fence gates.

“Would you like a glass of wine, Kathleen?”, April asked as they approached their seats.

“No, thanks. I’m working.”

“Fresh iced tea then?”

“That would be nice.”

“Make yourself comfortable here. I’ll just go to the kitchen and get the pitcher. And I need to make one short business call.”

Lynch stood for a moment watching the other woman dialing her phone while she walked the eighty feet to the other end of the living room, through the dining room and out of sight. She could hear April's voice, muffled by the distance, as she talked. She briefly considered how her Boston Irish accent must sound contrasted to April's refined speech with its total lack of any region at all. Every time she met someone new here in Florida, they looked quizzically at her and asked her where she was from; she wondered if with time here the "Boston" would fade.

Once again, her eyes scanned the sleek, uncluttered, yet obviously opulent interior. Though she was a complete innocent regarding decorating, she could tell that the furnishings were old and probably valuable. Yet the interior did not appear dated; indeed the effect was as fresh and contemporary as any space she had ever seen. Soft jazz piano was playing quietly throughout the living room, and she looked for, but could not see, hidden speakers.

The background check she had done on MacKenzie this morning had revealed no steady source of income to explain how he could afford such a property, and no one she queried at the station could offer any insight. Everyone on the force, just as she, had moved here from somewhere else. Bob the desk Sergeant, a retired Marine MP, had been here the longest, six years, and said:

"Can't help you much. Guy was already here when I came to Boca. Quiet type. Keeps a low profile. Drives a little too fast, we look the other way for residents like him, long as they don't get carried away. I've met him a couple times - seems like a regular guy. We see someone entering his property, we ask 'em to move on. Do that for all the heavy hitters. One thing I *can* tell you is every developer in Florida wants that land he's on real bad."

Growing up in a cop family, Lynch had been brought up to be suspicious of people who had more possessions than their income could explain. She knew that she would have to satisfy her professional curiosity about this guy. The fact that she had already admitted to herself that she was attracted to him, and could see she and April were becoming friends, wouldn't keep her from doing her job. She had let her ex-husband deceive her for three years, and damned if anyone was going to fool her ever again.

She picked one of the leather club chairs and sank into it as April returned with a pitcher of tea and some shortbread cookies.

"I'm sorry I took so long. I had to turn some Euros into Yuans before the end of the day" April said.

She carried the things to the marble counter, took glasses out of a light maple fronted cabinet so well crafted that Lynch hadn't even noticed a door there, and filled them with ice from a small built in refrigerator. She brought Lynch a full glass, and placed plates of lemon slices, sugar cubes, and the cookies on the coffee table, then sat in a club chair opposite the detective.

"Listen April, before I forget: Thanks for the breakfast the other day. That was the first non-microwave meal I've had in ages."

"Yeah, we could tell."

"It was that obvious?"

"Let's just say that I've never seen a woman out eat Mac before."

"Oh shit, that's embarrassing! Great first impression", Lynch said. "Damn", she thought, "I already care what he thinks".

“Actually, it was. I want to keep this shape forever, and I’m afraid to eat a lot. He thinks I don’t eat enough, and I could tell by the way he was watching you that he was impressed with your appetite.”

“Did he say that?”

“No, the only comment he’s made about you was: ‘Girl must work out a lot.’ “

Lynch thought: “I come barging in sweating like a bitch, interrupt their morning sex, mess up their kitchen, pig out on their food, and they’re completely gracious. After totally ruining their Saturday morning, all he can say is ‘Girl must work out a lot’. Hey, all that time at the gym isn’t wasted after all ! ”

April said “Did you see his face when I said he had to clean up the kitchen?”

“Like a dog about to be chained to a tree. I wondered why we used so many things. You brought out everything in the kitchen.”

She was laughing. “I love to do that to him. It’s so funny! He hates disorder. Everything around here has to be just perfect.”

“You should see him when I leave his computer on, which I always make sure to do. I can actually see him stop himself from saying anything to me. He just makes a very obvious show of going to the den to turn it off.”

“I like to shake him out of his routine once in a while. To make sure he knows I’m around.”

Lynch looked at this girl that no straight man in the world could ignore, and said “Trust me. He knows you’re here.”

April looked down and smiled as she took a sip of her iced tea.

The detective took a small spiral bound notebook and a ballpoint pen from a large black leather handbag, and looked over a few pages silently.

“April, what can you tell me about last Friday morning... what do you remember?”

April tucked her long shapely legs under her and curled into her chair. “Well, there’s not really much to tell. Sometimes he doesn’t sleep well - actually, he doesn’t ever sleep well at all - and he gets up and goes out on the beach in the middle of the night. Usually, he comes back to bed in an hour or so. He tries to be quiet so he won’t wake me, but I’m a light sleeper myself. That’s why we weren’t up yet when you came Saturday morning. Sometimes when he comes back, I’m wide awake and we..... well, you know.”

“Jesus, she’s actually blushing” thought Lynch.

April continued: “Anyway, contrary to the way it appears, I don’t live here, but we were out late Thursday night, and I decided to stay over.”

Lynch interrupted “What time did you leave to go out last Thursday night?”

“He came over to meet me at my office at Mizner Park at about seven. We had a dinner party to go to at PGA National. That’s north of Palm Beach.”

“How long does it take him to get to your office from here?”

“Maybe ten minutes. Depends what and how he’s driving that day.”

“What time did you leave the dinner party?”

“Well, it started at eight, and I guess we left around eleven-thirty. I really wasn’t watching the clock.”

“Did you go directly home?”

“Yes, but it was a nice night, so we put the top down and drove over to A1A, and came south along the ocean. That takes longer. I said he could just drop me at my place on the way, but he wanted me to come here for awhile.”

“And what time did you arrive here?”

“That, I know exactly. It was just before one. That’s why I decided to stay over. I knew by the time we got to sleep, it would probably be well after two, and he’d have to drive me home.”

“Then what?”

April’s soft voice became a little annoyed “You mean what did we do? That’s kinda personal, Kathleen.”

Lynch looked up from her note taking, and laughed. “Might be interesting, but that’s not what I meant. I mean, what happened after you went to sleep?”

“Oh. Well, we eventually went to sleep. This time, I didn’t hear him leave; but later when I rolled over to snuggle against him, he wasn’t in bed. I was really sleepy, and I didn’t think much about it.”

“You see he always gets up earlier than me. Every morning after dawn, he goes out and does what he calls “policing the shore”. He owns over a half mile of shoreline on either side of the house, you know, and he picks up trash that’s washed ashore overnight and any nice shells he finds. He gives the shells to friends who collect them, or to tourist kids up the shore at the park.”

“Anyway, when I turned back over, I saw by the alarm clock that it was five o’clock, and I thought “Boy, he’s getting an early start today”, and went back to sleep. I didn’t wake up again until seven-thirty, and he still wasn’t back. That’s odd, because when I’m here, he always comes in as soon as he’s done policing and makes me coffee. He never just goes off without saying good morning.”

“I wondered what happened to him, so I put on his dress shirt from the night before and went out on the beach to look for him. I saw him right away, about a quarter of a mile north of the house. He was just sitting there, cross legged and facing the ocean. As I got closer, I could see he was looking at something just in front of him. I thought at first it was just a big coconut. When I got a few feet away, I said “Bubba, what are you doing?” I startled him, and when he turned to answer me, I could see he was very upset. I’ve never seen his face look that way. Then I looked closely at the coconut and realized it was a... a *human head*.”

April’s voice had become softer with each sentence, and when she got to the part about Mac’s reaction, her voice, barely a whisper, cracked. Her eyes filled and teardrops began to drift over her high cheekbones.

She unwound her legs, pushed up out of her chair, went over to the bar, took a cocktail napkin and blew her nose. She stood there silently, with her back to Lynch.

Kathleen watched her standing there, and felt a wave of compassion overtake her professional detachment. Usually, women this beautiful were spoiled, empty-headed and relied upon their looks and someone else’s money to get by. This young woman of twenty-five was supremely intelligent, with an independence and confidence that belied her age. She had everything required to be a snobbish, ruthless brat. But she was exactly the opposite; friendly and approachable, with a natural ability to make anyone in her presence immediately at ease. As her boyfriend had said, “You can’t not like her”. The Sergeant supposed that April’s business success came not from trampling people with her superior intellect, but rather that people would want to be associated with her because of the gracious way she dealt with them.

And at this moment, Lynch could clearly see that April’s jocular air and casual air in Conor MacKenzie’s presence was concealing the fact that she was deeply in love with him. For the first time in her life the young genius’s emotions were preeminent, and her intelligence couldn’t tell her how to handle the situation.

She decided to let the next question wait until April was ready.

April sighed heavily, cleared her throat, and with her back still turned, continued: "He looked so... *forlorn*. He turned back to look at the...head, and said 'I've been waiting for you to find me. I was afraid to leave it here and come to the house because I thought the police wouldn't want it disturbed. And I had to keep the ghost crabs away, and the tide's coming in. If you hadn't come soon, I don't know what I'd have done. Would you please run back and call the police?' "

Lynch said gently, "So that's when you called us?"

April turned around and leaned back on the counter. "I ran back and called, and waited for the police so I could show them where he was. The uniformed guys came, and we went down to the beach and they relieved Mac and called for the coroner - said 'Hurry, the tide is coming in fast'. Then they started talking to Mac, and the coroner showed up, and then you showed up."

"At first, everybody was questioning Mac like he was some kind of criminal, and then the coroner packed up the thing, and it seemed you all decided it was probably a shark attack. And then all of you left, and we were back in the house, and he just tried to act like nothing ever happened... You saw what he was like on Saturday."

"Yeah, he was pretty nonchalant."

"Well, that was just *bullshit*. The thing that's bothering me is: what if I had just decided he was gone for the day, and taken a cab home? What would he have done? Kathleen, he sat there for almost *three hours*. He was *counting* on me. If I hadn't shown up, he would probably *hate* me."

“April, I’m sure he’s a pretty resourceful guy, He would have thought of something.”

“But he *didn’t*, did he? He *waited* and *waited* for me, because he was so sure I would look for him.”

“Someone would have come along. Or he would have just had to leave the head and come to the house.”

“You’re new here, Kathleen. Everyone knows this is private property, and they respect that. The only time anyone comes through here is in the winter when the tourists don’t know any better. This time of year we don’t see anyone. And he would *hate* to have just left that head there because, you know, he likes everything to be just right.”

April took another napkin, and dabbed at tears once again welling in her eyes. “What makes me so emotional is, he’s the most self assured man I’ve ever known, and I think he was upset because he thought I had let him down.”

The detective closed her notebook. She stood up, smoothed her skirt, thought a moment, then looked at April. “His reaction had nothing to do with you, April. Let’s go into the kitchen and get some coffee. I think I can explain what caused his reaction, and I think you deserve to know.”

- THREE -

As the women walked to the kitchen, April excused herself to visit the powder room to pull herself together. Kathleen knew where everything in the kitchen was from Saturday's breakfast, so she started coffee brewing, and brought cups, saucers, spoons and cream to the table. April would use the cream. Lynch, as a cop, was used to drinking bad coffee all day, which she unsuccessfully attempted to rescue with cream and sugar. This fresh brewed Starbucks was a luxury she wouldn't dilute.

She wondered for a moment how a man like MacKenzie wound up with a kitchen like this. Restaurant sized stainless steel oven, double-size gas stove top, triple glass door commercial refrigerator, enough counter space to fill four or five kitchens the size of the one in her apartment in Deerfield. From what she had gathered on Saturday morning, he hardly ever used the kitchen. April had said that all he ever bought was cereal, milk, lemonade, imported beer, hot dogs, and chocolate Hagen Daas. Plus his precious Starbucks coffee. A single guy's seven basic food groups. She could imagine her big Boston Irish family filling a kitchen like this on Thanksgiving, instead of the tiny one in her parents old home. Did people this wealthy even use their kitchens?

April walked in, red eyed but with returning confidence, and the Sergeant said "I hope you don't mind, I found everything and started the coffee."

"Of course I don't mind Kathleen. You're welcome here, as a friend."

April sat at the table, and let the other woman play the hostess. The coffee was ready. The detective carried the pot to the table, filled each of their cups, then took a chair opposite April.

She looked at the younger woman, deadly serious now. "Good, April. I'm glad you feel that way. Because what I'm going to say now is strictly as a friend. Officially off the record. We didn't have this conversation."

"What do you know about this guy? How long have you known him?" She flicked her eyes up from April's face, and pointedly looked at the house around them. "Tell me everything you know."

"Mac is kind and funny and handsome and a real gentleman," April replied. "I've known him for a little over a year, since right after I moved back here from Paris."

"Okay, you've just described a Boy Scout. Now, tell me specifically what you know about him."

"Well, let's see... He told me he was married and divorced long ago. They didn't have children. He changes the subject if I ask anything more about that."

"He has an interior design business, but he'll only do maybe one project a year, at his own pace, and the client has to be someone he likes. He has a contract to design for some big furniture company, but he told me they're upset... well he said "pissed off", because he'll only draw when the spirit moves him, and they want him on a schedule."

"He doesn't have any family, both his parents are gone."

"Let's see, what else... He has money. I can tell, because he never talks about it; those are the ones who are really well off. His lifestyle is really pretty simple. But when he wants to spend it, which is hardly ever, he just does it. For example - no one's supposed to know this, I *did* slip the other day - Jo told him she was going to close the deli because there's not enough business in the summer to pay her bills. The very next day, Mac walked over and bought half the business so she could stay open. Just because he likes her."

“He has more energy than anyone I know. He does most of the work around these grounds, you know. And he’s very athletic, almost compulsively, like he’s proving something to himself. He plays in a touch football league, windsurfs, snow skis, swims like a fish. He swims every day. Sometimes he swims so far up the coast, I almost lose sight of him. I’ve asked him to stop that; he just smiles and says “Okay, Mom.” And he lets me win at tennis. I’m not supposed to suspect that, but I played at Stanford and I know when someone’s not trying. All of that and more, with a left leg so bad that some days he can hardly walk. You should see the scars on his thigh and knee - oh, that’s right you did. I’ve asked him numerous times what happened to him, and every time I get a different silly answer like ‘jealous husband’, or ‘I was a lousy bullfighter’.”

“He knows something about everything. He can make wonderful conversation, but none of it is ever really about *him*. He never talks about his past. I can tell it makes him uncomfortable, so I don’t press. But, when you’re as close to him as I’ve become, you see that deep within him, his soul is bruised.”

“I guess that’s about it. It doesn’t seem like much when you ask me to sum it up like this. But Kathleen, I *do* know him, know the *man*. The kind and gentle stuff - that’s important to me.”

“Do you love him?”

“Is that an official question?”

“Official, no. Personal, yes. I think you and I are becoming friends. You don’t have to answer.”

“Well, it started out as a flirtation with a handsome older man. I mean, he can be *so charming*. But now I find I want to be with him all the time. I’ve never been with anyone so attentive, and such a gentleman. We are so comfortable and have so much fun, it seems like we’ve always been together. And then, it seems he’s always holding part of himself in reserve. Like he has a commitment phobia. I don’t know what to do about that. But I know he genuinely cares for me.”

“Well, I wanted to ask that, because some of what I’m going to tell you, you don’t know. And it may affect your feelings.”

She pulled the notebook from her bag again, and opened to a page of notes titled “MacKenzie”.

“This is what I found this morning, running a few quick inquiries: Conor Ian MacKenzie, the Third. Forty-two years old. Blond, blue eyes, five foot-eleven, one-ninety-five. That’s all off his drivers license record. Born Brooksville, Ohio; that’s farm country south of Cleveland. Mother died thirty-one years ago. Father died eight years ago. No brothers or sisters. Lived in California until about ten years ago. Then disappeared for a couple years, then surfaced here. Six years ago his name appeared on the deed to this property, real estate transfer papers say he paid one dollar, but that’s a standard tax ploy, especially when the sale is in untraceable cash - and I mean in actual currency. What he really paid, why it was done that way, or any other information, I haven’t been able to find out. There is a very high powered law firm that handled it, and apparently also still represents Mac’s interests. They won’t tell me squat without a subpoena, and I have no legal reason to ask for one. He has no visible means of support, just sort of hangs out a lot. Shows up at some high end charity functions, but that’s not his crowd, I guess you know that.” (April nodded yes). “His banking is done through Northern Trust, they’re a private bank, deal mainly with the trust fund crowd, you probably use them yourself,” (April nodded again), “and they also wouldn’t tell me anything. He’s a very shadowy guy, our friend. That always bothers me. We cops like to be able to find out about people.”

“Here comes the part that may make you uncomfortable. He told you he was divorced a long time ago. Well, that is true. He was married fifteen years ago in California to a Su Li Chin. They were married for nearly four years, then divorced. But I’m afraid that’s not the whole story. It seems she got a divorce nine months after leaving him, which he didn’t contest. Then, two months later, she died. She was driving south from San Francisco down the coast of the Monterey peninsula, at night, and her car went

off a cliff into the ocean. April, *she was beheaded*. And Mac was questioned extensively as a murder suspect. But no charges were ever filed, and her death was eventually ruled accidental. So, there's your explanation about his reaction out on the beach last Friday morning. He probably found the head and had some sort of flashback. But it had *nothing* to do with you."

"Look, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with Mac. He's a very likable guy. I'm just saying you might want to be careful before you get any more involved. His last ten years are just a little too mysterious for me."

Both women sat in silence for several minutes. April got up, went over to the counter, and brought the coffee pot and refilled their cups, without saying a word. Lynch could see that she was processing all this new information.

April walked over to the glass doors, and stood silently, thinking. Still facing the ocean, she said "So, his ex-wife's death was investigated and officially ruled an accident, right?"

"Right."

"She died eleven months after they split up. So, he was probably questioned only because she died so soon after the divorce, right? I mean, wouldn't you question a man here under the same circumstances?"

"I guess so."

"And nobody you talked to said he's ever done anything wrong, correct?"

"Yes."

April turned to face the detective, and in a very firm voice said "Then I don't see any reason to change my feelings about him. As a matter of fact, you've explained a lot about why he is the way he is. The poor man has had a terrible life. What he needs is my love, not for me to pull away now."

“Kathleen, I appreciate your telling me all this, I really do. I know you mean well, and it is good to know that I wasn’t the reason he’d been so upset. If you don’t mind, I’d like to be alone for awhile now. Before Conor comes home, I want to think about what I can do to help him face this, without him knowing I know.”

Lynch stood and took her cup to the counter. Facing April she said “Alright. But I still need to talk to him.”

April’s voice dropped low, and her words became tight with barely controlled anger. “Leave him alone, Sergeant. All he did was preserve evidence for you. He couldn’t possibly have anything to do with that goddamn head. I will *not* let you traumatize him further.”

Her instantaneous and complete change in demeanor took the detective by surprise. The force with which the young woman’s words were delivered was almost physically palpable. All sweetness and good nature had disappeared, and Lynch was suddenly facing a lioness protecting her cub.

The Sergeant softly but firmly said “He is one of our only two witnesses in what may possibly be a very brutal murder. I already have the other witness’s statement - yours. I have to have his. Please ask him to come to the station tomorrow. I’ll be waiting for him. You can come along and he can also bring his attorney, if he wishes. He is not a suspect, April. I just have to do my job. I’ll find my own way out.”

The detective walked quickly away, the sound of her heels receding in the distance. The front door closed with a soft click.

April turned toward the ocean once again. Of late, marriage and children with Mac had been playing across her mind. How could their idyllic life together have changed so much in only four days? Hugging herself, she leaned her head against the glass, and began to cry softly.

- FOUR -

I returned home at about five on Monday afternoon. April's Saab was gone. When I walked through the front door, I saw a piece of paper on the foyer floor. Bending to pick it up, I saw it was a note from her:

*Sergeant Lynch is expecting you at the station tomorrow.
She said you can take Josef Bayer if you want to.*

- A

OK, *that* was short and to the point. I wondered why she mentioned Josef Bayer. I had few occasions to require an attorney, but when I did, he was the one I used.

I walked down the foyer steps, turned left, and went downstairs to the second floor, wondering why April wasn't there. In the den, the computer was turned off. Strange.

Somehow, things hadn't been the same since my grisly discovery on the beach last Friday. I had awakened with the usual nightmare early that morning, and then to discover a woman's head on the beach shortly thereafter had been a shock I was not emotionally prepared for. It had seemed as if I was still in the dream, and could not wake up. Finally, April had come, and I was released back into the real world.

The nightmare, which previously had been infrequent, had come each night since. I couldn't talk to April about this - it wasn't her problem, and it had nothing to do with her and me. It was a burden I carried inside me that I had learned to live with, since I couldn't make it go away.

I had not seen Su Li's body after her accident. In fact, I didn't learn of her death except by coincidence. The nightmares were not born from reality, but from my own imagination.

After I showered, I went into the kitchen and bought myself a beer and took it out on the deck.

I wondered again why April had left such a terse note. Usually, when I wasn't here and she went home, she left a detailed note in the kitchen for me. Where she was going, when she would call, "*eat something besides hot dogs*", and some cute way of saying I love you without actually saying it. She was determined to cure me of my bachelor habits.

I had lived alone here for a long time, with only the occasional "overnight guest", and I had grown accustomed to the silence and my own company. About a year ago, April had burst into my life. I hadn't expected it to last for very long, that's my track record. Then it seemed like suddenly she was just *there* all the time, and it felt very natural. I liked it.

To a bachelor, there is nothing quite like having a woman around the house. Suddenly, everything changes. Forget your routine. Your orderly, organized life becomes unpredictable.

You find yourself taking another person's schedule into account.

Someone gives a damn what you did with your day, and you want to know about their's.

Lights are turned on that were never used.

Food appears in your kitchen.

You actually eat some meals at home.

You take baths, even though you never used to, because no man can resist a hot babe in a bath tub. Co-ed showers are a lot more interesting and lengthy, not just for getting clean.

You notice that a chair that was never used before, in a place off by itself, has become her favorite place to sit and read, and you now think of that little corner as hers, and you can't look there without thinking about her.

You find pieces of women's intimate apparel unexpectedly, and you grin goofily and tell yourself "*Nice goin' Stud*". I think they leave this stuff on purpose, just as a little reminder. I mean, have you ever heard of a *guy* leaving underwear?

The house doesn't seem so huge anymore, it feels more comfortable and alive with a woman's presence.

And, most noticeable of all to me, there is a hint of her scent in the air. I had yet to become accustomed to this, it had been a long time since I shared a house with a woman. The moment I walked in the door, I knew if April was here.

One day recently, I realized that if she was around when I left the house, I ought to say something about where I was going and when I might be back. I had to admit to myself that I had become so conditioned to being alone that I had taken too long to extend this simple courtesy. And I still forgot sometimes. Like today... *Damn*.

Maybe it was the unspoken tension we had felt the past four days, maybe it was the tenor of her note: until now I hadn't given this much thought to how my life had changed since April appeared. I began to grasp for the first time that, despite my promise to myself that I would never let anyone get close to me again, she had stolen into my heart. And as soon as I admitted that, I knew I had been avoiding the obvious because I would have to face the old fears of women leaving me. Mom left, died, when I was eleven. Granma took her place, then died when I was not yet twelve. Celeste was in and out of my life in months.

The next woman I got close to was Su Li, and she left after less than four years, then died. I had resolved then never to chance the heartbreak again. And, it seemed that getting close to me didn't carry a good prognosis for a woman's health. So I guessed by not admitting I cared for April, I had been subconsciously protecting us both.

I realized now that we had gone beyond playtime, and I wanted her around permanently, and I would miss her terribly if she wasn't here.

Having figured this much out, I knew I would eventually have to decide how to handle all this, and find out what April really thought about me. But I wasn't going to solve all that over one beer on the deck. So I decided to let it simmer for a few days, at least until I got Kathleen Lynch and her investigation off my mind.

The Marlins were playing the Giants tonight - my two adopted home teams. So I went into the kitchen and broiled myself four hot dogs - fixed them up ballpark style with mustard, relish, and lots of onions (no girl to kiss tonight), grabbed a six pack of St. Pauli Girl, and headed for the big screen.

- FIVE -

I awoke at dawn the next morning with a stiff neck, sore shoulder, a desperate need to piss, and one Mother of a headache. Sometime during the ball game the night before, I had come up with the brilliant plan to drink enough beer to make me sleep through the night without the nightmare. Well, the plan worked, no nightmare, but I had forgotten to include *“After getting drunk, go downstairs to bed”*. I had fallen asleep on the sofa with the TV on, and now I was going to reap the reward of my plan by feeling like shit all day. There was only one thing to do. I went downstairs, took a leak, changed into a swim suit, and headed out to the ocean for a long swim.

Thankfully in my condition, the ocean that morning was perfect for swimming. The water was smooth as a backyard pond, with wavelets about six inches high lightly slapping the sand at shore. They looked like pre-packaged perfect little waves that one would buy at “Toys-R-Us” for Ken and Barbie to frolic in. Devoid of wave action, the water was like crystal, clear enough to see the bottom at any depth, and warm - already up to about eighty-four degrees with a strong north flowing current. No boats had appeared this early. I dived in straight out from the house, and set out swimming south against the current - always better to have the current with you on the return leg of a swim. I did a hard half-mile down and a current aided languid return. As I swam, the stiff neck and sore shoulder loosened up, their cramps lessening from debilitating to nagging. The headache’s intensity receded by about fifty percent, but still pounded enough with each pulse beat to remind me of the perverted wisdom of getting drunk.

My mind drifted as each stroke became rhythmic and mechanical, and memories of many nights of drinking myself to sleep after Su Li left were triggered by my all too familiar condition. Everything I had worked so hard for years to keep locked up and hidden from myself was escaping from the emotional strongbox I had fashioned, and was resurfacing. I had long ago resolved to deal with emotions by not acknowledging them, and as I waded the last few steps through the shallows to shore, I knew I would do so again, now.

I climbed the steps from the beach to the weathered wooden bridge that connects the dune to the third floor deck, went into the kitchen, and put a pot of strong coffee on to brew while I took a shower. I shaved, and dressed to go to the police station in a good pair of chinos, my best white polo shirt, and tennis shoes. I started up the stairs, then thought about where I was going, and went back to the bedroom and put on socks and tassel loafers.

In the kitchen, I drank four cups of black coffee and ate a bowl of Wheaties, with fresh strawberries which April must have brought.

Feeling about three quarters human again, I went downstairs, brushed my teeth and hair, and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I saw years on my face that weren't there four days ago.

I went up and out the front door, down the steps to the first floor carport, got into the old white Jaguar coupe I'd had air conditioned for everyday use, and drove over to Boca City Hall to meet with Sergeant Lynch.

Boca Raton City Hall is a building with unfulfilled aspirations of grandeur. Attempted Addison Mizner architecture on a municipal budget. A three story square block main building is flanked by two single story wings with prominent archways, and fronted by a large brick paved courtyard with a central fountain surrounded by potted bougainvillea's. Tan colored stucco walls are contrasted by windows and doors with frames painted an odd turquoise color and the buildings are topped with terra

cotta barrel tile roofs, all, I supposed, trying unsuccessfully to mimic the colors of old Mediterranean buildings. Lushly landscaped and surrounded by trees, it occupies a full city block. Except there really isn't any city in the classic sense. In Florida, "cities" are usually just sections of land, claiming jurisdiction over areas delineated by roads to the north, south, east, and west. You could drive through town after town without knowing it, were it not for the welcome signs they erect.

I parked the Jag around the north side of the building in the coveted shade of a giant old ficus tree, in a space marked "Visitors". Inside the front doors was a large travertine-stone floored lobby, with Florida coral stone slab walls reaching up to the third floor skylights. An elderly lady with blue-grey hair in a bun, cats eye glasses, and a grey and blue flower print cotton dress, sat behind a large three sided dark mahogany reception desk. She was reading a romance novel, and when I asked, she directed me to the police department in a hushed voice that had the sound of a retired librarian. She called me "Young man". I liked her immediately.

Detective Sergeant Kathleen Lynch had a small office at the end of a hallway lined on either side by similar offices. Describing her office as "small" was being generous. If the door opened into the office instead of out into the hall, it would have been impossible to step inside and sit down in the guest chair in front of her desk. She sat facing the door, a tall beige metal filing cabinet stood in either corner behind her, with the space between them filled by low matching cabinets. There should have been a window above the low cabinets, but there wasn't, so she had hung a large picture of a snowstorm in a big city - presumably Boston. She had not otherwise personalized the space in any way, as if doing so would have been putting down roots she had not yet decided to plant. Her desk was, surprisingly, a mess. If she could find any one specific thing in that chaos, it would be by luck. Dressed in a white sleeveless blouse, her black suit jacket draped across the back of her chair, she was absorbed in studying a file folder full of newspaper clippings.

She didn't see me standing on the other side of the glass, so I opened the door and stepped in.

"*What?*", she barked. She was startled when she looked up and saw it was me and not another cop.

"Oh, sorry, Conor, I thought you were someone else. You're early; actually I wasn't sure you'd be in at all."

"Nice office. I guess you got a key to the executive washroom, too." I said.

"No, I got a private bath. With gold handles on the bidet." She swept her arm across the room like a spokesmodel, "This, is actually a decoy office, just so the other officers won't get jealous of my real office in the penthouse upstairs." Sarcasm didn't drip from her words, it immersed them. "It's an old routine: the newest guy in town gets the shitiest office. Doesn't help any that I'm the only woman in detectives and they brought me in as Sergeant over men who've been here awhile."

"But I'm used to this, I got the same kind of treatment every time I moved up in Boston P.D. It was much worse there, because I kept getting promoted and my husband didn't."

"You're married?"

"*Was* married. Three years and three months. It took him exactly three months after the wedding to start cheating on me. Wasn't hard for him to hide it, he just made sure he got assigned opposite shifts from mine. I found out about six months ago, when I came home early to surprise him, and I was the one who got a surprise: my husband and his "good buddy" patrol partner Dawn, in our bed."

"I couldn't stay in Boston, it turned out nearly everyone on the force but me knew about Joe and Dawn, and I was humiliated. I got a quick divorce, and found this job three months ago."

"Joe and I grew up together. Both our families are cop families and have been friends for years. In my family, you either became a cop, a priest, or a nun. I liked boys too much, so it was the cops for me."

“Both families tried to talk me out of the divorce; they said “*Boys will be boys*”, “*That’s just how men are*” (my own mother said that), “*It’s the assignment officer’s fault for giving Joe a female partner*”, and my own personal favorite: “*If you’d been taking care of him at home, he wouldn’t have needed her*” - that was from Joe’s older brother, another cop.”

“So this is as far away from that mess as I could get. Jesus, why am I telling you this? I haven’t told anyone why I moved here.”

I made no comment. It’s a phenomenon about myself that I had become aware of in high school: people share their private thoughts with me, tell me their problems, ask my advice. I’ve never figured out why. I don’t have much to say myself, so maybe people think I’m a good listener. Sometimes I think I should have become a “shrink”, but then I think what a mess my own life has been - how could I give advice?

Kathleen leaned forward, putting her arms on the desk, and folded her hands together. She looked at me in silence for a moment, her amber eyes for the first time revealing the fresh wounds of an injured young woman behind the “cop” bravado.

Very quietly, she said “Listen, I’d appreciate if you would keep what I just told you to yourself.”

What I was thinking, was: “Good God, what beautiful eyes.”

What I said, was: “Who would I tell? Besides, this is no one’s business but yours.”

Never breaking eye contact, she softly said “Thanks, Mac.”

She pushed her chair back, stood, and began rummaging through the piles on the desk, all business again. Not finding what she wanted there, she turned to one of the tall filing cabinets, opened the middle drawer, and began searching, while I once again surreptitiously admired her figure.

With her back to me, she spoke briskly “We have a homicide to investigate, and we’d better get to it. That’s why you’re here.”

Turning back around, she had two file folders in her hand. She looked at me now without a trace of emotion; the “cop” was back. “Let’s step into a conference room. Captain Stoltz wants to join our discussion.”

She buzzed Stoltz on the intercom, told him I was there, and we would meet him in the conference room. I followed her up the hall to a large room, the hallway wall of which was floor to ceiling glass with sliding glass doors. Windows with white wood blinds lined the long opposing wall, with a view of the back parking lot and a basketball court beyond. One end wall was covered with detail maps of the city, the other held a whiteboard with notes written in black grease pen, and an assignment board. Below the assignment board was a table with a microwave and two coffee makers. An oval conference table of white mica was surrounded by ten upholstered office chairs on casters.

As if obliged to confirm a cop cliché, a single beam of sunlight worked its way between the slats of a blind, and spotlighted the center of the conference table, which was occupied by a turquoise cafeteria tray piled high with a variety of doughnuts.

Lynch caught me smiling at the mound of doughnuts, and said “What’s funny?”

“You don’t see it?” I answered.

“See what?”

I didn’t bother to reply. Apparently, she didn’t notice the irony.

Not getting an answer, she gave me a good natured “You’re weird” look, and took a chair next to the head of the table. “Have a seat.” she said, indicating the chair opposite hers with a tilt of her chin.

As I was rounding the end of the table toward my seat, Captain Stoltz purposefully strode in, slid the door closed behind him, and walked over and extended his hand to me.

“Adrian Stoltz. You must be MacKenzie.” It wasn’t a question, and his firm handshake held no friendship. He was a good looking man of about forty-five, about six-two and lean, with neatly combed short black hair and a moustache. With his dark grey suit, white button-down shirt, and a dark red tie, he looked like an FBI Agent. I later learned he had indeed retired from the Bureau after twenty years service, and Boca was deemed lucky to be selected as the site of his second career.

He took the chair at the head of the table, and I sat opposite Sergeant Lynch. With an air of self importance, he pushed back his coat sleeve, looked at his watch, then took a small cassette recorder from his jacket pocket, and placed it on the table in front of us.

“Let’s get to this” he said. With a dismissive glance at Lynch, he said “Some of us don’t have the leisure of time to wait for investigations to start.”

“I’m going to tape our conversation. Sergeant Lynch will take notes. Before I turn on the tape, I want to officially inform you that we are investigating a homicide, and although you are at this time considered a witness and not a suspect, everything you say will be entered into our evidence file.”

“Are you “Mirandizing” me Captain?” I asked.

“Not at this time, no.”

“Because it sure sounded to me like you’re playing word games.” The headache began to pound again, and this asshole was beginning to piss me off.

“I am not playing word games, Mr. MacKenzie.”

“Then you won’t mind turning on the tape recorder, and specifically stating that I am a witness, not a suspect, and anything I say now will not be used as evidence to build a bogus case against me. Otherwise, you can take your mini-recorder and shove it up your tight ass.”

Stoltz just stared at me. I could see veins begin to pulse at his temples. Sergeant Lynch, on the other hand, looked quite amused. When she noticed that I was looking at her, and she realized she was grinning, she quickly looked down at her notebook and started scribbling, cutting the grin down to a small smile she hoped her boss wouldn't notice.

Continuing to stare at me, Stoltz picked up the recorder and put it back in his suit coat pocket.

He said "Sergeant Lynch will take notes. If at any time you feel uncomfortable answering a question, just say so, and we will move on. If it's a question I need an answer to, we may have you come back with an attorney. Is that acceptable?"

"Yeah" I said.

"Alright. Sergeant, go ahead."

Lynch looked up from her doodling, a little surprised. She apparently had expected Stoltz to do the questioning. Opening a small spiral bound notebook, she turned quickly to the notes she wanted, looked at them silently for a few seconds, then began: "Mr. MacKenzie, let's review..."

"Excuse me a second", I said. A uniformed cop had been standing outside the door, looking longingly at the tray of donuts as if they were the Holy Grail just beyond his reach. I picked up the tray, carried it to the door, slid the door open, and handed the tray to him.

"Um, thanks Sir", he said, and disappeared happily down the hallway.

I returned to my seat. Lynch was grinning again. Stoltz was impatiently drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair.

The Sergeant started again: "As I was saying, let's review what happened on your beach last week. Tell us how you found the head."

“I got up early Friday morning. I couldn’t sleep, so I went out to walk on the beach. It was still dark, but there was a full moon, so I could see almost as well as in daylight. I was walking north from the house, and thought I saw a large coconut on the sand. I went over to look at it, and realized it wasn’t a coconut at all, it was a head. It was sitting so perfectly upright that at first I thought somebody’s friends had buried them in the sand, you know like kids do, and then left the poor guy there all night as a joke. I knelt down next to it and said “Hey Buddy, are you all right?” No answer. Then I looked real close and saw it was all chewed up, and I knew it wasn’t a joke. I knew you guys wouldn’t want it disturbed. The tide was coming in and the ghost crabs had already been picking at it, so I decided I’d better stay with it. I knew my friend would eventually come looking for me.”

“By your “friend”, you mean Miss Blaine”, Lynch stated.

“Yes.”

“Then what?”, she asked.

“Then I sat down to wait. I sat pretty close to the thing to keep the crabs away. I didn’t realize how early it was, and that it would be so long until April, “*Miss Blaine*”, would come looking for me. She finally showed up, and I sent her to call the police. You know the rest.”

Lynch said “When you first went out, did you see or hear anyone else on the beach?”

“No.”

“How about when you were sitting there, did you see or hear anyone then?”

“No.”

“Did you see anything else unusual out there?”

“No.”

“Where there footprints around the head, signs of struggle, anything like that?”

“No. Now that you ask, that was kind of odd. The sand around it was completely smooth, except for crab tracks. It was like someone had purposely put it on display facing land, and smoothed the sand around it.”

“Was this the head of someone you know?”

“Well, the crabs and who knows what else had been at it all night, so it was a mess. One ear was missing, the eyes were gone... you saw it. So even if it was, I probably wouldn't recognize them. But no, it didn't look familiar.”

“Okay, back to the day before. What did you do Thursday?”

“You want the whole day?”

“Yes, please.”

“Alright.” I thought for a moment. “I guess I got up about six-thirty. I went out to the beach to clean up the litter that washed ashore. After finishing that, I ran for half an hour, then swam for another half hour. Then I came in and put on coffee, went and took a shower, then had breakfast.”

“Was Miss Blaine there?”

I wondered if it was my imagination, or was Sergeant Lynch a little extra curious about me and “Miss Blaine”?

“No.”

“Please continue.”

“After breakfast, I drove over to Dominic's Garage. He and I are working on an old car of mine. He gave me a list of parts, and I went to the foreign auto supply store down in Pompano to see if they had them. I got what they had and took them to Dominic. We spent the rest of the morning

working on the car. Then we went to Jo's Deli for lunch. Dom went back to work, and I went home to trim some shrubbery. Then I took a swim to cool off, got cleaned up, and worked on some design sketches until it was time to go pick up Miss Blaine."

"What time did you leave to pick up Miss Blaine?"

"Six-thirty. She's real keen on punctuality; I get lectured on being considerate of others. She said to pick her up at seven, so I didn't want to be late."

"Between six-thirty AM and six-forty-five PM, did you notice anything unusual on the beach or around your property?"

"Not a thing. And I would; I know every inch of the place."

"Was anyone on the beach when you left?"

"I didn't go out on the deck to look."

"What time did you arrive home?"

"I guess somewhere between twelve-thirty and one."

"Were you alone?"

Well, she knew the answer to that. "No. Miss Blaine was with me. That's how she happened to be there in the morning." This was getting tedious.

"When you arrived home, was everything as it should have been?"

"Yeah, everything was locked up like I left it."

"Did you two go out on the deck or the beach?"

"No. We went right to sleep." Lynch glanced up at me after that answer. I smiled at her.

“Did you hear anything during the night, before you got up?”

“Not a thing. Of course, all the windows were closed.”

“Well, I guess that’s it, then.”

Stoltz sat forward and rested his arms on the table. “I have a few questions, Mr. MacKenzie.”

“Shoot”, I said.

“How long have you known Miss Blaine?”

“About a year.”

“Were you seeing anyone before that?”

“A few. No one serious.”

“Any rancorous goodbyes?”

“Rancorous? I don’t think so.”

“Did any of these women have black hair?”

I thought that one over for a minute. “Yeah, one has black hair.”

Stoltz became very interested. I knew where he was going with this. “May we have her name?”

I didn’t want the woman hassled. “I assure you, Captain, she is quite alive, and we are still friends.”

“I’m sure she is, Mr. MacKenzie. We won’t need to question her, just to verify your statement. May we have a name and address?”

Shit. I had no reason not to tell them, except I hated to have cops go calling on an ex-lover. But they would find her without me, and make a nuisance doing it.

“Suzanne Sierra. She works as an Attache at the Brazilian Trade Office in Miami. Don’t bother her.”

“We won’t. We’ll just say hello. Just a few more questions. How do you make your living?”

What the hell did that have to do with the head? “I have an interior design business, plus I design furniture for several manufacturers. And I have a few investments.”

“Do you own a sword, or a brush scythe, Mr. MacKenzie?”

I laughed, “No, I gave my sword away with my suit of armor. I believe there is a scythe hanging in the carport with the other garden tools.”

“Would you mind if we examined the scythe?”

“I think I want to run that by my attorney first, but I don’t see why not. Come by this afternoon, and I’ll give it to you.” I was sure it was there, but I hadn’t sharpened it in ages. It wouldn’t cut brush, let alone sever a neck.

“Sergeant, have two uniforms pick that up this afternoon. One last question: How did your wife die?”

Lynch looked up quickly from her notes, almost as startled as was I by the question.

I’d had enough of this dickhead, and now I lost my temper. “Stoltz, that is neither pertinent, nor polite. If you know enough to ask the question, you must already know the answer.” I leaned toward Lynch, “Write this down, Sergeant. My ex-wife died years ago in a car accident. I was miles away at the time.”

I shoved my chair back, stood, and walked to the door. Sliding the door open, I turned and said to the two detectives: “We’re through. Any further questions, call my attorney. I’m sure you two can “*detect*” who he is.”

As I walked angrily through the lobby, the blue-haired lady called out “Have a nice day, young man. Come visit us again soon.”

- SIX -

Stoltz, red faced, said “Sergeant, get those men over there right away for that damn scythe, if it’s still there. And have them look for any other sharp garden tools and bring them in also. If he won’t cooperate, we will get a search warrant.”

He stopped in the doorway and looked at her. “And I think you may want to take this a lot more seriously. I saw all the grinning. If you want to flirt, take yourself off this case.”

“I wasn’t flirting, Captain.”

Stoltz turned to leave, but was prevented from walking out the door by an obviously perturbed Mayor. “Captain Stoltz, Sergeant Lynch, a moment of your time, please.”

Stoltz stepped back, and the Mayor stepped into the room.

“It seems like this is my day for citizen and police department relations. The first thing this morning, I had to placate two upstanding residents who last night were roused by three squad cars of overeager uniformed officers, for the serious crime of getting lost while looking for a new all night gym in Boca. Then just now, I saw Conor MacKenzie leave here, and he was so angry he didn’t even acknowledge me. Now, just what has him so pissed off?”

Stoltz answered, “We asked him some routine questions involving the discovery of a corpse, or part of a corpse, on his property. He was a little edgy.”

“As I hear it, he reported finding a dismembered head on his beach, right?”

“Yes sir.”

“And he is not a suspect, right?”

“No sir.”

“Then why are you hassling him?”

“Well...”

The Mayor angrily crossed his arms in front of him. “ ‘Well’, *my ass*. Do you two nincompoops have any idea who he is? First, he lives on the single most valuable undeveloped piece of property in all of Florida. Second, he is a well respected and very private citizen. And third, I play flag football with him every winter, and he is *my friend*.”

“And do you two *tourists* have any idea who his girlfriend is? I didn’t think so. April Blaine is Daniel Blaine’s only child. Blaine Development, Blaine Construction, Blaine Oil, Blaine Shipping, etcetera, etcetera. Old money... one of the country’s wealthiest men, one of the biggest landowners in the state, and probably the largest charitable contributor. I do not - let me emphasize that: *not* - want him to hear his precious daughter is being bothered by the Boca Raton police. *Have I made myself clear?*”

“Sir, we are investigating a homicide,” said Stoltz.

“Then investigate. *Quietly*. Find out who did it. Keep it off the news. And leave those two alone.” With that, he walked out - sliding the door closed so hard it loudly rebounded open again.

- Seven -

I arrived back home at about 10 o'clock. April's white Saab convertible was in the carport. My head was throbbing. I went into the kitchen, opened a beer, and wandered out to the deck. She was sitting under the umbrella at the table, in a tiny white bikini, working her phone and laptop.

She looked up at me and the beer, "Oh, *that's* an intelligent way to start a morning. Big night last night, Bubba?"

"Yeah. Apparently I can't be left alone without getting into mischief." Just looking at her, I began to feel better. "How are you?"

"Just dandy. Made a hundred-some thousand bucks already this morning. I'm ready to take a break. How about you?"

She stood up, pulled one string, dropped her top on the table, and took my hand to lead me downstairs. This girl was a workout for me when I was feeling *good*. I hoped I could survive in my condition.

As if reading my thoughts, she smiled sweetly as she put her arms around my neck, "Don't worry Casanova, I'll be gentle."

Two hours later, the phone awakened us. April answered, then handed the phone to me. "Kathleen Lynch", she said, and nuzzled into my chest.

"Hello", I said.

"Mister MacKenzie, it's Sergeant Lynch. Am I disturbing you?" This said with what seemed like extra politeness.

“No, it’s okay. What’s up?”

“Two things. One: what time would be convenient for the guys to pick up that garden tool? Would three o’clock today be alright?”

I had checked with my attorney, who was much more concerned about letting them have it without a warrant than I was. The police would be met here and observed by one of his associates, as Josef said: “Just to keep everything kosher.”

“Sure. It’s hanging in the carport. Tell them to come up the steps to the front door and ring for me; I’ll show them where it is.”

“Thanks. And two: The University of Miami Medical School has a professor who specializes in reconstructing human remains. We’ve asked him to reconstruct the head you found. I wonder if you would mind taking a look when he’s done, just on the off chance you might have seen this person before.”

“Sergeant, I’ll take a look, but I’m telling you I’ll not be able to identify it.”

“Well, that will still be of help. Process of elimination. It will take about a week. I’ll call you when he’s done.”

“Alright.”

“Thanks Mac. And, I apologize for Stoltz.”

I handed the phone to April to hang up.

“I like her”, April said. “We need to find her a boyfriend.”

“Yeah, she doesn’t quite realize she’s a real Babe.”

April rolled on top of me. “Oh, Honey, don’t worry. She knows it very well.”

- EIGHT -

For the next three weeks, life settled back into normal routine. April worked at her office in the morning, and spent most afternoons making her transactions via e-mail from my deck, while I worked in the den on last minute design changes for a client's new furniture line. We went to three dinner affairs given by land developers, but mostly ate at home. April had us on her "...summer menu, it's too hot to eat big meals". Which to me meant salad, fruit, and plain lemonade or just one Tom Collins every night - but I was just pouting because I wasn't getting any hot dogs. In reality, the menu she concocted, with Jo's assistance, was refreshing, filling, and not boring at all - and I even lost five or six needed pounds. About four nights a week, April stayed with me; occasionally she just said "I need to do some things at home", and I slept alone.

The ocean was now up to record temperature: eighty-six to eighty-eight degrees at the surface. The meteorologists said the Gulf Stream had veered a lot closer than usual toward land, and they were concerned about hurricanes. We had some heavy thunderstorms, but so far no hurricanes had come. Daytime temperatures hovered in the mid-nineties, and with the surf so warm, a swim in the ocean wasn't refreshing. So nearly every night, I brought some ten pound bags of ice from Jo's and dumped them in the lap pool at the north end of the house, to cool it off for a moonlight swim. April and I swam and played, then came inside and collapsed thankfully in the air conditioning. Some nights she filled the master bath's big Jacuzzi with cool water, and we drank cold wine and made great splashing love. We watched movies on the big-screen, or she read in her corner while I watched baseball.

Neither of us mentioned the head, nor did we openly discuss what was happening between us. The former because, as far as we were concerned it was a dead issue - pun intended - and there was nothing to discuss. The latter because, well, we were comfortable, and neither of us wanted to chance spoiling that. It seemed that right now, words weren't necessary. We both knew, though, that the day would come when one of us would say: "We need to talk". Not yet completely confident of the other's answer, neither of us wanted to be first. And I was afraid of my usual bad ending.

Life for me was as good as it had ever been. I had no financial worries, some interesting work, and a lovely young girlfriend. I had no close friends, just a bunch of guys I played sports with, but that didn't bother me, I had been a loner since childhood. I suppose April was becoming my best friend. She was smart, funny, and sweet, and it felt natural to be with her. I had not shared any of my past with her, but I was beginning to feel comfortable enough that I was thinking of doing so.

Three weeks to the day from my visit to the police department, things changed again. Detective Lynch phoned at eight-thirty in the morning. We were in the kitchen. April answered and wordlessly handed me the phone.

"Mac, it's Kathleen Lynch. We finally have reconstructed the head you found. I'm sorry for the delay, the professor was away helping another police department identify some old remains. When do you think you could come by and take a look at it?"

"Sergeant", I said irritably, "this is a wasted exercise. I've told you it didn't look familiar, and no one I know is unaccounted for. Are you sure you need me to do this?"

"If it wasn't important, I wouldn't ask. Humor me. At the least, you will get to see how these things are done."

“Gee, for some reason, that wasn’t on my need to know list. Alright, but I have to finish some drawings and fax them off today. I can’t get there until late afternoon, maybe four.”

“That’s fine. Come to my office, and we’ll go to our little morgue from there. See you at four.”

As I started to hang up, April grabbed the phone from my hand. Her expression serious, almost angry, she said “Kathleen, are you still there? Good. *I hope you remember what I told you about this.*” And she hung up.

I wondered what *that* was about.

She turned to me, expression softening, ran her fingers through my hair, and said “You know, you don’t really have to go there if you’d rather not.”

“No”, I said, “I don’t mind. She’s just trying to do her job, and her boss is a real tight-ass. If it helps her out for me to go over there, I will.”

We finished breakfast in silence, the tension from weeks ago creeping back between us.

After breakfast, April went off to her office, saying she would see me at dinnertime. Before she left, she gave me a hug, squeezing me extra tightly and for a very long time. As we broke our embrace, she touched one hand to my face, gave me an especially tender kiss, and whispered “I’ll see you here about six. The cell phone will be on if you need me.” Another tender kiss, and then she left.

When she was gone, I decided to take a long swim before starting on my drawings. I put on swim goggles this time, and since the sea was flat calm with little current, I swam straight out a quarter of a mile to the first reef line. When I got there, I stopped and just floated, observing the reef twenty feet below me.

The excessive warmth of the water had made a teeming reef into a near ghost town. The fish and other animals that could leave for deeper, cooler water had done so. Bleached spots had begun to appear on the corals - a sign that the tiny animals inside had died from the heat.

Before I could see it, I heard the roaring engines of a racing powerboat approaching. Realizing the boater wouldn't be able to see me until it was too late to steer clear, I waited until the boat was close, then dived for the bottom for safety. When the boat loudly passed directly overhead, I felt it's prop wash even twenty feet down. As the sound retreated, I drifted among the corals, seeming to have enough air in my lungs to stay down forever, relishing the total peace I always felt under the sea that I could never find on land. Finally, I needed to breathe, and though reluctant to leave the tranquility, I had to let myself drift to the surface. I swam slowly to shore, not eager to face a day with a four o'clock appointment about which I had a foreshadowing feeling.

For the rest of the morning through the afternoon, I worked in the den on drawings and modifications for my client. I called Jo at noon and had her send over one of her famous seafood salad sandwiches and some cole slaw, and washed them down at my desk with a couple bottles of Grolsch beer. I hated deadlines, and I kept myself motivated and working by promising myself that once this project was finished, I wouldn't take on any further work with time limits.

At about three, I loaded all the pages in the fax machine, dialed up the client, watched the first page go through, then turned out the lights and went down the hall to my bedroom to change clothes for my appointment with Sergeant Lynch. Outside the bedroom windows, I was surprised to see that while I had been working, the weather had changed drastically. A strong, steady wind was blowing over the ocean from the east, pushing a driving rain horizontally through an ominously darkened sky. The sea, calm just a few hours ago, had erupted into long rows of five foot high waves, rough and broken by the wind. I went upstairs to the living room and put The Weather

Channel on the big-screen. My favorite blond weather lady was in the midst of explaining that the National Hurricane Center in Miami had announced that Hurricane Dorothy had taken a sudden and severe turn, and "... while we had predicted that this storm would die at sea, it now appears that it will definitely make landfall within the next forty-eight hours, somewhere between Key West Florida and Brunswick Georgia. We are watching this storm closely, so stay tuned for updates as we receive them."

I phoned April's office and cell phone, got her voice mail at both, and left her news of the storm.

Then I called Jo, and asked her if she had heard about it.

"Yep," she said, "I saw it on TV an hour ago." She always had the TV in the deli turned on.

"You should close up and go home. Do you need any help getting the store prepared?" I asked.

"No, thanks. We have the storm shutters right here out back, and all the merchants here have formed a team to get everyone's places ready. They're doing it right now. All I have to do is give them sandwiches and beer while they work. I'll board up my condo tonight, and tomorrow if it looks real bad, I'll head up to my sister's in Orlando. Are you and April going to be alright?"

"We'll be fine. This place is steel and concrete. Everything here - the shape of the house, even the cuts in the dune - was designed for this, and it's been through a few hurricanes in the past forty years with no damage. The storm curtains are electric, all I have to do is run them down and we're buttoned up tight. I'm going to put most of them down right now. Then I have to go over to police headquarters, so after that I'll just put the car in the warehouse, lock that down, and take a cab back here."

I made sure she and April had each other's cell phone numbers, and we exchanged "Good Lucks".

The storm curtains were heavy galvanized steel, rolled up out of sight, hidden behind coves under the eaves. Congratulating myself for having them inspected and maintained every spring, I pushed a few buttons and lowered all of them except the center section on the top floor.

I found a rain slicker, and went out to the car. The temperature had dropped noticeably, and the rain had begun to flood the streets; not good weather for an old Jaguar. At town hall, I parked as close as I could to the building, and jogged to the doors. I had to pull the door shut against the wind and rain, then turned to see the same elderly receptionist watching me.

“My goodness young man, I hope that wasn’t an ill wind that blew you in!” she said, smiling.

“I hope not too, Ma’am”, I said, and continued on past her to Sergeant Lynch’s office.

Lynch was coming out of her office as I walked down the hallway. She had obviously spent some time at the beach since I had last seen her, and her skin had turned a radiant shade of brown. The off-white sleeveless linen vest and skirt she wore gave a stunning contrast to her new tan. Meeting such a beautiful woman in a police station was unexpected, and I purposely slowed my pace to prolong the effect.

She saw me coming down the hall, and strode quickly to meet me. “Hi, Mac. Let’s go right downstairs and get this done. I imagine you want to get back and prepare for the hurricane.”

She led me back to the lobby to an elevator, and we rode to the basement in silence. The door opened to reveal a large concrete hallway designed to double as a storm shelter, with a few opaque glass doors off either side, each with a stenciled label. Lynch led me down the hall to a door marked “Forensics”, opened it, and we walked in. The room was about twenty feet square, lined on all four walls with

white metal cabinets above, and counter height cabinets below. A large center island topped with stainless steel stood a few feet away from a rectangular stainless steel flat table with a steel sink at one end. With the polished bare concrete floor and bright fluorescent lights overhead, the room was the very definition of "stark". It was cold in temperature also, and my rain dampened hair and clothes gave me a chill.

The professor was waiting for us, sitting at a small metal desk, writing in a notebook. He stood up when we entered, walked to us, nodded hello to Sergeant Lynch, and offered me his hand. He was a twin of an older Andy Griffith, down to the southern drawl. "Ernie Sunderland. You must be our witness."

Lynch spoke up, "Dr. Sunderland, I appreciate your coming in this weather. If you could give Mr. MacKenzie a brief description of what you've done, then we can look at your work and get out of here before the storm gets worse."

Sunderland cleared his throat, and drawled in a professorial manner: "Well, in the interest of brevity then, I will just tell you what I had to do with this particular specimen. It's a female, I guess you both knew that, Oriental, most certainly Chinese. She had been beaten quite severely, probably with fists, before she was killed. I think the ear that's missing completely was lost during that beating. The facial muscles, tissues, and her nose were literally beaten to a pulp - even someone who knew her wouldn't recognize her. Her neck was severed quite cleanly, there were no jagged tears. In my opinion, she was beheaded with a long and extremely sharp sword. She was dead before she was in the water, and she wasn't in the water long. I'd say she was killed on a boat off shore and her head was either dragged beside the boat to shore, or somebody swam it in. Then, she was placed there on the sand, and the crabs had a go at her. All in all, the poor woman has been treated miserably. I had to make a decision whether to try to use the face she had left, or strip it off and fashion her a new one. So I took numerous

photos of her for reference, then stripped the skull and rebuilt the face. When we do it this way, ninety percent of the time we get a positive identification. Any questions?"

The detective and I both shook our heads, No.

"Well then, let's have you take a look at her."

He opened a door under the center island, reached in, and brought out the head on a display stand. He placed it on the counter top, and turned the woman's head to face Lynch and me.

I looked at the face, and felt like I had been shot at close range.

It was my wife, Su Li.

I tried to keep my composure, but the room and the head began to spin. I staggered over to the desk, dropped down in the chair, and grabbed the edges of the desk top with both hands to steady myself.

Somewhere, as if off in a tunnel, I heard Kathleen's voice: "Mac! Mac!" I felt her hands on my shoulders - she was leaning across the desk. "Mac! Are you alright?"

Sweating heavily in the cold air, I managed to get myself together. I looked at Kathleen's face, so close to mine I could see tiny freckles I hadn't noticed before, her eyes wide with concern.

"Yeah, I'm okay", I said. I took a deep breath of the cool air. "I guess maybe I'm coming down with something. All of a sudden I got lightheaded." I had reached a quick decision to keep the identity to myself until I had time to think. It *couldn't* be Su Li ... could it? She had died ten years ago. At least that's what I had been told.

Kathleen let go of my shoulders and stood straight. "Mac, you looked like you were shocked because it's someone you knew. Who is it?"

I couldn't bear to look at the reconstructed head, so I focused on the detective. "I honestly don't know who she could be. I don't know any Asian women."

Softly, she asked: "Wasn't your wife an Oriental?"

"*Ex-wife*. Yeah. Chinese American. What's that have to do with *this*? She's been dead for years."

I could feel her studying my face. "I suppose you're right. So, she doesn't look familiar to you at all?"

"Familiar, in that she looks like a million other Chinese women, yeah", I lied. Su Li had been the most beautiful Asian woman I had ever seen, one in a million. "Do I know who this is? No."

Lynch turned to the professor "Doctor, is there anything more? Did you find anything that could help us figure out who she was?"

Sunderland had been waiting for this question. Excitedly, he turned the head, pulled the left ear forward, and pointed behind it. "Right here, on the skull skin near the hairline, there was a very small tattoo. No one but the owner, or someone very intimate with her, would ever see it. I only found it because I was examining her. I took a photo before I stripped the skin, and had some enlargements made for you, Sergeant."

While talking, he had walked over to the desk where I still sat, and opened the briefcase on top. He took out several eight by ten photo prints, handed one to the detective and one to me.

The tattoo was a complex Chinese symbol. I had seen it many times before. Our house in the hills above Carmel had a big Roman tub, which Su Li surrounded with candles. She would light the candles, fill the tub, and get in, and I would wash her long black hair. The first time I noticed the tattoo, she pretended not to have been aware it was even there. "Will you ever tell me?", I would ask.

“Maybe someday, if you are a very good boy”, she would tease. Finally, I just gave up and accepted the little Chinese mystery. A rush of sadness came over me, my mind racing back to California, and a life I had left behind long ago.

“I don’t know what it is, Doctor”, I said. “Some sort of Oriental symbol, I guess.” I fixed the tattoo’s precise configuration in my head again, making sure I had it exactly, even though I already knew it well enough to draw it from memory.

He turned to Lynch, “Sergeant, if that’s all, I would like to get back to Miami while the roads are still passable. I will put this all in a report and send it to you.”

He closed his briefcase, nodded goodbye, and quietly shut the door behind him.

“Mac, are you sure you’ve told me everything?”

“I have told you: I don’t know who that is. All I know is that I don’t know.” That much was true, technically.

“Are you feeling alright now? Should I have someone take you home?”

“I’m fine. I need to get my car into it’s safe storage place, and catch a cab home.”

“Then let me follow you there, and I’ll give you a ride home. You’ll never get a cab. It’s the least I can do to thank you for your trouble. Where do you have to take the car?”

“It’s about ten blocks north. A little warehouse building.”

She walked over to the head, picked up a lab coat and draped it over it, then turned and held the door for me. “Let’s go.”

Outside, it was still raining in heavy sheets. The wind was bowing the trees around City Hall toward the west; they looked as if they were all trying to pull up their roots and make a mass run for safety. I ran to my car and waited while Lynch, barely able to keep her umbrella from carrying her aloft, made her way to her unmarked police vehicle. I watched her and thought how *conspicuously inconspicuous* unmarked police cars are: who else but a cop drives a full size plain Ford sedan with oversize tires, cheap hubcaps, dual exhausts, and cloth bench seats?

She followed me north on Boca Raton Boulevard, and I turned to the little white warehouse. The building is neat but nondescript, with no windows, and just the street number beside the double wide garage door. There is just one distinguishing feature, but one would have to be paying close attention to notice it: you have to go up a steep eight foot high ramp to get to the garage door. The building had been constructed so it's contents would be well above street level in case of flooding from a storm surge. I touched the button in the car, the door rolled open, and I drove up and inside.

By the time I had backed the old Jaguar into her space, the detective had walked up the ramp and into the building. She stood just inside the door with her umbrella at her side, rain cascading off the roof behind her. Wide-eyed, she slowly took in the contents of the building. Sixteen gleaming automobiles lined up into two rows of eight facing each other, and an immaculate work shop and car lift at one end.

"Is that a Talbot Lago?", wonderment in her voice.

"Yes."

"And a Gullwing Mercedes?"

"Yes."

"An original Ferrari 250 GTO?"

"Yes."

“A real Shelby 427 Cobra? And that... that’s... a Bugatti ?”

“Uh huh.”

“These are worth... *millions!* They’re all yours?”

“Kathleen, we have to get going.” I turned off the lights and reset the alarm system.

She was transfixed. “But where...?”

I took her umbrella, opened it and handed it back to her, then gently steered her down the ramp. We dashed into her car. I pushed the button on the remote, and put it in my jacket pocket as the door rolled down and closed tightly.

Inside, I said: “Relax, they’re not stolen. It’s a long story. Maybe someday I’ll tell it to you. Probably not. Hardly anyone knows what’s in there; I’d like to keep it that way. How do you know what those cars are, anyway?”

“My Dad. He always wanted a sports car. Never bought one, he kept talking himself out of it. I’d hear him tell my mother: “It just isn’t practical on a cop’s salary”. But he could dream. He had every “Automobile Quarterly”, “Road & Track”, and any other car book he could get. He used to read me road tests instead of bedtime stories. I wish he could have seen what I just saw.”

“When he comes to visit, call me. I’ll be glad to let him in. We’ll take him for some rides.”

“He’s dead. He was shot while off duty, stopping a robbery at a Seven-Eleven a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

We rode the rest of the way to my house in silence broken only by the squawking police radio. Lynch drove around the circle at the top of my drive, and pulled up near the bottom of the entry steps. April’s Saab wasn’t in the carport under the house. That worried me, I wanted her here, safe. Where was she?

“Listen,” I said, “this place is very secure against the storm. The first owner designed it that way. If you would like to ride it out here with me and April, you’re welcome.”

“Thanks, but I can’t. All city police and fire-rescue personnel have to stay on duty if the hurricane hits here. They’re getting City Hall ready for us to move in.”

As I reached to open the door, she put a hand on my left arm. “Mac, if there is anything you want to talk about...what happened today, or anything, call me. Okay?”

“There’s nothing to talk about”, I lied, looking directly into her eyes.

We exchanged good byes, and I ran up the steps and into the house.

I dropped my slicker on the foyer floor and, thankful April wasn’t there yet, hurried down to the den. I wanted to get the Chinese symbol onto paper before I forgot any details. I drew it exactly as I had known it; a memory from so long ago, refreshed today.

I called long distance information, and got the number for the San Francisco Police Department. Then I called and asked for the fax number for Homicide, and sent off the following message:

Personal To : Inspector Eddie Yee ,
S F P D Homicide

Eddie ,
Can you translate this into English ?

The image shows two large, bold Chinese characters in a traditional serif font. The character on the left is '學' (Xué) and the character on the right is '情' (Qíng). Together, they form the word '學情' (Xué Qíng), which translates to 'academic performance' or 'school situation'.

Need it NOW. Fax back A S A P.

Thanks ,
Conor MacKenzie

I went upstairs to the kitchen, brought three beers back to the den, and sat down to wait. The image of Su Li's face being turned toward me kept re-appearing in my mind. I stared at the fax machine, willing it to answer me. After twenty minutes, it hummed to life, spitting out Yee's reply, written at the bottom of my message:

Literally, it means " Beloved Twin " .

It could be a shortened version of the Chinese phrase

" Beloved twin (sister, or brother) , never apart " .

Mac, where are you? What the Hell is going on?

Eddie

Now I knew I had remembered correctly. Su Li's tatoo was behind her right ear. The tatoo on the woman's head I found on the beach, was behind the *left*.

- NINE -

Carrying the last beer, I finished it as I went upstairs to retrieve my rain slicker. I pulled off my shoes and socks, went out the back door and across the dune bridge, and down the steps to the beach. A storm-filled sky gave the night an eerie dark finality. The surf was pounding loudly, wave after wave attacking the preceding one before it was fully spent, the receding white foam clawing at the shore, dragging sand like a victim back into the sea with it. This storm would take some beach; the next one would likely bring it back. Wind-driven rain came cold and hard directly off the ocean. It slashed at my face and soaked through my clothes. I walked with my head down and my hands jammed in my pockets, thinking: “Good question, Eddie. What the Hell is going on?”

I walked back, climbed the steps to the bridge, and sat down facing the storm. There was a decision to be made now. One I had avoided for years. One about who I really was, and how long I would let the past haunt me, eat at my soul, and control my life.

Eventually April came, wearing a hooded raincoat, and sat beside me. She put her arm around my back, and rested her head against my wet shoulder. We sat wordlessly for a long while, the storm punishing us for defying it.

Finally, she said: “Conor, come inside. Whatever it is, you can solve it there.”

Staring straight ahead into the storm, I said: “April, there’s something I left undone that I should have finished. I’ve known for a long time that I would have to go back one day and take care of it. Now it’s time.”

“What is it?”

“It doesn’t concern you. And I won’t involve you. It happened long ago, long before we met.”

She stood, walked down a step, then turned toward me and took my face in her hands. “Conor MacKenzie, I am in love with you. But the past few weeks have been awful for us both. We tiptoe around each other. I pretend I don’t know you have nightmares. You are in agony over something, and you won’t talk about it. If we are going to spend our lives together, then you have to share *everything*. I can’t stand this tension and pretending any longer without knowing *why*.”

I looked into her angelic face. Tears ran down her cheeks and mixed with the rain. “I don’t know when I’ll be back”, I said.

Her hands dropped from my face, she made angry fists at her sides. “Then *go*. *But I can’t take this any longer*. I’m going to wait out the storm at my father’s. Call me when you’re really ready to share your life.”

She walked across the bridge into the house, and I was alone.

Again.

PART TWO

- TEN -

I sat there on the steps for another half an hour, storms raging around and inside me. I had a lot of questions, and the time had come to find the answers, to turn the artificial peace that I had created around me into the real thing. I could never truly be free to love April, or any woman, until I freed my heart from the bonds of my past.

I would go back and do whatever it took to put Su Li, and my soul, to rest.

Finally, I stood and turned toward the house, the one glass opening offering light and warmth. This had been my sanctuary, my healing place, for eight years. I wondered if, after I left, would I ever see it again?

The storm's building wind, driving inland from the sea, pushed at my back as if urging me to get moving. I walked across the bridge to the house and went in. The driving rain illuminated by the light from within was like a meteor shower streaking across the darkness. I closed the glass door, then went down to the utility room and pushed the button to lower the last storm curtain. Undressing there, I tossed my soaked clothing into the dryer. Then I went to my room, turned the shower to maximum hot and stepped in to get warm. I pulled on button-fly jeans (a gift from April: "They're fun to tear open.") and a white T-shirt, and went upstairs to the kitchen. I wanted hot coffee, and suddenly I was ravenous. It was nearly ten o'clock, and I hadn't eaten since noon.

Coffee started, I called Delta and USAir about flights to San Francisco. They were swamped with calls and said the impending hurricane made their schedules uncertain. Both offered to call me as soon as they knew anything.

I was just taking hot dogs out of the 'fridge, when the doorbell rang. April must have changed her mind, why didn't she use her key? Hoping we could avoid another confrontation, but glad she was back, I jogged to the foyer and swung the door open.

Kathleen Lynch stood there struggling with a broken umbrella, rain soaking through her unbuttoned raincoat. We stood there staring at each other for a few seconds, then laughing, she said "You look startled, Mac. Do I look that scary when I'm wet? Are you gonna let me in, or just stand there and watch me get blown away?"

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry. Get in here."

Giving up on the umbrella, she left it outside the entrance, and stepped in.

I closed the door, and turned to look at her. She's here to ask more questions I can't answer, I thought.

"Good timing", I said. "I just started coffee. Come on down to the kitchen."

She shrugged out of her raincoat, and handed it to me along with her purse. Then, leaning against the foyer wall, she lifted and crossed first one leg, then the other, dropping her wet high heels to the foyer floor. Her soaked linen vest and skirt clung to her body.

Suddenly she looked up, caught me staring, and smiled "Go ahead, I know the way. I'll catch up."

As I was getting mugs, she padded barefoot into the kitchen, trying to smooth her dripping dark hair. I opened a drawer and tossed her a couple of clean terry tea-towels.

"Thanks." She caught them, then placed her police radio on the counter. With one towel she wiped her face and arms, and attempted without success to pat her clothes dry. Then she bent forward and roughly tousled her hair with the second. Abruptly straightening up, she threw her head back and her hair fell perfectly into place.

Another sly smile, "You're staring. Never seen a girl dry her hair before?"

"Not quite that way." I came around the counter and handed her a mug. "So what's up now?"

"The hurricane center is predicting a record high storm surge. They think Dorothy will begin to hit directly at Boca tomorrow about the same time as high tide. Town Hall's at sea level, so they decided to send everyone home. We have to keep the radios on," she nodded toward hers, "in case we're needed." She took a sip of her coffee. "A lot of people are evacuating. I started to go to my apartment, but I don't know how storm worthy it is, so I thought I'd take you up on your invitation. If that's still offered."

Not what I expected to hear. "Sure. Of course. I was just about to make some hot dogs. Jo imports them from Chicago. And there's some of her potato salad. How many dogs can you eat?"

Lynch slid onto a bar stool across the counter from me. "Probably two, to start. Where's April, downstairs?"

Opening the package and placing six hot dogs on a broiler sheet, I said "She's not here."

Silence. She looked at me in surprise. "Oh?"

"She's gone to her father's. Big place up in Palm Beach."

"Oh, I didn't know. When I didn't see her car in the carport, I just assumed you had put it away with yours."

"Nope. Gone to Palm Beach."

She started to get up. "I had better go then..."

"Why?"

"Well, you know. April's not here. What would she think?"

“She’d think I was an asshole if I let you go back out in this weather. Come on, I’ll show you to the guest suite. You can get a hot shower and we’ll find some dry clothes.”

The guest suite, a large bedroom with its own sitting room and bath, is at the far end of the house, down a hallway from my rooms, past my office and home gym. She followed me down the stairs and along the hall, taking everything in with a professional observer’s eye.

“Your own gym?” She stopped. “Wow. I suppose you have your own billiard room, too”, she said sarcastically.

“Pool table’s in the game room, on your left there, across the hall.”

“Oh. *Of course*. And where’s the indoor tennis court?”

“No tennis court. In my family, it’s golf. There is a putting green and sand trap outside, though. At the opposite end of the house from the pool.”

“Well, *yeah*. You wouldn’t want to get sand in the pool filter. *Anybody* knows *that*.” More sarcasm.

I was enjoying this. She actually had a cool sense of humor. “Guest bedroom’s this way”, I nodded, and continued down the hall.

The suite is like a Hollywood movie set, 1930's era. Furniture of dark red mahogany, with nickel handles. Walls, thick carpeting, draperies, bed linens, even the sofa and chairs in the sitting room, are all in varying soft shades of grey. One wall of the sitting room is bookcases with lower cabinets, in the same mahogany, with a small television and a bar. A private balcony looks south over the putting green. Recessed lighting, including a small spotlight directly over the bed, is softly muted by dimmers.

I flipped a light switch. She stepped through the doorway behind me, looked around, and in a low almost reverent tone, said: “Jesus, MacKenzie, this is *beautiful*.” All trace of sarcasm was gone now. “Did you do this?”

“Yeah, I did. The bath is through the door over there.” Wait ‘til she saw that. “Everything you need should be there. There’s a robe, too. Give me your keys, I’ll put your car in the carport while you clean up.”

“They’re in my raincoat.”

I got soaked once again putting her car away, so I went downstairs to my room to change. Pulling on dry jeans, I grabbed an old long sleeved 49'ers T-shirt, intending to put it on upstairs. I almost ran into Lynch coming the other way down the hall, barefoot in a long white silk robe. We stood, both partially undressed, so close that I could smell the jasmine shampoo she had used, and almost feel her body barely concealed beneath the thin silk. For a moment our eyes locked, a sexual tension building. I began to feel intoxicated. If we touched now, everything between us would change.

“Hey, nice robes you have here!” She spoke first, more exuberantly than necessary, to break the spell. “Do guests get to take them when they leave?”

She was right, we were safer with the sarcastic banter. “Yeah. But it’ll be on your bill. And we count the towels.”

“I hung my vest and skirt to dry. Would you have something I could borrow?”

“Personally, I think this is a good look for you.” As I lightly touched the lapel of her robe, she gave me a mock look of petulance. “But we should be able to find you something. April has some things in the drawers on the right side of the long dresser, in my room. I’ll be up in the kitchen.” If she liked the guest suite, my rooms would blow her mind.

I was putting the hot dogs in the broiler when she came into the kitchen. Still barefoot, she had put on a pair of April’s black short shorts and a black sleeveless mock turtleneck that was a bit too small. The black clothes made her dark tanned skin look even more striking.

“Now”, I thought, “I have seen the two most beautiful women in the world in this house.”

“Stop staring. She doesn’t have much here, other than an entire store worth of bikinis. This is all I could find that fit. Also, I won’t wear another women’s underwear.”

I closed the oven door, thinking seriously about a cold shower.

We ate at the counter, both like we hadn’t seen food in days. She had three hot dogs and three helpings of potato salad, keeping up with me. Having food in front of us seemed to ease the physical tension - ease it not erase it - and we talked freely about storms we had been through. She asked me about all the hurricane protection on the house, and I told her the fellow who designed it had lost a home once and had been determined to build this one to last forever.

I walked around the counter to the sink, and just as she began handing me dishes to rinse, the phone rang.

It was a lady from USAirway’s reservations office. “Mr. MacKenzie, I’m afraid I have bad news. The airports in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and West Palm Beach have all closed down operations, and redirected all planes away from the hurricane area. We don’t anticipate being operational for at least a day, maybe two if the storm lingers. So, I can’t get you on a flight to San Francisco tomorrow.”

“Can I get a booking for the first flight out when you re-open?”

“Of course, sir. I can enter you in the reservations computer, and notify you when we’re able to fly. But I’m looking here, and I see that all the economy class seats are booked. Those people with previous reservations will have first priority.”

“What about first class, do you have seats up there?”

“Yes sir, we do. We have your American Express number on file. Would you like me to reserve that flight for you? Will that be one or two seats?”

I looked over at Kathleen. She was going through the motions of clearing dishes, but was paying close attention to the half of the conversation she could hear.

“One.”

“Very well, sir. We have you booked for the day after tomorrow. Please check our automated flight information number to be sure we have resumed service that day.”

“Thank you.” I hung up.

Scraping a dish clean, not looking up, she said:
“Going somewhere, Mac?”

“Any reason I can’t?”

“No. No reason at all. I just like to know where my witnesses are, that’s all. You seem to be in an awful hurry to get out of here.”

“I have some personal affairs I have to take care of. Can’t put them off any longer.”

She stopped rinsing, put down the dish, and looked at me seriously. “Mac, I know something is up with you. Your reaction to that reconstructed face today wasn’t normal. You are too cool a character for that to affect you that way, unless you have something you’re not sharing with me. And April not being here, that’s not right either. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“It’s nothing to do with you, Kathleen. It’s an old problem.”

“An old problem that landed on your beach a few weeks ago, right?”

I didn't reply.

"Look, you are not a suspect. But I am involved in this, whether you like it or not. Maybe I can help. You have to trust someone. I'm your best choice. After all, I trusted you with my story."

I looked closely again at this young woman. She was an anomaly: standing there boiling over with sex appeal, while at the same time her manner left no doubt that she was an intelligent professional police detective. Too smart to be misdirected, she knew I was somehow involved with the murder that had washed up on my beach. And it was true, when she had needed to unburden herself, for some reason she had chosen to trust me. There was something happening between us, of that I had no doubt.

"C'mon, Mac. Unless you've committed a crime or you're concealing evidence - which I doubt or I wouldn't be here like this now - whatever you tell me can stay inside these walls and between us."

Maybe it was time to tell someone my story, in case someday I couldn't. Maybe a detective whom I could trust was the right someone. I took a deep breath, let it out. "Alright. But I'm talking to *Kathleen*, not Sergeant Lynch."

"Understood."

I couldn't leave a mess in the kitchen. "Let's clean up here, and then get comfortable in the living room."

- ELEVEN -

Metallic pings of rain driven against the hurricane panels accompanied us into the living room. I turned the bigscreen to the Weather Channel, to check the storm's progress, while Kathleen settled into a corner of the leather sofa with her legs drawn up. The hurricane was headed directly at Boca Raton; the forecasters best estimate was that the eye would hit shore at about 8 AM tomorrow. The broad storm's outer bands were bringing the high winds and torrential downpour. It would soon get much worse.

Wondering if the house could withstand such a direct hit, I left the TV on with the sound muted, so we could monitor the storm's progress. My own safety didn't concern me; I hadn't cared one way or the other about living for a long time. But Kathleen was only thirty-one and just starting over. I didn't like the thought that her life might be snatched away because she had trusted my judgement.

"We're okay here, right?"

It was too late to send her away. "We'll be fine", I said, hoping she couldn't hear doubt in my voice. "There's a water storage tank and a generator in the utility room."

"And I'm sure we have plenty of hot dogs, beer, and ice cream", she smiled.

I sat in a club chair facing her, trying not to take notice of those perfect tan legs, again promising myself our situation wouldn't make me less of a gentleman. I put my feet up on the coffee table, and asked "What do you want to know?"

"How about: whose head do we have, and why was it placed on *your* beach?"

"I can't answer either question."

“Can’t, or won’t? I thought you were going to talk to me.”

I stood up and went to the bar. “Can’t. You want a beer?”

“I’d love a glass of Chardonnay.”

As I opened a bottle of Landmark Demaris, she said “You know Mac, nobody around here knows who you are. I checked you out, and got sketchy information up to about ten years ago. Then you disappeared for awhile, and six years ago you turned up as owner of this house. You’re something of an enigma.”

I handed her the wine and sat down again. “You ‘checked me out’?”

“We always do routine background checks on anyone involved in an investigation.”

“What did you find out?” I was curious, I didn’t know I was an enigma.

“Officially, almost nothing. You are almost 43. From Ohio. Married in Monterey, California. Divorced. Your “ex” is...” she paused, looked away, then directly into my eyes “...deceased. Six years ago you were deeded this huge house and a mile of undeveloped shoreline around it, for the exorbitant sum of one dollar. Your attorney is Josef Bayer; when I say his name at the station, people pay attention.”

“Unofficially: you own half of Jo’s Palmetto Deli, you are a friend of the Mayor, you have something to do with furniture, and you have a secret multi-million dollar car collection. That’s it. Oh, and you don’t like my jackass boss.”

She took a long sip of her wine, amber eyes peering at me over the rim of her glass. “Why don’t you fill in the blanks? Maybe there will be something to help me figure out this murder.”

To me, the ‘almost nothing’ she knew seemed like quite a lot. “Where do you want me to start?”

“How about at the beginning? ”

“You mean my life story?”

“Why not? It looks like we’ll be here for quite a while with nothing else to do.” The smile that came with that statement could have melted an entire iceberg.

Suddenly the room was very warm. I took a deep breath. “Do you shoot pool, Kathleen?”

“Let’s see... I’m Irish, I’m from Boston, my Uncle Seamus owns a bar, I’m a cop... What do *you* think?”

“Lets go downstairs. We can shoot some while I bore you with my life.”

She broke, and as I sat at the billiard room bar watching her expertly clear the table, I began:

“To fill in the blanks, I suppose I should start with my Grandfather. Interesting guy. We never met, but his life has been a big influence on mine, I even have his name. Conor MacKenzie the first, was a Scottish native, the club pro at a public golf course near the town of St. Andrews. In 1927, at the height of the Roaring 20’s, he was hired by a wealthy American industrialist to come to the US and be the head professional at a new private golf club on Long Island. It was prestigious for a club to have a Scottish pro, and my grandfather at thirty years old saw a great future in working for these rich Americans.”

“During the next year, he met and married an American girl, a farmer’s daughter ten years his junior from Bridgehampton, who was working as a bakery chef in one of the wealthy club member’s summer estate.”

“They had one idyllic year of marriage, living in a small cottage they were provided on the golf club grounds. Then in 1929, the stock market crashed. The summer estate was sold and shuttered, and my grandmother lost her position. The next summer, the golf club’s owners, many of them no longer wealthy, decided to close the club until better times. With no means of support, and nowhere to live, the couple moved into her parent’s farmhouse. My great-grandparents shared what they had, but the Great

Depression had arrived, and the young couple knew they would have to find some means of supporting themselves. A cousin of my great grandfather's had died two years earlier, and had left an abandoned farm in Ohio that no one in his family wanted. My great grandfather arranged for his daughter and son-in-law to take it over."

"So, Conor and Beth MacKenzie moved to rural Ohio, and the Scottish golf pro became an American farmer. The farm was several hundred acres of small rolling hills, with two streams running through forming small ponds along the way. The fields hadn't been planted in years, and had reverted to weeds and pasture. There was a barn and a big Victorian farm house, both of white painted wood, both still solid but in dire need of maintenance, as was all the farm equipment. Conor knew nothing about farming. Fortunately, Beth did, and they set about bringing the house and land back to life. And that first year brought their only child, my father, Conor Junior."

"The Scot longed for his golf, and in the next few years as the land was reclaimed for crops or grazing, golf holes were sculpted out of less productive acreage broken by hill and stream. By 1940, a full eighteen holes had been laid out, wild and long, like the courses of Scotland. The local people called the course "MacKenzie's Links". My grandfather began letting them play for a small greens fee, and word of the course spread beyond the valley. Each morning, after doing his dawn farm chores, he would ride his tractor over to the golf course, and find a group of golfers waiting patiently to pay him and play. So many began showing up that he eventually had to post a sign-up board for tee times, with an honor-box for golfers to leave their greens fees, so he could attend to his farm work. That winter, he built a small shed between the tenth tee and eighteenth green. The following spring he installed my father, then ten years old, in what became known as "Little MacKenzie's Clubhouse". He sold lemonade, apples from the farm, cookies Grandma baked, and golf balls found while maintaining the course. When my father wasn't manning the clubhouse, he was cutting grass."

"In the spring of '41, four bankers from Cleveland traveled the twenty miles south to Brooksville to play "this MacKenzie Farm course" they had been hearing about.

After playing their round, they asked my dad to go fetch his father - they had a proposition for him. What they offered was to buy the golf course, and the acreage surrounding it, to turn it into a private country club."

"My Grandfather was no fool, and he listened carefully to their proposal. What the bankers didn't know was that the MacKenzie's were deep in debt from bringing the farm back to life, they still were paying the cousin's family for the land - and most importantly - my Grandfather hated farming and wanted to stop planting crops and get back to making his living at golf. The Scot put on his best poker face, and concealed his delight at the prospect of getting out of debt and returning to the game he loved. This time he would negotiate a deal that would give him a job in golf for life - no matter what happened to the economy."

"So, the five men sat at a picnic table, in the shade of an apple tree by Little MacKenzie's Clubhouse, drinking lemonade and eating chocolate chip cookies (for which, to their amusement, my Dad dutifully charged them), and hammered out a deal:

First: the bankers and their associates would rent the course for the balance of the current season, payable in advance. What they didn't know was that this payment would allow my grandfather to complete his purchase of the land. In return for the rent payment, they and their friends would be able to play the course any day without a tee time or fee. Until the next year, when the course would turn private, the public could still play; the greens fees would go to the bankers. The lease terms would include payment for maintenance materials for the season.

Second: My Grandfather would be given an architects fee, and funds to refine the course layout to make it as good as any course in Scotland.

Third: He sold them all of the land, which he didn't even own yet, in addition to the golf course, except for the house and surrounding twelve acres.

Fourth: MacKenzie would be the new golf club's head pro for life, with a salary and teaching fees.

And last, young MacKenzie, my father, would be the caddie master. And his snack shack could stay open, though it would be rebuilt along with the new country club."

“So, in one afternoon, my grandfather paid off all his debts, put a little money in the bank, went from farmer to golf professional and course architect, and assured himself of a job for life.”

“This time, my grandparents had been more fortunate in their timing. Late the next year, the country went to war. In the midst of a wartime economy, they had financial security. As World War Two raged on overseas, the bankers and their industrialist friends reaped profits from financing and supplying the conflict. They never missed a payment or a paycheck to their golf pro. Money was provided for the reconstruction of the course, but men and materials were in short supply and work proceeded slowly during the war years. Most of the work was done by MacKenzie and his young son. By 1945, the golf course renovations were complete. My grandfather invited the new owners and their prospective member friends to come play the course with him. They were delighted with their purchase, and the decision was made to begin construction of a grand clubhouse as soon as the war ended. At the end of 1948, the new Georgian style building was finished, complete with tennis courts and a twenty-five meter pool. They named it The Scottish Links Golf and Country Club.”

“The members had grown quite fond of my father, whom they called “little MacKenzie”, so the new pro shop and snack counter built behind the first tee was unofficially called “Little MacKenzie’s Clubhouse”. The Pro had his office there, and my grandmother ran the snack counter, with my father’s help when he wasn’t in school. With an invitation only membership limited to one hundred-fifty, the club became, and still remains, an exclusive rural playground for the bluebloods of the Cleveland area.”

“In the summer, Little Mac had the run of the place when he wasn’t working, but the member’s children made it quite clear that he wasn’t in their social class and was merely an employee. Several evenings a week, Grandad would take my father out to play a few holes before dark, teaching him all he knew about the game and a respect for it’s Scottish traditions. When the snack shop wasn’t busy, Little Mac would hang around the practice green, taking small wagers from members who were amazed by his precocious putting skill.”

“But when Fall came and the golf course closed down, my father concentrated on his first love: football. Every day after school, he would play pretend games, with himself as both team’s quarterback. When I was a boy, he showed me how he used to throw the ball back and forth across the pasture until dark. By the time he was twelve, he could throw a spiral thirty-five yards. By fifteen, it was fifty. At sixteen, as a sophomore, he was Brooksville’s starting quarterback. It was a small country school and they could barely find enough boys to field a full team - everyone had to play both offense and defense. They were always outmanned, and to be competitive they had to be smarter and better disciplined than the bigger schools. My father became a student of the game, mastering the complexities of offense and defense. He made up new plays for the offense to play to their strengths, and devised defenses to offset their weaknesses. His coach knew he had a football prodigy on his hands, and let my father help with game plans. Only because of this, Brooksville won half their games the three years he played. Without a winning record, when it came time to choose a college, no school came looking for him. So he followed his high school sweetheart to a small state teachers college nearby. There, he encountered much the same football situation as in high school. He played in obscurity for four years, but worked with the coaches, further deepening his knowledge of the game. Along the way, he earned a BS in Education. So did my Mom.”

“Not long after graduation, he and my mother married, and both took apprentice teaching jobs back in Brooksville. He continued to spend the summers helping out at the country club, where they now called him Young MacKenzie, and in the fall he volunteered to help coach another area high school football team.”

“My grandfather passed away at sixty-eight, and the charter members of the golf club offered his job to my father. Of course he accepted, with the agreement that he could continue to teach and coach football during the school year. He and my mother moved into the old farmhouse with my grandmother; my father to be near the golf course, and my mother to help out with chores on the little farm when she wasn’t teaching.”

“This change renewed my father’s interest in golf. He was a good instructor, and also began playing a few holes

at the end of the day, and as a result his natural talent resurfaced. The members noticed, and at their urging he began to enter local tournaments. With no time to practice seriously, he always played well but never great. Until the year his game came together and he won the state open and qualified for the US Open. My mother followed him for all four rounds, even though she was pregnant. He placed twenty-fifth in the Open, almost unheard of for a club pro; they rarely make the thirty-six hole cut.”

“The British Open that year was being held at Carnoustie, in Scotland near my grandfather’s boyhood home. Since it was close to his roots, and he was playing the best golf of his life, my father decided to try to qualify for the tournament, and succeeded. My mother, although now eight months pregnant, insisted on accompanying him to Scotland, where they had been invited to stay with MacKenzie family relatives who lived near the course. Young Mac again made the thirty-six hole cut, and his wife faithfully tried to follow him. Carnoustie is a long and arduous course, and when she tired, she would rest a few holes until his threesome came back in her direction. Amazingly, after the third round he was tied for fifth. Many years later he told me that he felt like he was at home, his father had talked so often about his Scottish courses, and he could almost feel the Old Pro’s presence with him as he played.”

“The morning of the final round, my mother complained of indigestion and fatigue, so they decided that she would stay with the cousins and listen to reports of the tournament on the radio. In 1958, it wasn’t yet on television, and the cousin didn’t have one anyway. Dad went off to play, nervous and concerned about his wife, who had insisted he go.”

“He told me that it may have been his worrying about Mom that kept him from being nervous, but he was calm, at home, and confident about his golf. It was a typically cold and windy Scottish day, high winds playing havoc with even the best player’s shots. But the Old Pro had spent many evenings with Little Mac, teaching him how to keep the ball under the wind, and how to play the low bump-and-run shots required to get the ball on the greens on a windy day in Scotland.”

“At the end of the first nine, he was under par and one shot from the lead. When he got to the fifteenth hole, he was tied for the lead, and he knew he was going to win. He was greeted at the tee by one of his young Scottish cousins, who breathlessly informed him that he had been dispatched by the family to drive to the course, run out and find Cousin Conor, and tell him that his wife was on the way to the little local hospital. Without hesitation my father walked across the tee to an official, withdrew from the tournament, then asked his caddie to take care of his clubs, and left for the hospital with his cousin.”

“So I was born in Scotland, with American parents, and I’m a citizen of both countries. That’s why I grew up with the nickname “Scotty”. Didn’t find that out, did you, Miss Detective...”

“Though my mother was pleased that her husband loved her so much that he left fame on that fifteenth tee, she, more than my father, always wondered what might have been. When I was little, I used to hear her tell people: ‘If only that little boy could have waited two more hours to be born... And he’s been in a rush to do everything ever since’. Whenever I would try to do something I was too young to do - which was all the time - or be in a rush to go out to play, my Dad would tousle my hair, and say ‘Hey Carnoustie, what’s the rush?’ Of course I had no idea what that name meant until I was older.”

“So my parents returned from Scotland with a new son instead of a trophy, and settled back into their everyday lives. After a few months, Mom returned to teaching, leaving me in the care of my doting grandmother. Dad had gone back to teaching and the golf shop. The next fall, he was hired as a teacher and head football coach at a different high school. Though he won several more state Opens, he never entered an out of state golf tournament again. He said he would always be just an Ohio farm boy, and that’s where he would stay.”

“Sometimes when Dad and I played golf together, and we came to the fifteenth hole, he would stand on the tee with a wistful look on his face, and he’d whisper ‘The fifteenth, Scotty, that’s the hole’. I never understood what he meant until I was twelve, when one night at bedtime I asked my grandmother why everyone called me Scotty, and she told me the story of how I was born.”

“Unlike my father, I was a citizen of the world from the day I was born. I’ve lived in a lot of places, but I’ve never yet felt like I found my final destination. Boca has been my home for eight years, Kathleen, not six. But if you were to ask if this is my home, I would say: No, I’ve just stopped here to rest awhile.”

“Grandma MacKenzie used to tell me that as soon as I could walk, I started wandering off if she didn’t watch me. She said, if we lived in a city instead of on a farm, I’d have been run over by a truck before I was three. Once, when I was about five, I overheard Dad telling Mom ‘The boy’s just exploring’. This was after she couldn’t find me for most of an afternoon. I was following our stream from pond to pond. When I came home, I was surprised to find everyone glad to see me and angry with me at the same time. From then on, when anyone asked me where I was going, I said ‘sploring’.”

“The week after that episode, Dad began taking me to the country club swim coach for lessons. If I insisted on playing in the ponds, at least he and Mom would know I could swim. I took to the pool like a dolphin. Once I learned to swim, I practiced every morning with the club’s summer swim team, even though as a non-member I couldn’t swim in their meets. So my summer routine became: morning swim practice, then hang around the tennis courts, help out at the golf snack shop, or run errands around the club for Dad; go home in the afternoon to help Mom and Grandma with the farm chores - which I tried to duck - have dinner, then either have a golf or football lesson with Dad. Come each fall, with two teachers as parents, I was expected to excel in school. But, I didn’t like school. It wasn’t the learning I minded, I didn’t like the regimentation and the conforming, and I just wanted to be outside. To me, every day in the classroom seemed like a day I was missing something more important - my teachers were always telling my parents I had an attention problem. So, after dinner on school nights, I had to sit at the kitchen table and do homework for my parents. Dad was always the one more inclined to let me go, he would tell Mom: ‘Look Honey, you can already tell he’s going to be a jock anyway’. And Mom would say: ‘Well, he’ll need an education, he won’t be a jock forever’.”

“My first through fourth grade years followed the same pattern, a perfect life for a boy.”

I had to stop at this point; figure out how to tell Kathleen the next part - which I had never spoken to anyone about - without losing my composure. She had been listening, all the while casually running table after table, never missing a shot. When I stopped talking, she looked up from the shot she was about to make, put her cue down, walked to the table's end, and leaned against it. Facing me six feet away, her silhouette was backlit by the table light. Without my talking or the clicking of the billiard balls, the only sound in the room was the rain and wind driving against the hurricane panels. Lit only by the light over the pool table, the room, quiet and in semi-darkness, seemed poised to be audience to a somber tale. I filled her wine glass and took it to her. She accepted the glass, and set it on the table's edge, eyes never leaving my face. Kathleen was a good listener; she sensed that her undivided attention was needed now, waiting silently until I was ready to continue.

“Then, the summer before fifth grade, life began to change drastically for my family. In the Spring, my mother began to grow tired with very little exertion. Every year, she had planted a vegetable garden and surrounded the house with flowers. That Spring, Grandma and I did the work while Mom watched and directed from a chaise on the porch. Soon, she was even too tired to come downstairs, and we had to take her meals to her room. She ate less every day, and she was quickly withering away. My father was worried sick, but couldn't convince her to see a doctor. She said she just had 'a bug', and would be better when she got some rest.”

“One June morning, after she hadn't left her bed for two weeks, Dad just picked her up, carried her to his car, and despite her protests took her to the hospital.”

“She never came home again.”

“I spent almost all of every day at her side. On her thirty-eighth birthday, Dad brought her flowers, and I took her a card I had made, but she wasn't awake to notice. Two months later, she died of a very virulent leukemia.”

“I was eleven years old.”

Kathleen picked up her glass and moved quietly from the pool table to a bar stool next to me.

“Dad took me to get my first suit and tie. I remember asking him why I had to wear such happy clothes when I was so sad. He told me that Mom would be watching from Heaven, and wouldn't I want her to see me looking especially nice?”

“Grandma and Grandpa Olsen - Mom's parents - came from Florida, and after the funeral our house was crowded with what seemed, to a small boy like me, like thousands of people. After about the hundredth hug from another teary-eyed overly perfumed strange lady, I had to get away. How could people say they knew how I felt? I ran outside to my secret hiding place beside one of the streams. About an hour later, Dad came - he knew where to find me. I was crying, and when he arrived I tried to cover it up. He sat down on the bank next to me, and we sat silently shoulder to shoulder, both of us getting our new clothes muddy.”

“After awhile, he said ‘You know, Scotty, it's okay for a man to cry sometimes’.”

“I looked up at him... my strong tan athletic Dad... and... for the first time ever, I saw tears on his face.”

“I was just a kid, and I hadn't fully realized that he would be feeling pain like I felt. He put his arm around me and held me tightly. We both knew then that all we had left of Mom was each other.”

I stopped for a moment, emotion catching in my throat as memory brought that day back. Kathleen gently placed a hand on my arm.

“I said: ‘Dad, why did Mom have to die? I miss her already’.”

'I think our lives will be what they're meant to be, son. We can't control that. All we can do is always be honest, be good to those we care for, and try to finish whatever we've started before we go.'

"That moment, and his words, are forever burned into my memory."

I paused again as I realized that last night's decision to leave Florida and face unfinished business had really been made for me long ago, on that muddy stream bank.

I took a drink of beer, cleared my throat to continue. Kathleen had not moved, her hand still lightly on my arm, and again she waited patiently for me to resume.

"After the funeral, my days continued almost as they were before Mom got sick. I missed her terribly, but luckily Grandma MacKenzie was always there. Dad wasn't around as much, he battled grief by working even longer hours at the club and his football coaching. But life was pretty normal."

"For a year."

"The next summer Grandma died. She was only sixty-seven, but one morning she just didn't wake up. It was a Saturday, and Dad had left for the club just after dawn, to be there for the first tee times. When Grandma wasn't up by ten o'clock, I went to her room to wake her and tell her I was going to swim practice. She was lying so still, I knew she was gone. I sat on her bed and held her hand for a few moments, then, though I knew she couldn't hear me, I said: 'I'll be right back Grandma. I'm going to go get Dad. He'll know what to do.' I ran all the way to his office."

"I was twelve."

Kathleen, eyes glistening, her voice almost a whisper, said “*Oh... Mac...*”

“I had grown considerably during the year that had passed, and Dad took me for another suit. The store’s proprietor refused to accept payment for my clothes, telling Dad: ‘When the boy needs a suit for a happy occasion, then you can pay’.”

“With one funeral under my belt, and being another year older, this time I coped like an adult. After the funeral, I didn’t leave the house. Instead I helped to serve the food, and tolerated all the hugs.”

“My other grandparents had come from Florida again, and this time they stayed with us for a month. A few days before they were to leave, Dad came home early one afternoon.”

“He found me mowing the lawn, stopped me, and said: ‘Conor, let’s take a walk’.”

“He only called me Conor when he was very serious. We hiked out to my spot by the stream, neither of us speaking, me afraid of what was coming. I thought he was going to tell me he was dying.”

“Dad said ‘Let’s sit here awhile, son.’ We cleared debris from under a big willow, and sat with our backs against the tree, facing the stream.”

“ ‘Scotty,’ he began, ‘Mom’s gone, and Grandma’s gone, and now there’s no one to take care of you while I’m at work...’ ”

“ ‘I can take care of myself,’ I interrupted.”

“ ‘You need more attention than I can give you alone,’ he continued. ‘We’re not rich, and I have to keep my jobs. Grandma and Grandpa Olsen want you to go with them to live in Clearwater. They’re retired, and they can give you all their time. Florida’s nice, you’ll make lot’s of new friends, and we’ll see each other every holiday.’ ”

“I jumped up and faced him, hurt and angry. *‘I won’t go! If you make me go, I’ll run away!’* Then I started running, following the stream away from him.”

“*‘Conor! Conor, stop!’*, he yelled after me.”

“I wouldn’t stop - I ran faster as I heard him start to follow me. Going as fast as I could through the woods, I managed to maintain the distance between us. When we broke into an open field, he caught up with me. What he did then was unexpected - he just ran alongside me. Never tried to stop me. We ran for at least another mile, until we came to the golf course and it’s out-of-bounds fence.”

“As we began to run along the fence, he reached out and put a hand on my shoulder. *‘OK, Scotty, you made your point. You stay here, we’ll work something out.’* ”

“I stopped running, and looked up at him. He was smiling for the first time since Mom died. He grabbed me and we hugged for a long while.”

“Finally straightening up, he said *‘Let’s go home, son. But do you mind if we walk? You’ve about worn your old man out.’* ”

“We walked home, talking easily now for the first time in a year. Dad pointed out parts of the now fallow fields he had helped Grandpa MacKenzie farm before the land was sold. I had never known my Grandfather, he was sort of a folk hero around there, and anything anyone told me about him was fascinating.”

“When we were about a hundred yards away, he yelled *‘Race you to the house!’* ”

”Touching the porch rail first, I just beat him. We stood there on the lawn, laughing and gasping for breath. Dad climbed the steps to the porch, and dropped heavily into a wicker chair.”

“Still puffing, he said ‘Damn, Scotty, I didn’t know you were that fast! We need to start you working more on football and less on golf!’ ”

“Years later, just before he died, Dad reminisced about that day: My grandparents had approached him about raising me, it wasn’t his idea. He had told them he was sure we could get along alright, but he would talk to me about it, let me decide. If I had wanted to go, he would have understood. He was happy and relieved that I wanted to stay with him.”

“He also said he had been so absorbed in his own grief, that he hadn’t noticed until that day how much I had grown - and grown up - in that past year.”

“When I asked him if he had let me beat him to the house, he just smiled, lying there in his hospital bed, remembering.”

“What did he say?” Kathleen asked softly.

“I never did find out...”

“My Grandparents left shortly after that. It was late summer, school had started, and my father and I settled into a new routine. An early riser, I would get up and make us breakfast. Well... juice and cereal. After breakfast, Dad would head out to his teaching job, and I would catch the bus to school. I would get home about three. Football season had started, so Dad would come home from school, pick me up, and we’d go to his coaching job together. I was supposed to do my homework while he coached, but I almost never did. I learned the playbook, and spent most of the practices trying to be one of the players. I ran pass routes for the third string quarterback, shagged balls for the kickers, and occasionally I talked some of the receivers into practicing their routes so I could throw to them. The high school guys were all good to me, I was like a team mascot.”

“During games I was officially the Waterboy, but I was lousy at it. I’d sneak away every chance I got and climb to the top of the stands to watch the game. Since I knew the playbook so well, the first time I did that, I discovered that I could tell just what the other team’s defense was doing to counter us. My father’s team lost that game - the defense did alright, but our quarterback didn’t complete one pass.”

“That night at home, as Dad and I had our usual hot dog dinner,” (Kathleen gave me a knowing smile when I said “hot dog dinner”) “I told him I knew what had gone wrong.”

“Dad said ‘I know what was wrong: Randy’s timing was off and he couldn’t get the ball to his receivers.’ ”

“ ‘No Dad, it wasn’t Randy’s fault. The guys aren’t running their routes right. They’re going too long every time, and Randy doesn’t have time to wait for them to break open.’ ”

“ ‘How do you know this?’ ”

” ‘I went up to the top of the stands to watch. I know the routes. Every time Randy tried to pass, he had to run around before he could throw.’ ”

” ‘I thought he was panicking.’ ”

” ‘Nope, he just thinks the receivers are slow.’ ”

“My father stared at me for a moment. Then with a big grin, said: ‘So what else did you see?’ ”

“ ‘Well, I was thinking maybe you could have one of the backs run a really short route, that way Randy will have someone to throw to if the other guys aren’t open.’ ”

“That night, my assignment changed from Waterboy to Grandstand Observer.”

“In the Spring, when golf season started, our routine would change. After school I’d go directly to the country club, grab something at the snack bar, take it to Dad’s office, and do my homework. As soon as I finished, I was free to roam the club. By this time, I had become good enough at golf to take it for granted, so I began to hang out at the tennis courts instead. They had hired a tennis pro from Brazil, whose South American charm wasn’t lost on the lady members - daughters or wives. I pestered Jose’ for lessons: tennis I learned from practice; seduction, I learned from observation. He never overtly approached the women, he could lose his job. He was just a lot more attentive than the Ohio businessmen they were used to: always complimenting, touching - but never inappropriately - taking them in with his eyes so thoroughly that they often blushed. I took naturally to tennis and quickly became a good player. At thirteen, I had no practical use for the romantic observations, but I had begun to notice girls and I mentally filed Jose’s moves away for future reference...”

Smiling like a teenager who’d caught her boyfriend peeking at her underwear, Kathleen sat back on her stool, crossed her legs, took a sip of wine, and interrupted: “And now is your future isn’t it? Those files have been opened quite often, haven’t they?”

I took another St. Pauli from the fridge, popped the lid and took a long pull. “Ahem, where was I? Um, summer... As the golf pro’s son, and the founder’s grandson, I had free run of the place, as long as I stayed out of the members way. But I was still an employee’s kid. The members and their children were polite and friendly, but subtly made me aware of my place in their social order. I was allowed to play golf when the members were all through, play tennis with Jose’ when he didn’t have a lesson, and practice with the swim team. I was a popular caddy among the low handicap members; they knew no other caddy could possibly have the knowledge of the course I had. But I couldn’t play golf or tennis with a member; I was the best swimmer in practice but couldn’t be on the team, and though the member’s kids

my age were my friends, I was never invited to their birthday parties.”

“ Adults think children don’t notice these things - but they do, and they remember. Days would come when these same people, or some just like them, would court my attention. My life-long revenge for the lessons in the social order is an ability to take full advantage of people like that. And I still do, when it serves my purpose.”

“I began my freshman year in high school having already won the Junior Varsity quarterback position in summer tryouts. At fifteen, I could already throw fifty yards with accuracy. My father, as coach of a rival high school team, was too busy with his own team to attend my practices, and was only able to see one of my games that year: the day we played the JV squad from his school. Although he didn’t coach the freshmen, team loyalty dictated that he stand on his own school’s sideline.”

“My school was so small that we had to let everyone who tried out, play. We had about six good athletes out of the twenty-five or thirty on the team. I played at defensive back in addition to offense. We went three and five that year - outmanned in every game. But our third, and most satisfying, win came against my Dad’s school. I had one receiver who could always get open and he never dropped a pass. He scored four times that day, and I ran one in. We only gave up four.”

“I rode home with my father instead of on the team bus. Typically laconic, he finally said: ‘Scotty, if that were my team, you’d be starting for the varsity.’ ”

“ ‘Oh, yeah. Coach said they talked about that. But we have a senior quarterback, and Coach says we freshmen better learn to play together - we have three more years of playing against bigger teams.’ ”

” ‘I suppose he has a point there.’ ”

” ‘Dad, it stinks. We only have a couple of good guys. We have to play both ways, and we get awfully tired.’ ”

“ ‘Well, that’ll probably be good for you in the long run. Build your stamina. You’ll learn to make the best with what you’ve been given.’ “

” ‘Great. I’d rather *win* than learn a lesson.’ “

” ‘You’ll win, Scotty. Wait and see. You’ll win.’ “

“He was right. By my senior year, our little group had knit into as tight a unit as any high school had ever seen. We added enough talented sophomores and juniors to give us skill at every position. After four years of playing together, we seldom made a mistake. Our defense - still outsized - gave up lots of yardage, but few points. The offense - also outsized - was as cohesive as a pro team. We made up for the size deficit with speed and skill. And by this time, I could throw the ball about sixty yards. We lost only one game that year, and went on to win the state championship in our division. Coincidentally, Dad’s team won their division, too.”

“At the end of the season, I was named All-State Quarterback. I was popular; now I got invited to even the rich kid’s parties. Now, the stuck-up adults from the country club wanted to shake my hand. And I began to understand that a little fame brings a lot of power.”

“Major college coaches from around the country came to see me. We’d go out in the pasture back of the house, and I’d throw to them. Every one of them shook my hand, gave me the same canned grin, and said ‘You’ll hear from us Son.’ But I never did. Dad called some friends; found out every one of those schools thought I’d be taller. They all thought I was too small to play in Division One.”

“We talked about my college options. My idea was to skip college and work at the country club. My father didn’t think much of that, he said ‘We’re college grads in this family, Scot. Think what your mother would say.’ And so I decided to go to a small college close to home.”

“I spent the summer between high school and college as I had every summer once I was old enough to work. I was the club’s resident jack-of-all-trades. I worked

with the greens-keeper, lifeguarded, cleaned the pool, waited tables at big parties, parked cars. I was in demand as a caddy for the Invitationals and club championship, but avoided that job otherwise. Every spare moment I could find, I swept the tennis courts. That's where my girlfriend hung out - she was quite good - and I wanted to keep an eye on her."

"When Fall came, I left for college in a decrepit Austin Healy 3000 I bought with some of my earnings. My girlfriend, smart and with wealthy parents, was off to Barnard in a new Corvette, never to be heard from again."

"Nice girl", Kathleen shook her head.

"Aw, she was okay. We were from different worlds, I knew that would happen."

"As unexcited as I was about the academic challenge of a good small college, the football coach/athletic director was ecstatic about having an All-State quarterback fall into his lap. Once again, I found that a little fame brings power. Whereas at a Division One school I would have been just one of dozens of recruits, at this school I was the starting QB the day I arrived."

"To make sure their new star didn't do something dumb like flunk out, I was roomed with a track star Senior who was studying pre-med on an academic scholarship. He was instructed to make sure my transition from high school to college went smoothly, and that I went to class and studied. Of course, I knew nothing about his assignment. I just thought, in a good-natured way, that Taylor was a nagging pain in the ass. And I went to class. And I studied...a little."

"On the practice field, things were a disaster. As a Division Three school, our college wasn't allowed to recruit or give athletic scholarships. And the school was so damn hard academically that no pure jocks would go there. You're wondering, 'How did Mac get in?' Well, I had very high college board scores, and it helped that my father was a teacher."

“After our first practice, I was so discouraged, I wanted to quit. The team was comprised of kids who had never been better than third string in high school; most of them hadn’t even played in a game. Our two tallest receivers were five foot nine, they were all slow, and none of them could catch. None of our so-called linemen were over two hundred-ten pounds. We were gonna get clobbered. While everyone else showered and left, I just sat wordlessly in front of my locker.”

“The coach could see I was frustrated. After everyone but me had left, he came out of his office and sat on the bench next to me. ‘We’ll get better Conor. This was only our first day.’ ”

“ ‘No offense Coach, but these guys could practice for a year, and they’d *still* suck. I mean, half these guys are Seniors - they’re not gonna get any better. I think maybe I should transfer now, before I lose a year of eligibility.’ “

” ‘Look, Son, we can’t recruit. Division Three teams are built on reputation. Look at our track or wrestling or tennis teams - they’re all conference champs. Why? Because we’ve always been that way, so the good kids want to come here. Give us a year. You and I will do this together. I watched you play in high school. When I found out you were coming here, I worked up a playbook to take advantage of your abilities using the talent we presently have. I won’t bullshit you - we’re going to lose. A lot at first. *But*, with you and the offense I’ve designed, we’ll be exciting and maybe we’ll surprise some teams. When the high school kids hear about that, next year we’ll get some more guys like you. Then we will start winning.’ “

” ‘If I can still *walk*.’ “

” ‘One thing I will promise you, Conor. We *will* protect you. You’re going to be here four years - healthy. You want to prove the Division One coaches wrong. I want

a chance to show I really can coach. Get showered. We'll go get a burger and really go over the play book.' "

"So that's what we did."

"His playbook was built around deception and precision passing. On every play, I would have two or three options. If we couldn't out muscle the other team, we would try to out-think them."

"In practice, I realized that our receivers couldn't catch my passes because they had never handled a hard thrown ball. One kid was able to adjust, and then almost never dropped one. We had a halfback who was only five-seven, literally a half back, but quick and sure-handed. The offensive line was small, but adapted quickly to the new scheme of trap-blocking or just getting in the other team's way."

"On the phone one afternoon after practice, I was telling my father about my roommate - how I had seen him running the one hundred yard dash, and that I thought it was unusual for a guy six-foot-three to be so fast. There was a long pause on the other end of the line."

" 'Dad', I said, 'are you there?' "

" 'Can he catch a football?' "

"Instantly, I knew why he had asked."

" 'I'll find out after dinner. I'll call tonight and tell you.' "

"After dinner, I said 'Hey Taylor, lets go have a catch.' "

" 'Jesus, don't you get enough of that at practice?'"

" 'Naw, I didn't do much throwing today', I lied."

" 'Alright, but just for a few minutes. I need to study. And so do you, Sport.' "

“I threw to him for half an hour. Short and hard. Long arcs he had to run under. Crossing the field. Too high; too low. Behind; in front. Everything. After about five passes, he got the tempo. Then, he didn’t miss a ball. Not one.”

“We went back to our room, and I went to the pay phone in the hall to call my father. I told him what had happened.”

“ ‘Then you know what to do next’, he said.”

“ ‘Dad, he’s never had any interest in football. He’s never played at all...’ ”

” ‘Scotty, there’s your fast, tall, wide receiver. Talk him into it.’ ”

“ ‘*Football!* You gotta be kidding! I only weigh one seventy-five. I’d get fucking *killed!*’ Taylor’s reaction to the idea wasn’t exactly enthusiastic.”

“ ‘Look’, I said, ‘you won’t have to hit anyone. All you have to do is run and catch, like you did tonight.’ ”

“ ‘Yeah, and get fucking creamed *after* I catch it.’ ”

“ ‘They don’t tackle so hard down field’, I lied. ‘Besides, you’re supposed to be so damn fast - no one should be able to catch the Great Taylor.’ ”

“ ‘I don’t know...’ ”

” ‘Just look at the playbook; come to practice, suit up and try it. You’ll see - you’ll like the game.’ ”

” ‘But...’ ”

” ‘Oh yeah, one very important thing I forgot... Cheerleaders.’ ”

“ ‘Cheerleaders?’ he muttered.”

“Now I had his interest. Taylor had never been on a team that had cheerleaders.”

“ ‘Yeah, you know, the Babes in the short skirts. They love football players. And they go on the road trips, too.’ “

” ‘Missy Johnson’s a cheerleader, isn’t she?’ “

” ‘Yep. She’s at every game. And they practice right alongside our practice field every day.’ “

“I knew I had him then. Missy Johnson was a Junior. Golden blonde hair, bright blue eyes, lithe athletic body. A light-up-the-room smile. She was on the tennis team in the Spring. I happened to know that she had broken up with her home town boyfriend that past summer. And, most importantly, I knew that Taylor had a ten ton crush on her.”

“I could see the wheels spinning in his head. Quietly, I said ‘She doesn’t have a boyfriend, you know.’ ”

“ ‘Maybe I could just, like, bump into her at practice or something.’ “

” ‘Anything’s possible, Buddy. But she won’t be unattached for long.’ “

” ‘What time is practice tomorrow? I want to get there early and get a uniform that fits.’ “

“I had my wide receiver.”

“We scored a touchdown on the first play of our first game. An old trick play worked perfectly: We lined up with what looked like only ten players. Taylor stood casually just inside the sideline. Our team had been told to stand near him, but off the field. I took the ball from center, faked a

handoff, and threw a perfect pass to Taylor, who was streaking uncovered down the sideline. He ran in for six. The other coach, who had thought we were going to be penalized for too few men on the field, was livid.”

“Of course our defense then gave up six. But they held out for about eight minutes.”

“On our first play after the kickoff, we did it again. Taylor lined up next to our sideline. There was a lot of screaming from everyone on the other side - coaches, players, the band, people in the stands. They were so busy watching Taylor, somehow they completely missed what was right in front of them: our five-nine wideout stood just a few feet back from the line of scrimmage, next to their sideline. “Hide in plain sight”, Coach called the play. I took the ball, and never looked anywhere but at Taylor until I turned and threw to the little guy trotting down the other side. Six more. Their coach was turning purple with rage. He screamed at the referees, who were trying to suppress their laughter.”

“The other team was so distracted, our defense held them to a field goal this time.”

“After the next kickoff, we lined up in exactly the same formation as the time before: two guys lolling near the sidelines, and one normal split receiver. At first, the other team couldn’t believe we would try this a third time, then quickly went man-to-man on the three receivers. I took the snap, their whole team dropped into pass coverage, then I handed off to our little halfback, who ran untouched eighty yards for another touchdown. It had taken us a total of about forty-five seconds to score three times.”

“The other team, which should have kicked our asses, came completely unraveled. We held on to win by three.”

Kathleen was laughing, “That’s one of the best sports stories I’ve ever heard. It should be in a book or something.”

“Yeah, maybe. Anyway, one game - one win. We lost the next four, and ended the year four and six. But Coach was right: we did have a lot of fun. And Taylor and Missy have been married for years.”

“Have you kept in touch?”

“I last saw Taylor about ten years ago. He’s a Doctor. But that’s getting ahead of the story.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“That’s alright. I just want to keep telling this kind of chronologically, it’s easier to remember this way.”

“Go ahead, I’ll try not to interrupt.”

“Where was I? Oh. I played on the tennis team in the spring, did my usual work at the Country Club over the summer, and went back to school in the fall stronger and ten pounds heavier - but still only five-foot-eleven.”

“That summer, sitting on the porch one night with my father, he said: ‘Your wrestling team won the Conference again, huh?’ ”

“ ‘Yeah.’ “

” ‘And the track team...they did also, right?’ “

” ‘Yessir.’ “

” ‘Seems to me if you get on the phone now, you might have some new linemen, linebackers, defensive backs, and receivers lined up for fall practice.’ “

“Before he finished his sentence, I was up and heading in to the phone.”

“In the fall, our team was joined by six wrestlers and three more track stars. A fullback from my old high school

team enrolled; if the coaches couldn't recruit, there were no rules against me talking to old friends. We went seven and three that year, and by season's end had jelled into a good team."

"The Fall of my junior year- for the first time ever - Coach had to hold tryouts and make cuts for the team. We went nine and one. I was named All-Conference QB. I also made All-Conference in tennis in the Spring."

"Senior year, it all finally came together. Taylor had gone off to med school, but now every high school football player who was just a little bit short of making the big school teams and had good enough grades, was trying to get into my college. Coach was proved right - reputation did his recruiting. What he had was an offense and defense composed of guys pissed off about not making the big time, and all of us were determined to show those goddamn Division One coaches that they had been wrong. Our coach picked up on this sentiment, and played on it constantly, never letting us get complacent."

"We were talented, intelligent, cohesive, and well coached. We were merciless. We went ten and oh. We beat the living shit out of every team we played. We probably could have beaten Ohio State. We set Division Three season records for most points scored and fewest points allowed. I rarely played in the fourth quarter, we would be so far ahead that Coach wanted to give my successor some game time. I was All-Conference again, joined by an unprecedented ten others from our team. And I was the Division Three All-American QB."

"My Dad had attended every game, and filmed them all. He and Coach spliced his and the school's films together into a highlight of my senior year. Dad had a purpose: he thought I was good enough to make the pro's, but he knew they almost never took anyone from Division Three. He sent copies to every NFL team. Most didn't reply at all. Several of the older, more genteel franchises sent the film back with a letter, all of which were a version of 'Sorry, five-eleven and one-ninety-five is too small for our league. Good luck.' "

“I had expected this reaction, even questioned my father’s efforts. I just figured I would finish school and get a job; maybe use my moment of local fame to help find something decent.”

“Then, just before the NFL Draft, the unexpected happened. The Assistant Director of Player Personnel of the San Francisco 49er’s phoned my father. He said ‘Of course you know we can’t use a draft pick on a Division Three player, but the QB Coach wants to know if Conor will come out here for a tryout. Let us look at him in person. I’m telling you right up front, he has almost no chance of making the squad. But, we liked his film, and there are some changes in personnel coming, and you just never know what might happen.’ ”

“They sent me a plane ticket and five-hundred dollars expense money, and a free-agent contract which they suggested we have a lawyer look at. My Dad knew an Agent. He got me five-thousand for signing.”

“This would be my first plane ride. Dad drove me to the airport, and as we walked to the gate, he said: ‘Scotty, if I thought you needed me, I’d buy a ticket and go along. But you’ve been a man for about eight years now, and I know you can handle yourself. I also know you are good enough to play in that league, and the 49er’s must be thinkin’ something like that too, or they wouldn’t have sent for you. Just keep your hands in your pockets, keep your mouth shut, be respectful, and listen. Remember what you’ve learned, and do what you know you can do. You *can* play with those boys, I don’t give a fuck if you’re not six-four.’ ”

“I stopped dead in the middle of the aisle.”

“He went on a couple of steps, realized I had stopped, and came back. ‘What?’, he said.”

“I looked at him then, as a man, not as my father, for the first time. Except for the permanent tan and the little sun-caused lines on his face that went with his work, this guy could be my age.”

“ ‘ I’ve never heard you use that word before.’ “

” ‘What word?’ “

“I couldn’t say it in front of him. ‘The F-word, Dad’.”

“He smiled broadly. ‘Sonny, I don’t say it or even do it often. But either way, when I do, I fucking mean it.’ ”

“We looked at each other for a few seconds, then both broke out laughing. Arms over each other’s shoulders, we arrived at the gate counter, still laughing.”

“ ‘I’ll hit the men’s room while you check in’, Dad said.”

“I handed my ticket to the good looking young woman behind the counter. After the usual questions, she said: ‘And will your brother want to sit next to you?’ ”

“ ‘My brother?’ “

” ‘He was just here. Isn’t he traveling with you?’ “

“I realized she meant my father. ‘No, that’s not...’ What the heck, why spoil the illusion. ‘No, he’s not going’, I said.”

“Dad walked up as she handed me a boarding pass. ‘All set?’, he asked.”

“She answered before I could, her eyes riveted on my father, ‘Uh-huh. Window seat, in front of the engines where it’s quiet. Have a great flight. You can board right now.’ ”

“ ‘Thank you’, I said. She was too preoccupied with smiling at Dad to hear me.”

“We walked to the gate, and gave each other a hug.”

“ ‘You’ll be fine, Son, I know you will.’ “

” ‘Thanks Dad’, I said. ‘For everything.’ “

“I handed the man my boarding pass and started down the passageway. Remembering that I wanted to tell Dad I would call him as soon as I landed, I turned and walked back. There was my father, casually leaning on the ticket counter, charming the pants off the pretty airline girl. For the second time in the past ten minutes, and in my life, I was surprised that my father was also one of us guys. I had been more concerned with leaving him to fend for himself than about my first plane trip. Now I knew he would do, probably had been doing, just fine without me to look after him. Years of observing Jose’ the tennis pro in action had taught me not to interrupt a man at work. I watched Dad for a moment, realizing that the man I knew had a side of his life I knew nothing about.”

“Then I went down the passageway and into the plane that would carry me to my adult life.”

- TWELVE -

“**T**he Forty-Niner’s held training camp in Palo Alto, on the Stanford campus. They had vans waiting at the airport for arriving rookies. Everyone on the van I took had been drafted, except me. They were all late draft picks. The early picks received big-dollar contracts, and had private transportation. None of the seven guys on my van had ever heard of my college. ‘You’re a Division Three quarterback? You sure you’re not on the wrong bus?’ They all got a good laugh from that. I just shrugged and laughed along. We all knew that none of them had much chance of making the team, either.”

“We checked into our dorm, and a trainer came and told me to go see the quarterbacks coach. In his office, he greeted me warmly, then gave me a straight speech:

‘Mr. MacKenzie, I won’t bullshit you - we don’t expect you to make the team. Division Three players just don’t get into the NFL, especially quarterbacks. So, why are you here? Competition among the teams in this league is fierce. Every team knows all about every Division One player before the draft, so we’re all even there. This organization prides itself on being very thorough, maybe we’ll discover someone the other guys missed. That’s why you’re here. We saw some things that we liked in your game films. You can throw the ball - a lot of kids can, but you’re accurate and you don’t make mistakes. How many interceptions did you give up?’”

” ‘Ten.’ “

“There was a pause while he considered that. He frowned, scribbled something in his notebook. ‘Well, I guess the films held that back. That’s good, but not outstanding; ten in a season.’ ”

“ ‘In four years. Fifty-two games, if you count post-season.’ ”

“The pen stopped. He looked up abruptly. ‘In four years?’ ”

” ‘Yeah.’ ”

” ‘How many TD’s?’ ”

“ ‘I have no idea. Lost count long ago. We had to score a lot; the defense wasn’t much help until my senior year.’ ”

“More scribbling. ‘Well, we saw that you have a good command of the field. You don’t panic, you think, and you make the correct decisions. That’s the kind of player we like. On the other hand, you are too small.’ ”

“ ‘Yeah, I’ve heard that before. Pardon my language, but that’s bullshit.’ ”

“ ‘That’s a good attitude. But the truth is, in this league, size *does* matter. MacKenzie, I’ll promise you, you will get a fair shot to show what you can do. See the equipment manager and get your stuff. I’ll see you on the practice field tomorrow.’ He stood and shook my hand. ‘Good luck.’ ”

“As if to underline the coach’s ‘size does matter’ comment, when I got back to the dorm with my equipment, my training camp roommate was there. All three hundred-fifteen pounds of him. A defensive lineman from Nebraska State, he seemed to fill the room. He was also a long shot to make the team: a broken ankle had made him miss his senior season, the Forty-Niner’s had taken him with an extra pick in the last round, hoping he could come back from the injury. His nickname was “Mooch”, and at dinner that night I found out why. His favorite phrase was: ‘You gonna eat that?’, whereupon he would mooch any food you hadn’t touched yet.”

“The team had sent me an offense playbook a week before camp, and I had been pleasantly surprised to find that my college offense had the same basic philosophy as the Forty-Niner’s: lots of motion and high percentage passes - get the ball into the receiver’s hands and let them do their work. So the plays were relatively easy for me to learn. But, reading NFL defenses was something entirely different, and I knew it would take me a couple of seasons to pick that up. I also knew I probably wouldn’t have the luxury of time, so I borrowed Mooch’s defensive playbook and studied it. At least I would recognize the Forty-Niner’s defenses.”

“I won’t describe every day of camp, I’ll just give you the highlights. There were five quarterbacks in training camp. Three of us were competing for the third spot. Of course, I wasn’t expected to seriously compete. The first day, they had receivers run routes from the book, and we threw to them. I was better prepared than my two competitors and completed every pass. And honestly, I could throw better than any of them. It went pretty much that way all through camp. It surprised everyone when I made the first cut. The second cut came; one of my competitors was gone but I was still there, and everyone but me was shocked. We scrimmaged the Raiders. I got in for two plays: I handed off once, and completed a play-action pass. When the first pre-season game came, I was still there, but I didn’t play at all. My remaining competitor played the fourth quarter, and stunk; the Raider’s defense had him rattled.”

“Before the second pre-season game, the QB coach called me to his office. ‘MacKenzie, to be truthful, I’m surprised you’re still here. We all are. But you’ve worked hard. You’ve shown us you know how to play the game. You’ve done very well in practice. Now, we’re gonna give you a chance to show us what you can do in a game. We’re going to let you start the fourth quarter against Green Bay on Saturday. You’ll stay in until you fuck up, or the game ends. I won’t bullshit you, this is your one shot.’”

Kathleen was lining up a shot. She stopped, said “Hold it”, propped her cue against the table, then came over and again sat on the bar stool next to me. Tan legs crossed, she took a drink of her wine. “Okay, then what did you say?”

“Well, I thought for a moment. Then I said ‘I want the first string receivers.’ ”

“Coach said ‘*What? No way!* Those guys never play the fourth quarter in pre-season.’ ”

“ ‘Then give me them and the third quarter.’ “

” ‘Boy, you have balls, I’ll give you that. There’s no way the Coach will go for that.’ “

” ‘Ask him.’ “

” ‘You’re crazy.’ “

” ‘What’s the worst thing he can say? No? If you guys really do want to give me a chance to show what I can do, give me the starters. Then if I fuck up, it’ll be my fault alone.’ “

“He picked up the phone. ‘Mr. MacKenzie here wants the third quarter and the starters.’ He listened. ‘Yeah, to quote him if he fucks up it’ll be his fault alone. He listened again, hung up the phone, then, grinning, said ‘You’re starting the second half with the first team.’ ”

“ ‘Great’. I stood up. ‘I’m gonna go watch some films.’ ”

“As I got to the office door, he said ‘MacKenzie!’ I turned. He said ‘At least we know you don’t have a confidence problem. But as soon as you falter, you’re outa there. You’re taking a big gamble, son.’ ”

“I said, ‘Is there another way?’ and went off to study.”

“Kathleen, they’ll tell you that exhibition games don’t count. Well the only way they don’t count is in the season standings. For everyone involved, they count, big time. Especially for the guys trying to make the team and the players trying to keep their jobs, it’s real serious business. When they heard I would start the second half, some of them weren’t too happy. After all, how the quarterback plays affects the whole offense. But they were all professionals, and everybody liked me - I took their razzing well and I had been good on the field - so I knew nobody would tank on me.”

“Wait, what’s ‘tank’?” she asked.

“Purposely not play well.”

“Okay, sorry, go on.”

“At the end of the first half, we were up by three. Green Bay didn’t know the Forty-Niner’s were going to start a small-college rookie in the second half, but when their defensive players saw me come on the field, there was a lot of trash talk from their side. Our offensive coordinator had counted on that, he figured they’d lose their focus a little - either try to kill me or let their attention wander. He was right.” I stopped to re-fill Kathleen’s glass.

“Geez, Mac, don’t leave it hanging like that! What happened?” Her eyes were bright with anticipation.

“My first play was a seventy-five yard touchdown pass.”

“Oh God! That is so cool! ”

“Yeah, I kinda thought so. Everybody was pretty happy about it. Except for Green Bay, of course. They were really pissed off.”

“I would imagine so. Then what happened?”

“Well, I was right. I hadn’t played with the first string offense before, and it did make a difference. I threw two more TD’s before the quarter ended. Only two incompletions and no interceptions. It was fun.”

“Let me guess: they cut the other guy, you made the team.”

“Yeah. He was gone the next morning.”

“You don’t look like that made you happy.”

“Oh, it did. At that time in my life, that was the best day I had ever had. Mooch and I and a couple of other rookies went out and tied one on to celebrate. The team was keeping Mooch, but on injured reserve for the year. But I’m not through.”

“My Dad flew out to watch the final exhibition game the following Sunday. I knew I wouldn’t play much, if at all. It’s the final tune-up for the starters. Coach said I might get to finish the fourth quarter.”

This was another hard part for me to tell. I got off my stool, and went around the bar to get another beer. I opened it, took a long pull, put the bottle on the corner of the bar, walked around to the pool table and leaned against the end facing Kathleen. She wasn’t smiling now. Putting her wine glass down, she turned on her stool to face me. Her serious amber eyes watched my face.

I crossed my arms and looked down at my left leg. The memory hadn’t faded at all, I could still see the field that Sunday as if I were there again. Not looking up, I began again:

“I was standing on the sideline. We had the ball, and as we closed in on the two-minute warning, Coach Walsh came to me and said ‘Son, you’ve earned some playing time, but you probably won’t get in another game this season.

Go out and run the two-minute drill.' Our offense on the field was a mix of vets and rookies. The two-minute offense was mostly short passes to the sidelines. And that's what the other team expected to see, rightfully so. We were on our own thirty yard line, with a first down. The first play was supposed to be a ten yard sideline pass, so the wideout could go out of bounds and stop the clock. Supposed to be. But when the ball was snapped, our rookie halfback came open forty yards down the middle. I had to throw to him. He caught it at their thirty, and was stopped at the twenty. I called a time-out."

"At the sideline, the Coach said 'Having a good time? You know, this isn't supposed to be easy.' "

" 'I don't think it is, Coach.' "

" 'Sure looks like you do. Alright, you still have nearly two minutes and one timeout. If you take it in, I'll buy you dinner.' "

" 'All eleven of us out there.' "

"He tried to give me a pissed off look, but everyone around us was laughing. 'Okay, kid. You score six, I buy eleven dinners.' "

"As I ran back onto the field, a linebacker from the other team, the guy our halfback had beat, shouted 'You ain't doin' that again, Shorty!' "

"In the huddle, I called the play, then said 'Okay Boys, one TD, Coach buys us all a steak. Anybody hungry?'"

"I took the snap, dropped back, and San Diego blitzed everybody, about eight, I think. I got the pass off. It was a TD, but I didn't see it, my guys were overrun. Three or four, I never knew how many, got to me."

I paused for a moment, remembering. “When the pileup cleared, I was on the bottom. I couldn’t move my left leg. They wheeled me off on a stretcher.”

“My thigh bone was shattered. My knee was in pieces. I had a concussion.”

“I was done with football.”

“As they put me into an ambulance, I overheard the team surgeon tell my father that I would be lucky to even jog again. Dad said ‘You don’t know my son’. Then I passed out.”

I looked up then at Kathleen. Her eyes were glistening, and a tear had started down one silken cheek. Without a word, she slid off her stool, walked over and put her arms around me and held me tightly.

She murmured into my chest, “Every time you come to a part that looks like a happy ending, you yank it out from under me.”

“That’s exactly how I’ve felt.”

“I can’t imagine how you have gotten through all this. I’m exhausted just from hearing it.”

She tilted her head back, looked up at me. “It’s very late. I’m tired. Can we continue your story tomorrow?”

“Do you want to hear more?”

“Yes. All of it. But not now.” She stood on tip-toe, and very softly brushed my lips with hers. Her eyes locked onto mine. “I’m going to bed now, Conor” she whispered, then turned, picked up her wine, and without looking back sauntered out of the room.

I watched her go. This woman had a presence that would fill an empty stadium.

But I was far from alone, the room was quite full. There was Dorothy, howling and beating at the storm curtains, trying to join me inside. And the Hard-Luck-Kid, long buried inside me, brought back to life with the telling of his story. And the Unfinished Past, brought into the present by the face that was-yet-wasn't my late-ex-wife.

And Kathleen Lynch was still there. Her implied invitation hung in the air, and the feeling of her lips lingered on mine.

I knew I had to deal with each one of this crowd separately.

The very real physical danger of the hurricane was to me the lessor of the problems. It was about four hours until daybreak. Then I would try to go outside, inspect for damage to the house, and decide if we needed to take Kathleen's car and make a run to somewhere safer; though I didn't know where that would be.

The "Hard-Luck-Kid"? Well, maybe sharing his story would be a catharsis, and he would finally rest in peace.

As to the head with Su Li's face, I had already decided to go back, solve that mystery, and then finish something I had started long ago. Assuming I first survived this storm.

Kathleen... down the hall in the guest suite. Apparently, there for the taking. My thoughts and libido were mixed about that:

What about April? I knew I cared deeply for her. Last night she had told me she was in love with me, but couldn't stay with me the way I was. Where did that leave us, after a year together?

Did I have feelings for Kathleen, or was it just circumstance and physical attraction? I had to admit that she was the single sexiest woman I had ever met. Was that all there was?

If I went into that bedroom, it would change my life, and possibly hurt two women - did I want that right now? And did I want to begin something new before I resolved the past; what if I never came back?

I went up to the living room to decide whether to join my house guest. Sitting on the sofa, nursing another beer and absently watching the Weather Channel, I avoided making a decision by thinking about it until it was too late to go to her.

- THIRTEEN -

I awoke on the sofa at about eight A.M. Forgot to put myself to bed again. Apparently, sometime during the early morning Kathleen had found me asleep, and covered me with a light blanket from her room.

The living room was dark, except for a couple of candles she must have lit, on the console table behind me. No light penetrated the storm curtains. The television was off. It was completely quiet, no sound of the hurricane beating the house. "Must be the eye of the storm", I thought. I sat up and looked around. From the kitchen came a pale glow, and faint sounds of someone stirring.

Barefoot, I padded to the kitchen doorway. By candle light, Kathleen stood in profile to me, again wearing the silk robe, her freshly washed hair pulled back and still damp. Concentrating upon making coffee, she didn't notice my approach. I watched her in the soft light for a few seconds, realizing that she was one of those rare women who surprise you with their beauty each time you see them, because no matter how short the time, your memory cannot hold something so perfect. Only April had done that to me. April...

I cleared my throat and stepped into the room. Startled, she spilled most of the measuring cup of coffee grounds she held.

"*Shit !*" she said. "Now look what you've made me do. Sneaking up on me... What are you, a Cat Burglar?"

"Sorry, I'll start wearing a cow-bell when I'm barefoot."

“The power is out. I didn’t know how to start the generator.”

“That’s fine, we’ll want to save the fuel for that until we absolutely need it. You might as well put the coffee away, we’ll have to use instant and heat it over a candle.”

“Oh Boy! Just like camping out. I hate camping out; I’m a city girl”, she laughed. “I woke up, I guess, because it got so quiet. Your door was open, but you weren’t in your room. I came up to see where you were and what was going on out there - couldn’t, I forgot all the windows are covered. I went back to bed but couldn’t sleep, so I took a shower and came up here. By the way, we do still have water. I tried to be quiet, sorry I awakened you.”

“I’m a very light sleeper.”

She had found the instant coffee, and was figuring out how to heat the cups over candles. “I don’t mind telling you, I’m a little apprehensive, Mac. I’ve never been in a hurricane. Why is it so quiet? Is it over?”

“I think we’re in the eye of the storm.” She handed me a cup of lukewarm coffee. “There’s a battery-powered radio in my office, I’ll go get it. If we are in the eye, I want to go outside and see how we’re holding up. And I’ll get some flashlights for walking around in here.”

When I came up the hall from the office, she was standing at the doorway to my room, holding a candle. “I tried to phone the station, the cell phone doesn’t work”, she said. I handed her a flashlight. “I’ll go out with you, just let me find some other clothes. Want to help me pick something out?”, her eyebrows arched with the question.

I considered that for a moment. But these were April’s things she was borrowing. “No, I think I had better

let you do that alone.”, I said as I turned right and headed up the stairs to wait for her.

She came upstairs wearing an old pair of my grey sweat pants, a worn out chambray shirt I wore for garden work, and April’s old sneakers.

“Now there’s an *Outfit* ”, I said. I received a smirk from her in return. “The radio says we are in the eye, right in the center; the storm is a direct hit on Boca. We have about an hour before it starts up again.”

“Okay, fashion critic, how do we get outside?”

“We’ll go right out the front door. I don’t want to raise a storm panel. It would be my luck to have one stick and not lower again.”

We went up the steps to the foyer, and I opened the door to a scene of quiet and chaos. You see the aftermath of hurricanes on television, but until it happens to you personally, those are just pictures. My lushly landscaped grounds were now barren; nearly all of the foliage was gone. We walked down the steps to the driveway, kicking loose debris out of our way. It didn’t look better at ground level. In the carport under the house, Kathleen’s police car was intact. As designed, everything under the house, though wet, had been protected from the worst of the wind. Clearing a path before us, we walked down the drive toward Route A1A, here called Ocean Drive. Sixty-foot palm trees lay on the ground, exposed roots swept bare by wind and rain. As we approached the wild sea-grape forest that buffered my property from the road we saw that much of the vegetation had blown into it; the sea-grapes - naturally storm resistant - had held their ground. From a distance, we could tell the road was flooded, a lagoon full of floating debris had formed at the lower end of the drive.

“Guess we’re not going anywhere for a while”, Kathleen muttered.

Having no further to go, we turned and started back up the driveway. “*Jesus !*” She grabbed my arm and stopped. “*Look at that !*”

It was our first long view of the house. I had never seen the place without trees and shrubs. The big oval three story structure stood stark against the sky. The ocean had breached the dune at the cuts man-made for exactly this purpose, but the surf was all the way up the beach, pounding at the sea side of the dune. As each wave broke and flowed through the cuts, more water ran around the house, down the hill toward the lake that used to be a road. Even though the dune was overgrown with sea-grapes, I had serious doubts that it would survive Dorothy’s coming backside.

The house itself looked fine. Guy Franke had designed the building with this worst scenario in mind. The oval structure rested inside ten three story high round concrete columns, reinforced with steel beams which were attached to the beams of each floor of the house. Each column had been anchored in bedrock, many feet down. The walls were ten inch thick poured concrete. The white stucco clad house had no flat walls or corners or edges for the wind to catch. The roof, poured concrete like the walls, was covered in Mediterranean barrel tiles just for decoration, and it peaked lengthwise at it’s center, shunning wind and water. His idea for diverting a storm surge was to let it come through cuts in the dune fifty yards from either side of the house, and direct the water down what were normally decorative dry stone-lined false creek beds toward the road. So far, both the house and dune designs had held.

“Let’s walk around back,” I said, “watch your step.”

“I’m fine.” Walking ahead of me, she declined my help, and hopped athletically over a huge felled tree.

The first floor was enclosed with no windows, with a portion of the oval under the front of the house left open for the carport. The cantilevered concrete decks of the second and third floors were overhead on the ocean side. An outside stairway, poured as part of the building with a three foot high outer wall, curled up and around the curve of the north end from the ground-level pool area to the third floor deck. The stairs were clear of storm debris.

As we climbed the steps, I said "Enough rain came down here to keep these stairs clear."

"Like a water slide", she answered.

We reached the deck and looked over the railing. Wind and water had pushed several feet of sand into the chasm between the first floor wall and the dune. A bright almost breezeless sky was proved false by the roaring of the attacking surf. The bridge, which had somehow survived so far, sloped from third floor deck to the steps down to the beach. It had once touched the crest of the dune, and now stood a good three feet above it. The steps at the end were under water.

"Looks like we're holding up well", I said. "Will you check the storm curtains up here while I check the second floor ones?"

"How are you going to get down there? There's no stairway, and you don't want to open them to go out from inside."

"No problem." I climbed over the railing, knelt down and grasped the edge of the concrete deck, swung inward, and dropped lightly onto the deck below.

"Yeah, nice move, Cat Burglar. Let's see you get back up here."

"Just check the curtains, willya?" I yelled up at her.

Moving quickly, I inspected each storm curtain. On this level, they protected windows and doors at the master suite, the gameroom, and the guest suite. All were still locked down and in good condition. There was little debris on the deck, except for a dead seagull in front of my bedroom. Apparently it had been caught in the storm, tried to find shelter on the deck, and drowned in the torrential rain. I told myself not to find any symbolism in this, and dropped the lifeless bird off the end of the deck. If it was still there after the storm, I would bury it.

I got back up onto the third floor deck. Kathleen was at the other end, in front of the breakfast room. Leaning against the railing, watching the ocean torture the beach, she didn't notice me until I was almost beside her. She didn't say a word, just gave me a brief worried smile, and looked back to the water. We stood silently side by side, I put my arm around her shoulder, she wrapped hers tightly around my waist. When the wind began to pick up, I led her away from the railing and, arms still around each other, we walked to the stairway.

As we came to the steps, she said "I guess your father was right."

"About what?"

"You using your leg again. It seems to work just fine. How did you get back up here?"

"Pole vault."

At the bottom of the stairs, she turned and looked up at me. "Mac, is your story going to get better, or worse?"

"What, you don't like it? You're the one who asked to hear it."

"You know what I mean: easier or harder to tell... and hear."

I thought about that for a few seconds. "Both," I answered.

- FOURTEEN -

It was now about eleven AM; the storm was moving on, taking the tranquility of the eye along. The wind began to pick up, the sun was suddenly obscured and the sky darkened. Heavy gusts blew sea spray in a mist around the house, making it look like a scene from an old Sherlock Holmes movie.

Re-entering the darkness inside, we retrieved our flashlights from the foyer console table. I tried the light switch; as expected, the power was still off.

“I’m going to go down and start the generator and let it run for awhile. Cool the house off, and we need to keep our food supply cold”.

“And the beer and the wine”, she said.

“Yeah, let’s not forget the important stuff”.

I got the generator running and, not having cleaned up yet, went to my room to shower and shave. I had no idea why the city water was still running, but I wasn’t going to argue with a little good luck. Barefoot, dressed in khaki shorts and an un-tucked white LaCoste shirt, I decided to check the radio for a storm update, and went down the hall to my office. The emergency broadcast wasn’t encouraging. I sat in my desk chair facing the storm panel covered window, to listen: the worst of the storm was now poised to wash over Boca; it was a Category Four hurricane; if you haven’t evacuated don’t try to leave now, don’t drink the water, etcetera.

I turned the radio off, and noticed that with the power on, my answering machine’s message light was blinking.

When I pushed the 'Play' button, I heard April's voice. The sound of wind howling in the background made it obvious that she had called from her car. I had to listen intently to understand her words:

"I should have listened to my father and nearly everyone else. They told me you were a playboy and you would show your true colors eventually. But even they wouldn't believe you could work this fast. I drove back down here in this damn rain, then walked up your driveway through all that water, because I thought you needed someone to be with you now. And what do I see? Sergeant Lynch's car parked under the house. I was right: you do need someone - but it seems it can be *anyone!*"

Her voice grew more charged with emotion with each sentence. "I hope she'll be happy with you. Until she turns her back for a moment, and the next Babe comes along. As soon as possible, I will be on Daddy's plane back to Paris. At least there, you know up front the men are cheating bastards!"

For a moment, I just stared at the machine. Then I played the message again. It didn't sound any better the second time. Forgetting the lines were down, I reflexively reached for the phone to call her. No dial tone.

"Mac, I'm terribly sorry."

I put the phone down, and turned my chair to face Kathleen standing in the doorway. She had changed back into the black outfit.

"I wasn't eavesdropping, I promise. I came down the hall from the guest room and stopped because I thought you were listening to the radio. As soon as I can get out of here, I'll find her and set things straight. You didn't deserve that, it's all my fault. I am so sorry."

“Nothing is your fault, Kathleen. Maybe it’s for the best. She can’t be included in my life right now, and it frustrates her. I don’t know how long I’ll be away, and she should just get on with her life.”

“You’ll never catch her anyway. Daddy will have his jet here to pick her up before the pavement dries. She’ll be gone before we can get out of my driveway. Really... it’s all right.”

“So you say...” she said quietly, and went down the hall and up the stairs.

The truth was, I was disappointed that April was so quick to believe the worst about me. For her to reach this conclusion without even talking to me was unreasonable, and kind of pissed me off. It didn’t matter how close Ms. Lynch and I had come to making April’s assumption correct - nothing had happened. Now April and I were going in opposite directions. And I was as anxious as she to leave.

Taking the radio with me, I went upstairs to join Kathleen. She was in the kitchen again, and I was barefoot, so as I went through the dining room I yelled out “I’m coming in, don’t drop anything”.

“Very funny,” she called back.

She had gotten containers of food out of the refrigerator, and was setting the breakfast table. The storm curtains covering the expanse of glass blocked the view, and I realized how accustomed I had become to watching the sea while I ate.

“All that stuff on the counter is perishable. I thought we should have that first, and save the frozen things and canned goods for later,” she said. “Bring it all over to the table, we’ll have a buffet.”

It was all from Jo's: seafood salad, chicken salad, tuna salad, corned beef, hard boiled eggs, a variety of cheeses, potato salad, fresh picked tomatoes. I also had Kaiser rolls and rye bread from the bakery Jo used. Kathleen had dished it all out of plastic containers onto serving plates; something I never bothered to do. She sat down and waited as I brought the food and condiments to the table. There was enough there to feed about five people... or one healthy lady cop with a little left over for me.

"While you have the generator on, I made coffee. And I put more of your beer in the fridge," she said.

"Little early for alcohol. I think I'll have a cup of coffee, then some lemonade."

I brought the coffee pot, a pitcher of lemonade, and two glasses to the table. She had already made herself a huge sandwich on a Kaiser, another on rye, and heaped some of everything else on a separate plate. I poured her a cup of coffee, and sat down across from her.

"Thank you," she said, as she attacked her first sandwich. Between bites, she said "You would make a good waiter."

"Done that. I wasn't very good. I couldn't tolerate rude customers."

"And I bet you let them know that."

I hadn't started to eat yet, and she was into her second sandwich. How the woman could eat like that and keep such an amazing body was a true mystery.

"I see why you wanted to keep Jo's open. This is great deli food - as good as any back home in Boston."

She turned her attention to her second plate. "The house has held up really well. I'm glad I went outside with you. Now I'm not so worried."

"I hate to think what it's going to cost to clean up all the debris and replace the landscaping. The putting green's gone, and the pool may be ruined. That stuff's not insured. But I think the house will be alright. With what's coming now, though, I'm not sure your car will make it."

She shrugged. "Not my car. I hate those big Fords anyway. I feel like a senior citizen in them."

I watched her eat, contemplating how far from senior citizenship this young woman was.

"I'll let the generator run for another hour, then it's back to candles and flashlights."

"I like candles," she said. "Mac, when we were in my car, you said the man who designed this place knew what he was doing. Do you know him?"

"He's not living. In a way, yeah, I knew him. But that's getting ahead of the story again."

"You left off with you passed out on a stretcher at the stadium. Then what happened?"

"I don't remember the ambulance ride or checking into the hospital. When I came to, I was in bed in a private room. Dad was sitting on a chair beside me."

"He said 'Welcome back, Sport. We've been wondering when you'd decide you had enough sleep.' "

" 'How long.... Where....?' I mumbled."

“ ‘You’ve been out for about two days. You had the doctors a little concerned. You’re in City General Hospital. They brought you here from the stadium. Mr. DeBartolo has his personal doctor looking after you. I’ll be right back, I’m supposed to tell them as soon as you awaken.’ ”

“Then two nurses were fussing over me, adjusting an IV and taking my pulse and temperature. A doctor came in and examined my eyes, held my head and turned it side to side, then took my hands one at a time and asked me to squeeze. Dad stood at the footboard and watched.”

“The doctor said ‘Good. You’ve had a severe concussion, but you are going to be fine. We’ll let you rest for a few days until the swelling around your brain goes down, then we’ll get the fellows in here to finish work on your leg.’ ”.

“ ‘What’s wrong with my leg?’, I managed to say.”

“Dad spoke up. ‘Doctor, may I speak to my son in private for a moment?’ ”

“ ‘Of course. Have the nurse page me if you need me.’ ”

“He left the room. My father closed the door behind him, then came and sat next to me on the bed.”

“ ‘Conor, I have something to tell you. I want you to hear it from me, not from a stranger.’ He looked across me to the window, gathering his thoughts, then looked back directly into my eyes. ‘Son, there is no way to cushion this... you’re done with football.’ ”

“ ‘*Why?!*’ I tried to sit up and he put his hand on my chest and gently held me down.”

'Son, you can't feel it because they keep shooting painkillers into you, but your leg is ruined. They're trying to tell me you might be crippled. I know you will heal and be almost 100% some day, but football is over. There's nothing we can do about that now, we just have to pick up from here.'

" 'But... Can't they fix it?' "

" 'Yes, they will fix it. But it won't take even a light hit. If it gets damaged again, they say you may lose the use of the leg.' "

"I was stunned. What he told me had penetrated the haze of the painkillers with perfect clarity. Through with football. What would I do? I had never even considered another future."

" 'If it's any consolation Scotty, they told me that you had made the team.' "

"That was a bitter prize. 'It's not,' I said. 'Dad, I think I'd like to be alone now.' "

" 'Alright. I'll come back later. Mr. DeBartolo has lent us an apartment in the city, while you recuperate. I'm going to go get settled in, and call the country club to let them know I'll be out here for awhile.' He stood, leaned over and squeezed my shoulder. 'You'll figure out what to do Son. You always have.' Then he left."

"A nurse came in and gave me another shot, and I drifted back to sleep."

"Over the next few days, they gradually decreased the painkillers so the neurologist could judge my recovery from the concussion. As the drugs waned, I began to feel the damage to my leg. Beyond 'yes' or 'no', I had nothing to say to anyone, including my father."

“After they had taken me for a cat-scan of my head and leg, DeBartolo’s physician came in to tell me and my father that the concussion was nearly gone, and it was time to meet with the orthopedic surgeons.”

“That afternoon, they came bustling into my room, two in white coats, one in a tweed sport coat. The white-haired older fellow in the tweed seemed to be the boss. He was all smiles and friendliness; the other two were quite young and serious, and stood back as the chief spoke to us.”

“ ‘I am Dr. Penn, these are my associates, Dr. Wu and Dr. Janitski. Well, young Mr. MacKenzie, it looks as though you made a touchdown, but pissed a few people off in the process.’ He began to pull up a chair, and both the other doctors jumped to push it next to my bed for him. He sat down, removed wire-rimmed glasses from a case in his jacket pocket, pulled out a white handkerchief, studiously polished them, and carefully put them on. At the end of the bed the other two stood silent and expressionless while he completed what must have been a familiar ritual. Finally ready, he held out a hand without taking his eyes from me, and one of the other two stepped forward and handed him a large folder. He opened it on his lap, briefly scanned the first and second pages, then looked up at me and said ‘How is your head today?’ ”

“ ‘Fine’, I answered.”

“To my father, he said ‘Do you think we could have him sit up a bit while we talk?’ ”

“On the other side of the bed, Dad reached for the buttons and the bed slowly brought me up.”

“ ‘That’s good. Thank you’, he said. ‘Now young man, let me tell you what has happened to you. The femur-thigh bone - in your right leg is snapped like a broken twig

in two places, leaving a short piece of broken bone floating in between. That's the worst of it. Your knee is compromised in every direction. All of the ligaments and tendons are either severed or detached. Your patella - knee-cap - is floating... no big deal. The tibia is cracked at the joint, but intact. The good, and surprising, news is your knee cartilage is completely unscathed. I think that when everything else broke, the cartilage was just pushed out of harm's way.' He looked up at me, then my father. 'Any questions so far?' "

"My father shook his head 'no'. I said nothing."

" 'Alright then. To sum up, as my grandson would say: this is one seriously fucked-up leg.' "

"Everyone but me laughed softly."

" 'So.' He slapped the folder shut. 'So far all we have done is line everything up temporarily as best we could and immobilized it all. That's why you are in this thing up to your hip.' He tapped on my cast as he spoke. 'Now that your head has cleared up, we can schedule the real work. First, we will have to open up your thigh. We'll clean up the ends of the broken bones and the floating piece, drill through all three, insert a stainless steel rod, and cement it all together again. Over time, it will knit together. We will then close that up, and open up your knee. From what I can see in your pictures, we'll be able to patch everything together but one ligament, which appears to be beyond repair. It is one you need in order to walk, so our plan is to give you one from a donor.' "

" 'Who's the donor, me?' my father asked."

" 'No sir, you need it too. We will get one from someone who has no further use for it.' "

" 'A cadaver?', Dad asked."

“ ‘Yes’, he answered. ‘We’ll sew you up and put you in another of these for about a month. I understand you have a place to stay here in the city. A week or so after the operation, when we’re sure everything is knitting, you can go there to recuperate. In a couple of months, when it has all grown together solidly, you will do physical therapy.’ He stood up, pushed the chair back against the wall. ‘Questions?’, he looked first at my father, then me. Neither of us spoke. ‘I know that was a lot to absorb. The question you are not asking is: Will I be able to walk normally? The answer is: Probably. If we can get that femur together without losing any appreciable length, you won’t even limp. If it’s a little short, you will need a shoe with a built up sole to compensate. Your days of sports that involve running are over, obviously that includes professional football. I understand you were a good swimmer; I suggest you take that up again as soon as possible.’ He patted my cast. ‘We have you scheduled for tomorrow, bright and early. A nurse will bring the consent forms for you to sign.’ He looked at my father, ‘And don’t fret about expenses, Mr. MacKenzie. The team is taking care of everything. See you in the morning.’ With that he walked out of the room, followed by Dr. Janitsky.”

“Dr. Wu came to the foot of the bed and spoke for the first time. ‘This may all have sounded terrible, but realize two positive things: First, this man is without question the best orthopedic surgeon in the country... you will have good use of your leg. Second, the bright side of all this is you woke up with all your mental capabilities intact. For a while there, they thought you might have been brain-damaged. I’ve learned in medicine to be thankful for any victories that you can achieve.’ Then he left.”

Kathleen had continued to eat while I talked, pausing only during the part about Dr. Penn’s description of my injuries.

I stopped to build myself a second sandwich, before she could consume everything.

"It really is a miracle that you can run like you do," she said. "And, had you known your concussion was that bad?"

"No, not until Wu said it. And, until Dr. Penn told me, I hadn't believed my dad when he said I wouldn't play again, I thought they would patch me up and I would be back for the next season."

"From what I've seen, obviously the operation went well."

"Yeah, it did. I wouldn't realize that for quite a few months. My father told me I was in the operating room for four hours. But in the end, they were all correct, I couldn't play again."

The wind had begun pounding at the storm curtains again. The table was close to the windows, and we could almost feel Dorothy on the other side.

Kathleen pushed her chair back from the table, raised her arms over her head, arched her back, and stretched like a lioness. "I'm stuffed. That was good."

"Really? I couldn't tell."

She picked up a roll and tossed it at me. "Shut up!" Standing, she began to clear the table. "Let's go into the living room, we'll be more comfortable."

"Alright. After we clean up here, I'm going to turn off the generator. It's been running for almost two hours."

"Go do that. I'll finish here. Light the candles out there before you go downstairs, please."

Out in the living room, I lit the candles, stopped a moment in surprise at the roaring of the wind and water against the storm curtains, then went down to the first floor. I checked the generator to be sure it was running properly, then shut it down, plunging myself into darkness until I turned on my flashlight. Remembering I should check the diesel fuel level, I shined my light to the gauge on the tank. Good, still nearly full. As I turned to go, I noticed something odd on the eastern wall of the room. Not sure of what I saw, I went across, and ran my hand along the bare concrete. It was damp. Not leaking, but definitely full of moisture. "Damn," I thought, "I'm not sure what this means, but it can't be good." I walked along the entire wall; it was all in the same condition until I got to the curve that formed the southeast end of the house. A small puddle had begun to form at the base of the wall. I went from the utility room to the adjacent laundry room, and checked the wall there. Also damp, but no puddles. In a basket, there was a bunch of old towels that I used for washing cars. I took some back to the other room, wiped the floor dry, then watched as another puddle slowly formed. There was no cure for this, not from inside, and going outside now was clearly out of the question. So I moved everything, mostly sports equipment, away from there, then made a dam with towels at the site of the leak. Moving to the other rooms on this floor, I found no additional leaking. I took more candles from the storage room, and went upstairs.

Kathleen was curled up in a corner of the sofa, working on a box of chocolate chip cookies, while fiddling with the battery powered radio. I couldn't believe she was still eating. I waved the beam of my flashlight in front of her so she wouldn't be startled, and sat in the club chair nearest her.

"Did you get lost?", she asked.

"What?"

“Hey, I know it’s a big place, but you were gone for an awfully long time. Is anything wrong?”

“No,” I lied. “I was just rearranging some of my stuff. Guess I got distracted. Are you getting enough to eat? I could make a Dunkin’ Donuts run for you.”

“Oooh, would you? Wait... was that a cop joke, or a fat joke?”

“Well it certainly wasn’t a comment on your figure.”

“Good answer. Mac, I can’t get anything on the radio.”

“Did you try FM?”

“FM, AM... there’s nothing there.”

I thought about that.

“Say something,” she said.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean anything.”

“Y’know, you are so full of it. That means a transmission tower is down. Do you know how much force it would take to do that? And we are right in the damn middle of it. How naive do you think I am? Now, what were you doing downstairs?”

I sat forward, moving closer to her. “Alright Detective, here’s the story: all the walls on the first floor are wet. There is a leak, and it’s causing a pool to form at one end of the utility room. I’m not sure what that means - if it means the house is in danger. I don’t think it does... but I’m not a builder. I stuffed some towels against the leak.” I glanced over at the wall of glass, which was now getting wet; the rain was pushing in around the storm curtains. “Truth is Kathleen... listen to that wind out there. This storm is a lot

worse than I expected. I was remembering stories about this house surviving storms without any problems. I shouldn't have asked anyone to ride it out here. Not this one."

She picked up a bottle of beer, took a long swallow, put the drink down, slowly uncurled her legs, and leaned forward so close I could feel her breath. "Conor, we are going to be just fine. So there's a puddle. It's not like a wall is falling down. This place is a fortress, we saw that outside. And you were well prepared." She placed a hand on my knee, then gave it a light squeeze. "Now, tell me more of your story before we get bored and have to find something *else* to do." Sitting back again, she reached for her beer, took a swig, put it down. All the while giving me a sly smile that said she was quite pleased with the effect she knew she had just had on me. She picked up a cookie, stopped it just short of her mouth, raised her eyebrows, and said "Well?"

Jesus H. Christ. The woman had just gotten me excited without me even touching her. How the hell was I supposed to think about the house?

"It's getting warm in here. I need a cold drink." I stood up, trying to conceal my condition, and headed to the kitchen.

I wasn't supposed to hear her as she chuckled to herself, "Yeah, I'll bet you do."

- FIFTEEN -

I opened a beer and stood at the kitchen counter and quickly drank the whole thing. We both knew there was beer in the bar fridge in the living room, but I had wanted to get away from her for a moment. Splashing cold water from the faucet on my face, I composed myself. The girl was gaining on my willpower... I'm only human.

I watched as the water slowly trickled to a stop, the last gasp a muddy brown color. So, that luxury was gone now, too. I had been more surprised that it had stayed on, than I was at it drying up. The two bath tubs were filled, the laundry tub was also. And we had the water storage tank, which I had flushed and filled with fresh water only a month ago. We might have to conserve, but we would be alright.

"Just stick to telling the story," I thought. With another bottle in hand, I went back to the living room.

Kathleen was still sitting in the same spot, now with her long legs outstretched, feet crossed at the ankle, propped up on the coffee table. She smiled at me as I sat once again in the armchair nearest to her.

"There's cold beer right over there," she nodded toward the bar. "You didn't have to go to the kitchen."

"Not the kind I wanted", I lied.

"Ohhh, I understand...".

"The water system has dried up", I said, changing the subject.

"What does that do to us?"

“Well, assuming we can get out of here within a couple of days, not much. We’ll just have to be a little conservative. There’s a water storage tank downstairs, and I had filled both bath tubs before you came.”

“When I was showering, I wondered why the tub in there was filled.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll have to conserve water. No more showers for a while, I’m afraid. ”

“That’s fine with me, Conor, the bathtubs are big enough for two.”

“No, that’s for drinking, we can’t use... Oh, I see.”

She turned around and reclined on the sofa, facing me. “So, when you left off, they had done the operation on your leg. Then what?”

“After two weeks of recuperation from the surgery, I was taken to an apartment in Pacific Heights, which is one of the best neighborhoods in San Francisco. Mr. Debartolo, the team’s owner, had loaned a big two bedroom penthouse to me and my father, for as long as we needed it. Dad had taken a leave-of-absence, and would stay with me until I was able to get around on my own. An ambulance delivered me in a wheelchair. To say I was depressed would be an understatement. Riding the elevator to the top floor, Dad tried to be upbeat about my future. I was sullen and had nothing to say. At the private foyer off the elevator, he opened the double doors and wheeled me down a hallway into the livingroom. Walls of floor to ceiling windows greeted us with an amazing panorama of the city, down to the bay. The Golden Gate bridge in the distance was enshrouded in white fluffy fog, only the top few feet of it’s orange towers was visible. I wasn’t in the mood to be impressed.”

“ ‘They sent a walker and a pair of crutches for you’, Dad said. ‘When you’re ready, we’ll start working with them.’ “

” ‘Yeah, well you can just leave them in the closet, Sport. I don’t think I’m gonna be needing them.’ “

” ‘Scotty, you can’t expect to just get up and walk. You’ll have to use those things first, and work up to it.’ “

” ‘Who says I’m gonna walk?’ “

” ‘C’mon Son, you’ll be fine. This will just take a little time.’ “

” ‘Easy for you to say. You’re not the fucking cripple.’ “

” ‘No. And neither are you, so cut out the pity crap. There are a lot of people worse off than you.’ “

“I didn’t bother to reply. How could anyone know how I felt?”

“ ‘Where’s my bed? I want to get out of this damn chair.’ “

“He wheeled me into a big bedroom. For a kid accustomed to a farmhouse or a dormitory, the room was like a palace. Very tasteful, nothing that would look unusual to me today, but I had never before been in a place that had been decorated.”

“I looked around, muttered something like: ‘Oh great now I’m gonna be a cripple *and* a girl’. Dad didn’t say anything, just helped me onto the bed, pointed at the water and painkillers on the night stand, and quietly walked out and closed the door behind him. I swallowed three pills, and drifted off to sleep.”

“A physical therapist began to come each day for an hour. She tried her best to get me to do exercises, but when it came to standing up, I refused to try. I was sure the leg would break and then they would amputate it, though I never shared those thoughts with anyone, not even my father. Her name was Wanda, and she irritated the hell out of me. I had never met anyone before - or since, for that matter - with such a sunny disposition. I swear, if she fell from a window on the top floor, she would tell you how much time she had saved by not waiting for an elevator. No matter how grumpy and uncooperative I was, she would pat my head and say ‘We’ll do better tomorrow’. After two weeks of this, I insisted that my father let her go.”

“My leg was beginning to heal, and the stitches itched and the whole thing ached. I kept up a steady regimen of pain killers, staying just drugged enough to spend most of my time sleeping. My father and I were barely speaking; he was disgusted with my attitude. He made three meals a day, but I hardly ate anything: all I wanted was more pills. When they ran out, I would call the pharmacy and they would send over more. I didn’t realize, or maybe I didn’t care, but I was getting addicted. As the pain subsided, I didn’t let my father know. Three weeks after leaving the hospital, Dad started taking the pills away. But he went jogging for an hour every day, so I just had the pills delivered when he was out. I still don’t know why they kept on re-filling the prescription.”

“It was now becoming winter in San Francisco, and the weather began to change. Have you ever been there?”

Kathleen shook her head, No.

“Funny how it is out there, it gets warmer in the winter. One Sunday morning, while my father was gone, I decided to meet the drug store courier outside. I got myself into the wheelchair - leg propped straight out - took the elevator down to the lobby, and the doorman helped me

out onto the sidewalk, with a caution about the hills. Straining to keep the chair from careening out of control, I made it down to the corner. I flagged down the pharmacy guy, got my package, and then realized there was no way I was going to get myself back up to the apartment. Sitting there, semi high, I thought 'Well, Loser, now what?' As I was pondering how long it would take my father to come looking for me, a young Chinese-American guy came jogging - no, running - up the hill. When he came to me on the corner, he stopped.

“ ‘Hey, are you okay, Buddy?’ ”

“ ‘I’m just dandy’, I replied”.

“ ‘Oh. What happened to your leg?’ ”

“ ‘War wound.’ ”

“A puzzled look on his face, he said: ‘What war? There’s a war somewhere?’ “

” ‘Private war.’ ”

“He thought that over for a moment. ‘Which way are you going?’ ”

“ ‘Up the fucking hill.’ ”

“ ‘Listen, I’m going to get some coffee and breakfast. How about coming along?’ ”

“I looked at him more closely. He was a very handsome guy, tall for an Asian - about my height. Very tan. Hair carefully disheveled. Perfectly pressed pale yellow jogging suit. Clean white running shoes.”

“ ‘I’m not gay’, I said.”

“ ‘You’re not my type’, he laughed. ‘But you look like you could use a good meal. Let’s get some food.’ ”

“Before I could protest, he grabbed the handles and began pushing the chair.”

“He took us to a little Italian bakery that serves breakfast and lunch, down the hill on Fillmore Street at the corner of Washington. There are just seven tables, a bakery counter, and a small kitchen. Everyone there knew him, and when the young waitress came to our table, he greeted her in Italian.”

“ ‘Bonjourno, Cara Mia!’ ”

“ ‘Good morning Eddie’, she said with a smile. ‘And who is this handsome stranger who rode in with you?’ ”

“ ‘Forgive my poor manners. Celeste, I would like you to meet my good friend...’ He looked at me quizzically.”

“ ‘Conor’ ”.

“...‘My good friend Conor. Conor, this is Celeste, the most beautiful girl on all of Fillmore Street.’ ”

“ ‘Eddie, you’re gay’, she said, laughing. ‘What do you know about beautiful women?’ ”

“ ‘I’m gay?! Merde ! What will I tell my wife?’ He grabbed his head in mock surprise. ‘Then, it’s too bad there are no real men here to give their opinion.’ He grinned at me.”

“ ‘He’s not gay, Eddie. You’re wasting your time’, she said.”

“Trying to keep a straight face, Eddie looked at me ‘Did you lie to me, just to get a push to breakfast?’ ”

“I think I was smiling for the first time in ages. I played along with his joke. ‘Hey, I was hungry!’ “

” ‘Well, tell her she’s beautiful, so she won’t poison us.’ ”

“I looked her up and down, taking my time. She was absolutely lovely. About twenty-two, long dark hair in a ponytail, big blue eyes, athletic yet sexy body, perfect legs.”

“I told him: ‘She would never poison anyone Eddie, unless he broke her heart.’ “

”Remembering the tennis pro’s lessons from long ago, I took her hand, looked up at her and said: ‘Celeste, you are very beautiful. And not just on Fillmore Street.’ “

”Eddie knocked lightly on the table. ‘Alright, break it up. Can I get some coffee before the wedding?’ “

”Celeste blushed. I gave back her hand, and without another word she went for the coffee.”

“ ‘How did you do that?’ Eddie asked.”

“ ‘Do what?’ ”

“ ‘I’ve seen guys work on that girl for months, and get nowhere. You come in here, and in five minutes she’s blushing and speechless.’ ”

“ ‘It’s the wheelchair. She feels sorry for me.’ ”

“ ‘You’re not only crippled, you’re blind, too. That last look wasn’t sympathy. That was “I want to bear your children”. You’re a natural; we just need to put some weight on you and get you to shave daily. This homeless look, it isn’t ‘you’. ‘ ”

“ ‘Well I am homeless.’ ”

“He grunted, ‘Nobody’s homeless on that hill, Skip. What building are you in?’ ”

“ ‘2190 Broadway, I think.’ ”

“His eyebrows went up. ‘You’re not homeless, you’re a freaking millionaire! There are only twenty condos in that whole building. What floor are you on?’ ”

” ‘The top one. I don’t own the place.’ ”

“ ‘That’s half of the eleventh floor! Even the rent would fund a small country!’ ”

“ ‘I don’t rent it. It’s on loan.’ ”

“ ‘Oh, I get it. You’re there as compensation because the owner is responsible for your injury.’ He nodded at my leg.”

“ ‘Something like that.’ ”

“Celeste arrived then with our coffee, and cinnamon croissants still warm from baking. She put the rolls on the table, and filled our cups.”

“ ‘Leave the pot, okay Cara Mia?’ Eddie said as she poured.”

“She nodded ever so slightly, placed the pot on the table, along with two menus, and went back to the kitchen.”

“ ‘Ah, you’re in some serious trouble, buddy.’ ”

“ ‘Why is that?’ ”

“ ‘First, that young lady is never speechless, and second, I’ve been coming here for two years, and she never gave me free anything.’ He picked up a croissant and took a huge bite. Mouth full, he said ‘I come here with you, and all of a sudden things change.’ ”

“We ordered eggs, bacon, and sourdough french toast. I was suddenly famished. Celeste brought our food, being especially careful as she leaned across my outstretched leg. As she filled my cup, I noticed her scent was like wild-flowers.”

“ ‘Is everything alright?’ she asked. I noticed a slight bit of Italian accent in her deep, sultry voice.”

“ ‘Yes. Everything’, I answered.”

“She knew what I meant, and gave me a big smile before she turned to wait on another table.”

“I looked at Eddie, who was gnawing on a piece of bacon through a grin.”

“ ‘What?’, I asked.”

“ ‘The service here is terrible today. She didn’t even ask if I needed anything.’ ”

“We ate in silence for a few minutes. I noticed that Eddie’s eyes were never still, everything going on in the restaurant and on the street beyond the storefront windows was observed.”

“ ‘Where do you live, Eddie?’ ”

“ ‘Down there below your building, in Cow Hollow, off Union Street. I share an apartment with a friend.’ ”

“My face must have shown the question I knew I shouldn’t ask.”

“ ‘Former “close” friend. Now just a friend and roommate. He’s an interior designer.’ ”

“ ‘And what do you do?’ ”

“Looking at me over the rim of his coffee cup, obviously gauging my reaction, he said ‘I’m a cop.’ ”

“ ‘That’s cool. What kind?’ ”

“ ‘Plainclothes. Burglary, robbery. I’m hoping to work up to homicide.’ ”

“ ‘Why do you want to investigate murders... isn’t that pretty grisly?’ ”

“ ‘Yeah, it can be. But I like the idea of possibly solving a mystery that no one else could.’ Chewing his last piece of bacon, he asked ‘What did you do before your “war” laid you up?’ ”

“Other than being exceptionally fastidious about his appearance, Eddie acts as “straight” as you or me. But, one thing that has always bugged me about him, is he always talks with his mouth full. So my answer to his question was ‘Huh?’.”

“He gulped some coffee, swallowed, and said ‘How do you make your money?’ “

”I thought about that for a moment. It was a question I hadn’t considered since I was injured. ‘I guess I’m unemployed.’ There was a thought to cheer me up.”

“What wonderful timing. Just as I said ‘I’m unemployed’, Celeste stopped at our table. ‘Anything else, men?’, she asked.”

“Eddie saw that I was a little embarrassed. ‘No, thank you Celeste’, he answered for us both.”

“ ‘I’ll bring your checks.’ ”

“ ‘I was in school before I got hurt.’ I explained to Eddie.”

“ ‘Yeah, I thought you are pretty young. Listen, the meal is my treat - I invited you.’ ”

“ ‘No, you kidnaped me.’ I laughed. ‘And I don’t even have any cash on me; I suppose I could wash dishes.’ ”

“ ‘Naw, you couldn’t reach the sink from that chair. You can get the next one.’ ”

“ ‘Deal’, I nodded.”

“The waitress arrived, and placed checks in front of us both. She brushed a hand lightly across my shoulder, said ‘Come back’, then ‘See you Eddie’, and walked away.”

“Eddie reached for my check, looked at it briefly, then smiling like a kid who had intercepted a note in class, handed it to me. ‘I’m afraid you will have to take care of this one yourself.’ ”

“Puzzled, I looked at the bill. It said:

Celeste 892-4880

I folded it and put it in my jacket pocket.”

“We left the restaurant, and while he pushed me home, Eddie told me his last name is Yee. He is a second generation American, and he grew up in Chinatown. His parents were not too pleased with him - they didn’t like his choices in career, where he lived, and especially his, as he called it, “lifestyle”.”

“ ‘Let’s do this again’, he said as we arrived at my building.”

“ ‘Sure. I owe you one anyway.’ ”

“ ‘And do me a favor: don’t go down the hill again without a plan for getting back up.’ ”

“ ‘Yeah, I’ll have to work on that.’ ”

“He handed me over to the doorman, and walked away. As we went through the doors, he called back ‘Hey Conor!’ I looked over my shoulder. ‘Call her!’ Then he jogged down the hill.”

“The doorman pulled me in my wheelchair, backwards up the stairs to the lobby. I declined his offer of more assistance, and the elevator took me up to the apartment. I managed to get the door open, and wheeled myself in. Dad was sitting on a barstool at the kitchen counter.”

“Did I tell you about my father and his sandwiches, Kathleen?”

“No.”

“Well, he loved to build these monster sandwiches. I mean four or five inch high things. He’d spend twenty minutes making them. Then he would eat the whole thing and down it with a root-beer float or a milkshake. He ate like that his whole life and never had an ounce of fat on him.”

“So that explains it”, she smiled.

“Explains what?”

“Why you bought Jo’s Deli.”

“Yes, I suppose it does. I grew up on that food. And Jo needed my help.”

“You’re a nice guy Mister MacKenzie.”

I looked over at her. For once, she wasn’t being sarcastic. “Anyway, there was Dad at the counter, constructing his lunch. He didn’t ask where I had been.”

“ ‘Want a sandwich, Scot?’ he said.”

“ ‘No thanks. I went out. For breakfast.’ ”

“ ‘Good. About time you got your ass outa that bedroom.’ ”

“I let that pass, and wheeled into my bathroom. I popped two pills in my mouth and drank some water. As I was stashing the bottle of painkillers in a drawer, Dad appeared in the mirror, behind me.”

“ ‘Son, you need to let those things go. We both know you don’t need them any longer.’ ”

“ ‘Yes I do.’ ”

“ ‘We’ll let the doctor decide. Remember, tomorrow you go in for a checkup.’ ”

“I sat there in front of the bathroom mirror, and took a good look at myself. I was in a wheelchair and I looked like shit... why would that beautiful girl give me her number?”

“The next morning, Monday, we took a van to the hospital. I got a Cat-Scan, and we returned home. We had some lunch, then Dad left me in the living room so I could watch the sailboats out in the bay. He was in the kitchen cleaning up when the phone rang.”

“I overheard his half of the conversation: ‘Yes it is. Hello Doctor.’ A long pause, as he listened. ‘I see. Well,

is there any alternative? I understand. Alright, we'll see you on Friday morning then.' ”

“He came out to the living room, and sat on the arm of a chair next to me. ‘Conor, that was Doctor Penn. The CT scan showed a problem. Your thigh bone isn't healing correctly, and he wants to make some adjustments now, while he can do some good.’ ”

“ ‘What does that mean, “adjustments”?’ ”

“ ‘I'm afraid it means more surgery, Son. They have you scheduled for four days from now.’ ”

Kathleen sat forward, “You mean you had to go through it all again?”

“Yes. That evening, Eddie Yee called and said he was coming in the morning to take me to breakfast.”

“ ‘How did you get this number?’ I asked.”

“ ‘I'm a cop, remember? I'm going to run first. Don't go down the hill yourself, I will come get you. See you about ten.’ ”

“The intercom from the lobby buzzed at exactly ten the next morning. I was to learn that there is no “about” with Inspector Yee. Time is a precise concept to him. He pushed me up the hill the two blocks to Fillmore, then down the hill to the restaurant. I rolled behind him to the same table we'd had a few days before.”

“ ‘You have a regular table?’ I asked.”

“ ‘Yes. I want to be able to see the street.’ ”

“Celeste appeared with coffee and warm croissants. She gave us menus, and walked away without a word.”

“ ‘You didn’t call her, did you?’ Eddie said.”

“ ‘No, I didn’t.’ ”

“ ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I have mistaken you for a man with a brain!’ This was said with a mouth full of croissant.”

“ ‘What did you say?’ I asked.”

“ ‘He took a gulp of coffee, washed down half a roll. ‘You are an idiot!’ ”

“ ‘I laughed. ‘That’s what I thought you said.’ ”

“ ‘Conor, no one gets a date with that girl. Why didn’t you call her, don’t you like beautiful women?’ ”

“ ‘Eddie, I’m in a wheelchair.’ ”

“ ‘Using my many years of police training in observation, I seem to remember that you were also in a wheelchair when she gave you her number’, he grinned. ‘Is your leg the only thing that doesn’t function?’ ”

“ ‘Oh, thanks, that’s a great thought to put into my head. As if I didn’t have enough problems already. Listen Eddie, no one wants to be dating someone new who has a leg in a cast, or end up taking care of me.’ ”

“ ‘Well, why don’t you give her a chance, and see? Maybe she’ll be different from everyone else. Maybe it won’t matter to her, she seems to have seen past the bum leg already.’ ”

“ ‘What would I do with her, where would we go?’ ”

“ ‘ Y’know, you might just ask her those questions. Or, how about this: You have a great apartment with an awesome view, ask her over for dinner. Order in, ask your Dad to take off for the night. Just get to know each other. I can tell she likes you, Conor.’ ”

“I thought about this for a moment. He was right... if my leg didn't bother her, why not take a chance?”

“ ‘Eddie, you need to walk outside and check on something, right?’ “

”He looked over my shoulder, out to the sidewalk. ‘Why, what's going on?’ “

” ‘And you'll be gone about fifteen minutes, right?’ “

” ‘But... I'm still eating...’ “

” ‘We'll get your food warmed up when you get back.’ “

”His puzzled look turned to one of understanding. ‘Oh, yes. I do have to walk down the street for a few minutes. Do you think fifteen will be enough?’ “

“ ‘I hope so. Now, go.’ “

“Eddie got up and left. Celeste watched as he went out, came over to our table, and looked at his unfinished meal. ‘Is there something wrong?’, she asked.”

“ ‘No, he just remembered something he had to check on down the street. He'll be back in a few minutes.’ ”

“ ‘Then I'll take his plate and keep his food warm’, she said. Her attitude toward me was more impersonal than the last time we met.”

“ ‘Yes, please do that. But first, do you have a minute to sit with me?’ “

”She looked at me, puzzled. Softly, she answered ‘Okay’, then took the seat next to my wheelchair, and waited for me to speak .”

“I had fifteen minutes, or less. I got straight to the point. ‘Listen, I know I should have called right after you gave me your number, I’m sorry. But I don’t want sympathy, and I can’t understand why else you’d want to see me.’ “

”She sat up a little straighter. ‘Why would you need sympathy? Unless I should feel badly that your razor is obviously broken.’ “

”I ran my hand over my several day old stubble. ‘Well, my leg... the cast...’ “

” ‘I’m not blind, Conor, I saw that. If I didn’t like you and want you to call me, I wouldn’t have given you my number. Sympathy hadn’t entered my mind.’ “

”Yeah, she certainly wasn’t blind; she had the bluest eyes I had ever seen. Encouraged by her statement, I forged ahead. ‘Celeste, I’d like to ask you for a date, but as you can see, I’m not very mobile. So what I’m wondering is: Would you like to come over to my place for dinner?’ ”

“She took a moment to think, then said ‘Ordinarily, that isn’t something I would do on a first date, especially with a guy I don’t really know. But two things tell me that would be alright. One, you’re a friend of Eddie’s - I’m sure he’s already checked you out - and I trust his judgement. And two, how dangerous can you be in that chair?’ The last said with a big smile. ‘Yes, I would love to come for dinner. How about eight tonight?’ ”

“I thought, Wow, that wasn’t hard at all. ‘Great’, I said. ”

“ ‘I have to take care of the customers’, she said, as she rose from the table.”

“Eddie appeared, and hesitated in the doorway for a moment. I waved him in.”

“ ‘Did you chicken out, or strike out?’ he smiled.”

“ ‘Both. But not this time. You offered to help, now I need you to.’ ”

“ ‘Sure. When?’ ”

“ ‘Tonight. At eight.’ ”

“ ‘Tonight?! That’s only nine hours! I can’t do a proper dinner and decorations in nine hours!’ ”

“ ‘Well y’know what? This was your big idea, so you haven’t a choice. Either you help, or I’m having pizza delivered.’ ”

“Eddie stared into space for a second, then said ‘Alright. We’re lucky it’s my day off. But first, where is my breakfast? She was a really good waitress before you showed up.’ ”

“As if she had heard his complaint, Celeste arrived with a whole new breakfast for him. ‘Warmed over food isn’t good’, she said as she placed the plates in front of him. She placed a hand gently on my shoulder, ‘Do you want anything else?’ I smiled and shook my head, No. ‘So what are you serving me tonight? I warn you, I have a big appetite.’ ”

“ ‘Yeah, you look like you eat constantly’, I said sarcastically. ‘We’ll be having ...’ I looked at Eddie, who of course had his mouth full. He put down his fork, and pulled at the corners of his eyes with each hand. ‘...Chinese... we’re having Chinese.’ ”

“She didn’t see his gesture. ‘Oh, good. I love that.’ She put down our bills, and her pen, then said to me ‘Write down your address and phone number. I’ll see you there later’, and she went back into the kitchen.”

“Eddie had already picked up his fork, and with a mouth full of french toast, mumbled ‘I better eat fast, lot to do.’ ”

“He finished his meal, I paid the bill, and we left. On the way home, we talked about the dinner. I had figured on ordering takeout, but after her comment about “warmed over food”, Eddie said he had better come over beforehand to do the cooking. Once there, he asked to see the apartment, to determine what was needed for the evening. We took the elevator to the penthouse’s private foyer, and went in.”

“ ‘Dad, you home?’, I yelled.”

“ ‘In the kitchen’, he answered.”

“I wheeled in, Eddie following. ‘Dad, this is my friend, Eddie Yee. Eddie this is my father.’ ”

“ ‘A pleasure to meet you, Mister MacKenzie.’ ”

“ ‘Oh, you speak English’, Dad said.”

“Eddie looked at me, puzzled. ‘We’re from Ohio’, I explained.”

“He smiled at me, ‘I understand.’ Then looked back to my father, and said ‘Yes’.”

“Then he walked past the kitchen to the living room. In a minute, he was back. ‘You know, I have lived here all my life, but I am still impressed by the views. This one is awesome.’ ”

“ ‘Yes, it is’, Dad agreed. ‘Where we’re from, the land’s all flat - there are no views.’ ”

“ ‘Do you mind if I look around the kitchen? I have to cook here tonight.’ ”

“ ‘Help yourself ‘, he answered. ‘You hired us a cook?’ he said to me.”

“ ‘He’s a police inspector, not a cook. And he’s not cooking for you, you’re going out for the evening.’ ”

“ ‘Oh... you two don’t want me around?’ he winked at me.”

“Eddie stopped looking through cupboards. ‘Not ‘we’ two, Mr. MacKenzie. Conor and his new girlfriend.’ ”

“Dad looked at me, eyebrows raised, ‘Boy, you work fast. You’ve been out of the house, what, twice?’ ”

“ ‘She’s not my girlfriend. She’s a friend of Eddie’s. So, can you make yourself scarce tonight?’ ”

“ ‘ Sure. Until when?’ ”

“Eddie stopped once again. ‘You may want to crash at my place for the night’, he said with a grin.”

“Dad looked at me in amazement. ‘Damn! You *do* work fast!’”

“ ‘ C’mon guys’, I said. ‘It’s not like that.’ ”

“ ‘Will you keep an eye on him?’ Dad said to Eddie.”

“ ‘Sure. Why?’ ”

“ ‘I have an old golfing friend down near Monterey. This would be a chance for me to pay him a visit.’ ”

“Eddie told my father that he planned to leave as soon as he finished preparing dinner, but that he would phone later in the evening to check up on me ‘In case he can’t hold the girl’s attention’.”

“Dad left the kitchen to call his friend and get packed for his overnight stay. My new chef handed me a pen and pad, and as he continued rummaging through the kitchen, he dictated his shopping list.”

“ ‘You do like Chinese, don’t you?’ ”

“ ‘I really like La Choy Chop Suey’, I offered.”

“ ‘Oh Brother,’ he rolled his eyes, ‘you did just fall off the turnip truck from Ohio, didn’t you?’ He put out his hand, and I gave him the list. ‘I’ll be back at five. You will help.’ He walked out to the foyer and opened the door, yelling over his shoulder: ‘In the meantime, do what you can to make yourself presentable... what that young lady sees in you, I’ll never know.’ ”

“The door closed, then opened. *‘And for God’s sake, shave!’*. Then closed again.”

“My father helped me bathe, and I followed Eddie’s order and shaved. Then Dad split the leg of a pair of my khakis and I put them on along with a white polo shirt.”

“Promptly at five, the doorman called and announced Eddie. I wheeled out and met him. The elevator opened, and he was standing among a sea of shopping bags. ‘Hey Dad,’ I yelled, ‘we need some help out here’. Ed put a couple of bags in my lap, he and my father each took a few, and we unloaded in the kitchen.”

“ ‘Is she a particularly big girl?’ Dad asked.”

“ ‘Eddie laughed. ‘No, Mr. MacKenzie. She’s about five-foot four, with a particularly hot body. I’m cooking for four; I’ll take some of this home for me and my roommate.’ He busied himself emptying bags of cooking utensils and groceries, talking as he worked. ‘Must be nice to have a kitchen this large. Do you two eat in here all the time?’ ”

“Dad and I nodded, Yes.”

“ ‘Well tonight, you’re using that beautiful dining room. Why waste that view? I selected some wine because, no offense, you guys probably wouldn’t have a clue. And I brought lots of candles - I can’t imagine a place like this, with a nighttime view like this one, without candle light. Conor, there is china and crystal in the buffet in the dining room. Would you go get some out, I’ll arrange it later. And here,” he put some candles and holders in my lap, “put these around while you’re out there.” He looked at me and said “I see you took my advice and shaved. You know, you are a handsome fellow... still not my type, but wait until Celeste sees you cleaned up - she’s going to propose.’ “

“ ‘Propose what?’ I laughed, and I wheeled out to the dining room, put the candles on the dining table, and began to get dishes from the buffet.”

“I was beginning to feel a little edgy. I hadn’t had any pills yet that day. Leaving the things scattered on the table, I wheeled myself past the kitchen, heading toward my bathroom cache of medications.”

“As I went by, Eddie said ‘Did you set the table already?’ “

“ ‘Not quite. I’ll be back, I need some pain medicine.’ “

” ‘Hold on a second’, he came out of the kitchen. ‘Listen, Conor, maybe it’s none of my business. But I notice things. It looks to me like you have yourself strung out on that stuff. I know your leg probably hurts, but not so bad that you would risk life and limb going down that hill in a wheelchair to meet the delivery guy.’ “

” ‘I’m not doing anything illegal; I have prescriptions. I’m not addicted, I’m in pain.’ “

” ‘I know you have prescriptions. I checked. Now don’t get mad. I’m a cop, it’s what I do. But I think you are addicted; you just don’t know it.’ He knelt next to my wheelchair, ‘You have a very lovely woman coming to spend the evening with you. I think you should be wide awake for that. Let’s try this: hang out here with me, I have some wine we can drink while I cook. That will help you calm down. No pills for now. You can take one after Celeste leaves, if you need to.’ “

”I shrugged.”

“ ‘Really my friend, I’ve seen it too often. You won’t like the life of an addict. Don’t start down that well... it has no bottom.’ “

“ ‘Okay, I’ll try it your way. For now.’ “

” ‘Glate ! Noww ret’s cook sum Chynee !’, he said, mocking his own ethnicity. He wheeled me into the kitchen, said ‘Your wine education begins now’, then opened a bottle and poured us each a glass, cautioning ‘Don’t drink it for a minute or two, let it breathe’.”

“As he prepared the food, he talked about wine: Grapes, and sun, and soil, and weather, and casks, and history. Why wines of the same type will taste differently depending upon all those things and more; and upon the vineyard. And why a small vintner’s passion for their craft yields a better wine than those of mass producers.”

“Is that how you became such a wine connoisseur?” Kathleen asked.

“Well, from Eddie’s lessons and then by living in California for ten years. It seems like everyone out there is an expert. But I have yet to find a wine that goes with hot dogs as well as a good German beer.”

Kathleen smiled, “Go on.”

“With a few glasses of wine, and with Eddie’s constant chatter as he cooked, I did forget about the pills. When he finished, he gave me instructions for serving the meal. Then we went out to the living and dining room.”

“ ‘Let’s see what you’ve done so far’, he said. ‘Oh. Basically, nothing. You just stacked everything on the table. Alright, here’s what we’ll do: we’ll set you at the end so you can sit sideways with your leg out, and we’ll put Celeste at the corner next to you. You’ll both be able to see the view. You will be able to roll back and forth to the kitchen; we don’t want to make her wait table on her night off. Only candle light tonight; it’s going to be a clear evening, you’ll see the lights on the bridge, and the city and marina below you. I’ll place them and light them before I go.’ He put the flowers in a vase and arranged the table, placed the candles and lit them, then went back to the kitchen to wrap up his take-home meal.”

“My father came out to the living room to say goodbye. Dusk had fallen, the room glowed warmly, and the lights of the city drew the eye to the view. He looked around, admiring Eddie’s work. ‘I thought you either had lights on or off. I never would have thought of all these’, he gestured at the candles. ‘God, what a view. I’m going to miss it when I go home.’ “

”Eddie came in and said he was taking off. He promised my dad he would call and check on me. We both thanked him, and he left.”

“ ‘I need to get going too’, Dad said. ‘It’s a two or three hour drive, and Jim wants to go out to dinner when I get there. We’re going to play Spyglass Hill tomorrow. I’ll head back afterward, and call you when I leave. I left his number on the kitchen counter.’ He tousled my hair like he did when I was a kid. ‘She’s a lucky girl, have a nice time.’ And he left.”

“I rolled into the kitchen to check the food, then went back to the living room and watched night come to San Francisco, while I awaited my date.”

“At eight sharp, the doorman rang and I told him to send her up. I rolled out to the foyer and waited. The elevator door opened, and a very different Celeste stepped out, with a camel hair topcoat over one arm and a bakery box in the other hand. Her long dark hair hung loose, and she had on just a bit of makeup. She wore high heels and a low-cut black cocktail dress. This wasn't the young waitress I was expecting - this was a woman.”

“I sat there and stared at her. I couldn't think of anything to say.”

“ ‘What's the matter?’ she said, looking down at herself.”

“ ‘Nothing. I'm speechless.’ “

“ ‘Well, I hope that isn't a permanent condition, or this will be a very quiet evening.’ She handed me the bakery box. ‘I brought desert, I didn't know if you had one. Paulo made us my favorite tiramisu, it's his specialty.’ She tilted her head to one side, smiled at me and said ‘Shall we go in? I'm anxious to see your apartment.’ “

“ ‘Please, after you’, I managed to say, and followed her in. ‘The coat closet is there on the right. I would take yours, but I can't reach.’ “

“She stopped, hung up her coat, then turned to me and said ‘Alright Mister MacKenzie, let's have the tour.’ Taking the handles of my wheelchair, she pushed me down the hallway. ‘What a nice kitchen. I see you've been busy in there.’ “

” ‘I have to be honest’, I said, ‘I didn’t do the cooking. Eddie Yee was here earlier.’ “

” ‘Hmm... why had I already guessed that he was involved?’ “

” ‘There are two bedrooms, two baths, and a den around that corner’, I said.”

“We went on to the living and dining room, which was now aglow with candle light. Celeste stopped in the middle of the room, to take in the view. Below us the traffic wove in red and white flashes through the low buildings, toward the lights of the Golden Gate bridge. Beyond, the lights of Sausalito and the Marin County Headlands twinkled across the Bay. The lighthouse beacon flashed around, warning ships away from the rocks of Alcatraz Island.”

“She pushed my chair next to a sofa facing the windows, and sat down. ‘Wow, this is just amazing. You are so lucky to live here.’ “

” ‘Being lucky wasn’t what landed me here. Would you like a glass of wine?’ “

” ‘I’m from Italy, what do you think?’ she smiled. ‘Chardonnay, if you have it.’ “

”I went to the kitchen to retrieve a bottle from the ‘fridge. Ed had already placed an ice bucket and glasses out in the living room. I brought the wine to the cocktail table, and began struggling to uncork the bottle. She watched for a moment, then silently took the bottle and corkscrew from me, and opened it expertly.”

“ ‘It’s actually my first time’, I said.”

“ ‘Oh? Opening a wine bottle, you mean?’ “

"I just laughed. 'So, you're really from Italy?' "

"She filled a glass and handed it to me. 'Yes, from Venice. I came here five years ago, when I was eighteen, to go to college. Now I'm a graduate student. Paulo, my uncle, owns the bakery. I live with him, above the shop.' "

" 'What are you studying?' "

" 'I'm getting a Master's in marketing. My mother runs a small apparel business that my father started. He died when I was in high school, it was his wish that I come to school in America. I plan to go home to help her when I've finished my studies. Did you go to college?' "

" 'Yes, back in Ohio.' "

" 'Is that where you're from? What did you study?' "

" 'Yes. I majored in psychology.' "

" 'Really? Why psychology?' "

" 'Because they wouldn't let me major in football. Would you like dinner now?' "

" 'I am starving. Let me help.' "

" 'I've been warned not to let you do that.' "

" 'Don't be silly. Who's that formal?' "

" 'We ate like kings, as they say, as she told me about Italy. For a boy who had only seen Ohio and part of California, it was like a travelogue. After dinner, I convinced her to leave the cleanup for me to do the next day. While I went to the restroom, Celeste took cushions and pillows from chairs and sofas, and made a lounge on the floor in front of the windows, so we could sit together.' "

“ ‘ I think Inspector Yee should be Chef Yee, instead’, she said, as she helped me out of my chair.”

“ ‘You’re right about that.’ “

” ‘I’m really full, but I can’t pass up my uncle’s dessert while it’s fresh. Will you share a piece with me?’ “

” ‘Sure, I’ve never had that.’ “

”She brought the tiramisu and more wine to our little campground. Celeste was right, it was good, though I still consider it a ladies dessert. We shared the cake in silence as we watched the lights beyond the windows. When we had finished, she put the plate and glasses aside, took off her shoes, and sat close to me, on my good leg side.”

“She softly touched my cheek, ‘I’m glad you found your razor. You are too handsome for a beard. Now, tell me what happened here’, she reached across and tapped on my cast.”

“So I told her.”

“ ‘You were on the Forty-Niner’s... you’re not making that up?’ “

” ‘Yes, I was. “Was” being the current status.’ “

” ‘I love American football. I watched that game. You were amazing! I felt so badly, watching them carry you off the field. Now, knowing you, I feel worse. Is it alright? Will you play again?’ “

” ‘What you saw was my last game. Ever. They’re going to operate on me again in three days. I don’t know if I’ll walk again.’ “

”She looked into my eyes, very serious, ‘Yes, you will.’ “

"The phone rang then, and I asked her to get it."

"I could hear her answer in the kitchen. 'Hi Eddie. Yes, I'm still here. Oh, he's fine. Thank you for making dinner for us; we think you should open a restaurant.' She laughed. 'Yes, this city needs one less cop and one more Chinese restaurant.' Pause. 'No you don't need to come, I will take care of him.' Pause. 'Very funny... so you're a comedian, too. Goodnight.' "

"Then I heard her dialing. 'Hello, is Mister MacKenzie there? May I speak to him? Mister MacKenzie, this is Celeste, Conor's friend. I saw that you left this number, so I thought I would call to tell you that your son is alright. Eddie and I will look after him; why don't you take an extra day off? Okay, have a nice time. Goodnight.' "

"She came back into the living room. 'I don't work until noon tomorrow', she said as she snuggled in close to me. 'Do you mind if I stay?' "

"An answer wasn't expected. We had both had long days, were well fed and content. Her head on my chest, she whispered 'I like this'. "Me too', I said. Within a few minutes, we were both asleep."

"We were awakened early, as the morning washed us with sunlight. Celeste hugged me, gave me a peck on the lips, and said 'Good morning Mister MacKenzie, you are a gentleman.' "

"While I pondered what she meant by that, she got me up and into my wheelchair. She went to the powder room to freshen up, and I cleared most of the things from the dining table and stacked them in the kitchen."

"Celeste came in, and said 'I can imagine the comments I'm going to get, coming home today wearing the same dress I left in last night.' She smiled and rolled her eyes."

“ ‘But, nothing happened.’ “

” ‘You and I know you were a gentleman. My aunt and uncle... what they will believe may be another story. When I come here again tonight... well, they are Italian after all, I suppose they will understand.’ “

” ‘You’re coming back tonight?’ “

” ‘As long as you don’t mind’, she smiled. ‘I told your father to take an extra day in Monterey. I can’t very well leave you alone, can I? I said I would look after you.’ “

” ‘I thought you had to work today.’ “

” ‘Only until eight. I’ll have Paulo make us dinner. He makes his own pasta, you will love it. Now, let’s have some breakfast, I need coffee.’ “

” ‘She made a big breakfast, saying she would have to bring us some good coffee instead of our jar of instant. Then she insisted upon getting the dishwasher loaded before she left. I saw her to the elevator. She kissed me on the cheek, said ‘I had a very nice time. See you tonight’, and she left.”

” ‘I had no sooner rolled back into the apartment, when the doorman called and said Eddie was there.’ “

” ‘When he came in, I thanked him for everything he had done. I said he had just missed Celeste.’ “

” ‘Good’, he said.”

” ‘Why?’ “

” ‘Not because I just missed her. Good, because she is exactly what you need now.’ “

” ‘I don’t know what you mean by that.’ “

“ ‘When was the last time you took a pill?’ “

” ‘I had to think. ‘Early yesterday morning.’ ”

“ ‘That is what I meant. Are you seeing her again?’ “

” ‘She’s coming back tonight. She called my father and told him to take another day.’ “

” ‘Eddie had a huge grin. ‘You’re very good MacKenzie, very good.’ “

” ‘I didn’t do anything last night.’ “

” ‘And apparently, doing nothing was exactly right. What time is she coming?’ “

” ‘Sometime after eight. She’s having her uncle make us dinner. Would you like to eat with us?’ “

” ‘Thank you, but I have to work tonight.’ “

” ‘How about tomorrow night, with my Dad?’ “

” ‘Sure. Maybe the four of us.’ “

” ‘Eddie, I’m having more surgery on Friday morning.’ “

” ‘Wow, I’m sorry, I didn’t know it was that bad. Are you going to tell me what really happened to you?’ “

” ‘I told him. He too, had seen the game.’ “

” ‘So when you’re rehabilitated, you’ll be going back to the team. You can get us some tickets, so Celeste and I can come watch you play.’ “

” ‘I shook my head, ‘Won’t be going back. I’m through with football. May not even walk again.’ “

” ‘Oh. That is rough, Conor. What are you going to do?’ “

”I let out a big sigh. “That’s the thing, man. I have no idea. I don’t know anything but sports. And all I have is my small signing bonus plus training camp and three games pay.’ “

” ‘Do you want to live here in the Bay area?’ “

” ‘I don’t know where to go, either. My Dad has to go home soon, he’s missing work. I have some friends back there, but if I go back with him, I’ll just be a stone around his neck. I like San Francisco, but it will be awhile before I can take care of myself, and I don’t know anyone here.’ “

” ‘You know me. You know Celeste. We can help you until you’re on your feet again. Meanwhile, you can think about what you want to do with your life.’ “

” ‘I don’t want to be a burden to anybody.’ “

” ‘We’re your friends. Friendship is not a burden.’ “

” ‘Thanks, Eddie. I’ll talk to Dad about all this. Mr. D said I can stay here as long as I need to; but once I can get around I think I should move out. I guess by Friday afternoon I’ll know more.’ “

”Ed said he had to get to work, and left. I sat in my wheelchair, thinking about my future. There was no epiphany, so I decided to take a pill and a nap. I wheeled into the bathroom, took the cap off the bottle, and stared at the pills. Eddie was right; I didn’t know what I was going to be, but I didn’t want to be an addict. I had gone more than a day without medication, and the pain, though constant, was bearable. I flushed the pills down the toilet, and went into my room for the nap.’ “

“Celeste showed up at about nine, bringing a big dinner and dessert for us. She was right, Uncle Paulo’s pasta was great. I was getting a food education; real Chinese, real Italian, not like we had back in Ohio. We hadn’t moved the cushions from the living room floor, and after eating we settled in there again.”

“ I told my aunt and uncle all about you. I also told them I would be spending the night with you again. Possibly many nights. Paulo said he has an old shotgun somewhere. Gina, she thinks it is very romantic.’ “

” I feigned fear. ‘A shotgun? If he gets past the doorman with that thing, I’m a goner.’ “

” ‘Relax, there is no shotgun. It’s just a Latin man thing; Paulo is like a father to me. Now kiss me, we don’t have much time before your operation.’ “

”We spent the night there again, and again in the morning she made breakfast. Before leaving, she ordered me to spend the day resting for the next day’s surgery. Dad came home in the late afternoon, then Celeste and Eddie came over. They all asked me what I wanted for what would be my last good meal for a few days; so we ordered pizza from two places, because Ed and Celeste couldn’t agree on whose was best. She spent the night again, this time we had to be in my room. The next morning at seven the van picked me up and took me to the hospital.”

Kathleen interrupted, “Ahem... you sorta glossed over an important point there, Stud.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Yeah you did.” She got up and went to the wine cooler, took out a bottle, opened it, and poured herself a glass. Coming back, she perched on one arm of my chair. “How does a guy with his leg in a cast up to his hip have sex? And don’t tell me you two just slept.”

I looked up at her. She had the cutest mischievous smile.

“We were both very athletic”, I deadpanned.

She stood and walked behind my chair, tousling my hair as she went by. Plopping onto the sofa, nearly spilling her wine, she stretched her legs out and crossed her feet on the coffee table. Looking into her glass, thinking who-knows-what, she smiled to herself, nodding her head just a bit. “Hmm.”

“Anyway, to continue: They told me that the operation had gone very well. I spent the next week in the hospital, with my leg in traction this time. My dad, Eddie, and Celeste became good friends. Since I was in a private room, Celeste stayed with me several nights.”

“Then, it was back to the apartment, my leg in a cast again. For the next month, I was never alone. These were three very positive people, and although I was sure I wouldn’t walk again, I didn’t get the chance to worry about my future.”

“Celeste and I became very close. From the day I came home from the hospital, for four solid weeks she spent every night with me. She even sent my father off to Monterey for a few days.”

“Then one afternoon, she showed up much earlier than usual. My father answered the door. I heard ‘Hello Mister MacKenzie, is he awake?’ “

” ‘Hi young lady. Yes he is; he’s in the living room.’ “

”I was propped up on a sofa, reading a sports magazine. She practically ran to me, threw her arms around me, and began to cry.”

“ ‘Hey, what’s wrong’, I said. ‘Are you alright?’ “

” ‘Oh Conor, my mother died this morning. We just found out.’ “

” ‘Geez, I’m sorry. What happened?’ “

” ‘They think she had a heart attack. She collapsed at her desk. Conor, she’s only forty-six, she’s never even been ill before.’ “

” ‘My dad came in then. ‘Is everything okay Kids?’ “

” ‘No, it’s not, Dad. Celeste’s mother died.’ “

” ‘He came over, knelt next to us, and gently put a hand on her shoulder. ‘I’m sorry Celeste. Is there anything I can do?’ “

” ‘Her head still buried against my chest, she said ‘No, there is nothing, thank you.’ “

” ‘Would you like to be alone with Conor?’ “

” ‘Yes please, Mister Mackenzie.’ “

” ‘Alright, I’ll go take a run then have some dinner. I’ll see you two later.’ He stood. “Take care of her, Son. You know how this is.’ “ I nodded, and he left.”

” ‘She held onto me, crying quietly. After awhile, she lifted her head. Her bright blue eyes glistening, she looked at me and said ‘Mama is not the only reason I am so sad. Now I have to leave the man I love. Conor, I have to go home... I have to return to Venice. I am her only child.’ “

” ‘I don’t want you to go.’ “

” ‘It is so wonderful to hear you say that. On the way over here, I wondered if you would. But I have no choice, I have to go. Tomorrow. Just for awhile.’ “

“We were up early the next morning. Her aunt and uncle were taking her to the airport. The three of us had coffee together, talking quietly. She asked us to say goodbye to Eddie for her.”

“Then it was time for her to leave. She and my dad hugged. I heard her whisper, ‘Take good care of my Bambino.’ “

” ‘I will. You take care of yourself Honey,’ he said, ‘God is taking care of your mother.’ “

”She wheeled me out to the foyer, and called for the elevator. Facing me, combing my hair with her fingers, she said ‘You be a good boy, Conor MacKenzie. I love you.’ “

” ‘I love you too, Celeste.’ “

”The elevator door opened. She bent down and kissed me on the lips, a long kiss. Tears in her eyes, she ran her hand down my cheek, and said ‘I’ll see you soon.’ She walked into the elevator, turned and smiled at me, then the door closed and she was gone.”

“I sat there for a long time, looking at that door. Then I wheeled into the apartment, found Dad in the living room, and sat beside him.”

“ ‘Are you alright, Scot?’, he asked.”

“ ‘Dad... watching her go... This feels as bad as when Mom died.’ “

” ‘I’ve been watching you two these past few weeks. I think you’ve both found your “One”. Reminds me of your mother and me. She’ll be back some day, Son.’ “

Now, twenty years later, I sat in my Florida home, and thinking about that day so long ago, I fell silent.

Kathleen was watching my face. After a moment, she softly asked "Did she come back?"

"No. I never saw her again."

"Why?"

"I honestly don't know, Kathleen. She phoned me almost every day for nearly a year. And then... suddenly she stopped. I called a couple of times, left messages that weren't answered. Maybe I should have gone over there..."

"One January day, long after, I got a Christmas card that had been sent to me in care of Eddie, that he forwarded. It was from her. All it said was 'I hope you are doing well'. There was no return address, just an Italian stamp. That was the last I heard from her."

"You loved her very much, didn't you?"

"More than my heart could hold."

We were both silent for a few seconds. Kathleen's eyes were locked on mine, and I looked down, not wanting to let her look into my soul.

Then she quietly stated: "And to this day, you still miss her."

I shook my head once side to side, "No.... Yes.... It doesn't really matter..."

I went to the bar and got a beer. In the past half hour, as I had told Kathleen a somber part of my story, the hurricane had raised her abuse to my house to a new level. The wind was howling against the storm curtains like a wolf. By the dim light of the candles, we could see that the windows were shaking and straining to keep Dorothy out.

I was concerned, but I didn't want the detective to notice that, so I took my beer back to my seat, swiped a cookie from her stash, and resumed my tale.

"For the next few days, I did nothing, hardly talked to my dad. Eddie stopped by, heard the news, and was very sympathetic... after all, it was he who introduced me to Celeste. He stayed for dinner, and as we three ate, Dad said 'I think she'll be back before you can miss her.' "

"Ed agreed, 'Yes, of course she will', he said, mouth full.

" 'It doesn't feel that way' "

"Then, one afternoon, my father came up from his run, holding some mail. We almost never got mail there. He opened a large white envelope, and stood at the dining room table, reading. I watched him shuffle pages, reading it twice. I was in a chair in the living room; Dad came over and sat on the ottoman next to my leg.

" 'Son,' he said, holding up the papers, 'this is something I didn't expect yet. And maybe I would have waited a while until you were healed to give it to you. But I think it's come at the right time, you need some good news.' He handed them to me."

"It was a letter to my father. Actually, I still have it. I'll get it and let you read it for yourself, you will probably never see one like it."

"What is it?" Kathleen asked.

"You'll see, in a minute."

I went downstairs to my office. It would be in my filing cabinet, in a folder under either "I" or "L". I tried "L" first. "L.A.", why did I have a file on Los Angeles? "Land"... "Lawn"... "Lawn Mowers"... "LeCorbusier"... "Licenses"...

... Okay, April teases me about being over-organized, maybe she has a point... Ah, there it is. I took the file folder and went back up to the living room.

Kathleen was pouring herself more wine. "Another beer?", she asked.

"Not yet, thanks. I found it. Read this, then let's get something to eat."

She sat. I handed her the folder, and watched her as she read the contents.

Lloyd's of London
Office of the Director
SW 1
London, Great Britain

Re: Account No. US53065

Dear Mr. MacKenzie:

As Managing Director of our firm, I was saddened to learn of your son, Conor Mackenzie III, being severely injured in a sporting contest. Please convey to him my best wishes for a speedy recovery.

Lloyd's has received medical reports from the U.S. National Football League, and the attending physicians and surgeon. In the report regarding your son's second surgery, the attending physician concludes that he expects young Conor to recover and walk again. However, he also concludes that Conor will never again participate in a professional sport. Our own medical consultants have reviewed all the pertinent information, and they concur with this diagnosis.

Therefore, in accordance with our contract with you, I am enclosing a cheque payable to Conor Mackenzie III, in payment of the full amount of the contract. This will fulfill and complete Lloyd's of London's obligation, as agreed.

I can imagine that nothing will replace the loss of his sporting career, but we sincerely hope this cheque will provide some measure of consolation.

We are pleased to have been of service.

Yours faithfully,

Geoffrey Smythe White

Geoffrey Smythe White, IV
Managing Director

Kathleen read this quickly, then turned to the second page. I had photocopied the original. It was a check drawn on the Bank of England, made out to me, for one million US dollars.

She stared at the check copy. I heard her mutter "This explains a lot."

"Pardon?"

"You were right Mac, or should I call you "Sir". I will never see one of these again. How did this happen?"

"Well, my father told me that after I had left for training camp, he started to wonder what I would do if I couldn't play. Not if I didn't make the team - he was positive I would - but if I were permanently injured. So, he called one of his cousins in Scotland, who works for Lloyd's, and arranged a policy on me. Specifically for a football injury

disability. He had wired them the first year's payment, twenty-five thousand dollars, before my first day of contact drills."

"So you were a rich man at, what? Twenty-two?"

"Twenty-three. When I saw the check, I just handed it back to my dad. All I wanted was to play football. And to have Celeste there to watch me. Money wouldn't buy either one."

"Did you tell her about the money?"

"Yeah, when she phoned that night. She understood how I felt. And it didn't matter to her, she could take care of herself."

"I'll give her a lot of credit for that. Some women would have been knocking on your door the next day."

"She wasn't 'some women'. Would it matter to you, Kathleen?"

She looked perturbed at my question. "If it did, I'd be trolling for trust-fund geezers in Palm Beach, not hanging around here."

"Right. Good point. You look hungry. Let's go to the kitchen and get some dinner."

- SIXTEEN -

Accompanied by the drumming of the storm against the metal curtains outside, we carried our flashlights and candles to the other end of the house. One of the windows near the breakfast table was leaking, rivulets of water running down the inside. I got a couple of dishtowels and jammed them against the frame, which seemed to stop the leak. While I was doing that, Kathleen rummaged through our food choices.

“Y’know,” she said, her head buried inside the refrigerator, “I’ve never seen a ‘fridge like this except in magazines. Let alone, a kitchen with two of them.”

I really tried not to stare at her bending over in those very short shorts of April’s. “Me neither. The original owners did that. For circumstances just like we’re in now, I suppose. So, what are you serving this afternoon?”

“Oh, there are lots of things left in here. But no matter what else we have, we should either begin or end with ice cream, ‘cause it’s all starting to melt.”

“No complaints here. Just bring out whatever you want. After we eat, I’d better run the generator again.”

She brought out corned beef, turkey, Swiss cheese, kosher dills, lettuce, tomatoes, mayonnaise, mustard, kaiser rolls, and lemonade.

“Do you mind if we sit on the stools at the counter?”, she asked. “Being close to the windows right now makes me a little nervous.”

“The Nervous Detective. That would make a good book title.”

Concentrating upon constructing a sandwich worthy of my father, she didn't look up. “Or an old black and white British movie. So what happened after you suddenly became rich?”

“I thought Dad should get all the money, but he wouldn't agree. So the next day, he and I put it in the bank, and opened a checking account for me. As soon as we got back, I wrote him a check for a hundred-thousand dollars, which I made him accept. He said I would be paying a lot of the money in taxes, and we had better get some good advice. He phoned Mister DeBartolo and asked him for the name of a trusted financial advisor - he didn't tell him why.”

“When he got off the phone, he came into the living room, and said ‘Okay, he gave me the number of a guy. I'll get him to come over and advise us what to do with your money. And, more good news: Mister D has made arrangements for you to go to a private rehab facility down in Carmel. He says it's the best there is and they work with each patient on an individual basis.’ “

” ‘Where's Carmel?’ “

” ‘Just south of Monterey. He said it's more like a mansion than a hospital, and right on the ocean. You'll like it there, it's a neat little town and that whole area is beautiful.’“

” ‘I don't see the point, this leg is permanently fucked up.’ “

” ‘The doctor's are all confident you will be able to walk on it. I think this is the right thing for you, you'll want to be walking when your girl gets back.’ “

” ‘You mean *if*. What are you going to do while I’m there?’ “

” ‘I need to get back to work, before the club and school both replace me. So I’ll go home, then when you’re ready, I’ll come get you.’ “

” ‘Dad, I don’t think I want to go back to Ohio.’ “

” ‘No? Where do you want to go?’ “

” ‘Eddie asked me the same question a month ago. I don’t know the answer.’ “

” ‘Well, you can decide while you’re in Carmel. You can afford to do whatever you want to.’ “

”The following afternoon we met with the financial advisor, and worked out a plan of investment. Then I had a checkup with Doctor Penn. He knew of and highly recommended the place in Carmel.”

“A week later, my father rented a mini-van and took me down there. I had never seen anything like the scenery on the coast road from Half Moon Bay down to Carmel; valleys running up to mountains on the eastern side, cliffs dropping straight down to the ocean to the west. We stopped for lunch at the boardwalk in Santa Cruz. Dad detoured to show me his old friend’s golf course, and downtown Monterey, then we went on to the little village of Carmel.”

“The rehab clinic is in a reconfigured mansion, at the bottom of the steep hill which holds the village, directly on Carmel bay. You can look at Pebble Beach golf course straight across the water. They had broken the house into ten patient apartments, an infirmary, offices, a gym, individual therapy rooms, and a restaurant. There was also

a small movie theater; remember, this was pre-VCR or DVD days. Outside, there was a long pool by the beach, and another twenty-five yard long pool indoors. They try to make it look like anything but a hospital..”

“We pulled into a circular driveway, and were met at the door by an attendant dressed in the staff uniform of a navy blue polo shirt and khaki slacks. He helped me into my wheelchair, took my suitcase, and asked us to follow him into the lobby, where we were greeted by a tall young woman dressed in a business suit.”

“ ‘Welcome to Carmel Convalescence House, Mister MacKenzie and Conor. I’m Stephanie Young, the general manager.’ She shook hands with us both. ‘Mickey will take your bag to your suite. He will be responsible for your comfort while you are here, so if there is anything you require, he’s your man.’ She began walking toward a hallway to the back of the mansion, and, as we followed, she described the amenities. ‘... and our restaurant closes at ten o’clock. But you also have a full kitchen in your suite; let Mickey know what you like, and he will stock it for you. Of course, you are always welcome to go out at any time. Conor, you will find the hill up to town too steep to climb in your wheelchair, so Mickey will be happy to drive you. By the time you are ready to leave us, I’m sure you will be walking up there on your own.’ She stopped at a door at the end of the hall, by a window that looked out to the pool and the ocean beyond.”

“My father asked, ‘Is there some paperwork for us to do?’ “

” ‘No sir. Everything has been taken care of, including your medical records.’ She put her hand on the doorknob. ‘One last thing: CCH is not a hospital, although we have an excellent medical staff on call. We think of ourselves as a fine hotel - which just happens to specialize in helping our guests recover from serious injuries - and we

run it as such. Conor, you will have as much or as little personal privacy as you desire; as do all of our guests. A few have injuries much more challenging than yours. A few are well on their way to leaving us. You will have a custom physical therapy regimen, otherwise your time is your own. Our job is to get you out of that chair, while you enjoy your stay in this beautiful town. And now I'm going to introduce you to our medical director.' "

"With that, she opened the door and ushered us into a lavishly appointed office with a wall of windows overlooking the Pacific."

" 'Mister MacKenzie, Conor, I'd like to introduce you to Doctor Taylor.' "

" 'Thank you Stephanie, but we've already met.' "

"It was my old college roommate. He stood and walked around his desk and shook my father's hand. He grabbed my shoulder with one hand and gave it a squeeze. 'Howya doin' Buddy?', he smiled."

" 'Taylor?' I looked at my dad, who was beaming."

" 'I found out yesterday... thought I'd save the surprise', he said."

"Stephanie said 'I see you are in familiar hands. If you need anything, call me.' And she left."

" 'What are you doing here?' I asked."

"Taylor shrugged, 'Everybody has to be somewhere. I could ask you the same thing.' "

"I replied by looking at my cast."

“ ‘Yeah, I know’, he said. ‘I’m really sorry Man. If I had known, I’d have been up there right away. But you know football was never my favorite sport, so I don’t pay any attention to pre-season. I’m either here, or at the hospital, or chasing Missy around. Or out there,’ he nodded toward the ocean. ‘Surfing is my passion.’ “

” ‘That’s okay Taylor’, I said.”

“He sat on the edge of his desk. ‘Well I feel bad. Especially considering I interned with Doctor Penn. Until a couple of days ago, he didn’t know that you and I went to school together. When he phoned to brief me on your case, that’s when we both figured it out.’ “

” ‘You are a lucky guy, Mac. I’ve studied your x-rays. Penn is the best there is. A lot of surgeons wouldn’t have bothered with that second operation, and you would have had a short leg and a limp for the rest of your life. He saw a window of opportunity to make it much better, and he did it. If I am ever in the same situation, I hope I have the guts to make the same decision he did.’ “

” ‘I can’t walk. I’ll never play ball again. What’s so lucky about that?’ “

” ‘Buddy, you are lucky to have two legs. A lot of people who come through here aren’t that fortunate.’ “

” ‘He’s right, Scot’, my dad said. ‘And now you’re lucky to have an old friend to take care of you.’ “

” ‘I sure will, Mister MacKenzie. Now let’s get you on your way in daylight. That coast highway is dangerous at night.’ “

”We went back up the hallway, to the lobby. The doctor shook hands with Dad. My father gave me a hug, said ‘See you soon’, and left.”

“Taylor said ‘I’ll get Mickey to get you settled in. You rest awhile. Then Missy is coming over to have dinner with us. She’s looking forward to seeing you, and the food here is excellent. Mickey!’ he yelled, and the guy came running. ‘Don’t take any shit from this guy, Mick. He’s just a farm boy like me.’ He clapped me on the shoulder, ‘Dinner at seven. Tomorrow we’ll get to work’, and he walked away toward his office.”

“The attendant took me to my suite, showed me around, and left.”

“What a strange feeling that must have been... running into your old friend that way”, Kathleen said.

“Yeah, it was. That evening, as I watched he and Missy - obviously crazy about each other, successful, with a home and a new baby - I envied them. I missed Celeste, and somehow I already knew that she and I would never share a life like my friend’s.”

“The next morning, Mickey escorted me to Taylor’s office.”

“ ‘Mac, I’ve studied your records and x-rays, and I consulted with Doctor Penn again this morning. Immediate post-operative therapy is the current fad. And usually I am in agreement with that, and we begin to push our patients hard right away. In your case, however, I think we should wait, and Penn agrees. You not only had a lot of trauma to that leg, you have also had two extensive surgeries, and the bones haven’t completely knit around the steel in there yet. So, here is what I want you to do: Nothing. Stay in the wheelchair. Loaf, read, have Mickey take you out on the beach or up to town. But no use of the leg for a month. You can, and should, go into our gym and lift weights with your upper body. But that is all. Do you think you can do that?’ ”

“ ‘What choice have I?’ , I replied despondently. ‘I can’t very well run away.’ “

” ‘We’ll fix you, Mac. I promise. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have Missy. This will be my return of that favor.’“

”And so I embarked upon a month of doing nothing. Or should I say, another month of it.”

“I’ll bet you spent all that free time conquering the nurses”, Kathleen smiled. “Right?”

“No. I was very depressed. They took me for electrical stimulation of my leg every day. I didn’t want to lift weights. So Taylor had a therapist come get me, but I didn’t really try. My father called from Ohio every night, trying unsuccessfully to cheer me up.”

“I just sat in my room, with the TV on, or by the pool. Mickey took me into town for lunch one day; that was my only outing. Basically, though, that was just what the doctor had ordered.”

“After four weeks, Taylor removed my cast, and said it was time to start lifting weights and walking therapy. I refused to try. I remember telling him ‘What’s the point? It’s over.’ This went on every day for a week. I sat at the outdoor pool in my wheelchair, tanning my pale withered leg.”

“Then very early one morning, Taylor himself came and awakened me. He put me in my wheelchair in my pajamas...”

Kathleen interrupted, “You don’t seem like the pajama type to me.”

“I’m not. It was a hospital, not my home. Anyway... he put me in the chair and wheeled me out of my room.”

“ ‘Where are we going?’ , I asked.”

“He didn’t reply. Didn’t speak at all. He took me downstairs and to the indoor pool. Wheeled me right up to the edge.”

“Then he knelt beside me, and spoke in a low, nearly angry, voice. ‘Mac, you are pissing me off with all this moping around. And embarrassing us both... I bragged to everyone here what a winner you are. I told them we would be fighting to keep you out of the weight room. Look, you didn’t lose a leg in a war. You weren’t shot in a robbery. You got hurt playing football - something you voluntarily got into. For God’s sake Man, you made the Pro’s! You knew this could happen. Okay, tough break, literally. But I don’t see my buddy being a sorry-ass loser who elects to spend the rest of his life in this chair. There are a million things to do besides football. Pick one and do it. I’ll help you. Pick a hundred, I don’t care. The pity-party is over as of right now.’”

“With that, he stood up, went behind the chair, and tipped me into the pool.”

Kathleen’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Wow!”

“When I came up for air, cursing him, he stood there laughing. ‘Take your jammies off, Farm Boy, there’s no one else around. I’ll send someone for you in an hour. Do some laps. Tomorrow we start the hard work.’ He moved the wheelchair out of my reach, and left.”

“I floated to the edge and held on to the gutter. The water was warm and felt good. Buoyant, with no weight at all on my leg, it hurt less than it had since the game. I was sure I couldn’t get myself out and into the chair. ‘Nothing else to do for an hour, might as well swim’, I thought. I worked out of my PJ shirt, then undid the knot on the bottoms and let them sink. Maybe they would clog the drain and get Taylor

in trouble. I pushed away from the side...floated. Tentatively tried a freestyle flutter kick. Okay, the leg didn't respond too well, but on the bright side, it didn't fall off either. Then I tried a frog-kick. Excruciating pain shot from my knee to my hip. Well, that meant breast-stroke was out. I did a little freestyle. If I basically just dragged my legs, there was no pain. So, I started swimming laps."

"I was out of shape and tired easily, and I found that I could do two laps, rest in the shallow end, then two more, and so on. It had been a long time since I last did laps, and I had forgotten how much I enjoyed it. The rhythm of the strokes felt good. As I rested, I thought about Taylor's lecture. He was right, things could be much worse. At least I didn't have to worry about money; which gave me time to figure the future out. So I put everything else out of mind, and just swam."

"Floating on my back, resting, I suddenly realized I wasn't alone. Looking up to the deck of the shallow end, I saw one of the physical therapists standing above me in a swim suit, holding a towel."

" 'Hi, I'm Jenny', she said. 'Do you mind if I do some laps too?' "

"I quickly turned over and pulled myself against the pool wall. 'No; go right ahead. Someone is supposed to come get me in a few minutes. I'll be out of your way.' "

" 'You're not in my way. And I'm the "Someone". Just let me swim a few and then I'll get you out of there.' With a complete lack of self-consciousness, she slipped off her suit. 'How many laps ahead of me are you?' "

"I just stared up at her. I couldn't help myself. After all, I was in reality still just an Ohio college boy."

“ ‘Come on’, she said, hands on her hips, ‘I’m getting cold. How many?’ “

”I blushed and looked down. ‘I don’t know. I wasn’t counting.’ “

” ‘Humpf’, she said. Then she sprang over my head and dived into the pool. As she arced over the water, she yelled ‘Tomorrow we start counting!’ “

”Motivation. Courtesy of your friend the doctor”, Kathleen said.

“Yep. Not the suitless part; she just did that so I wouldn’t feel embarrassed that time. She got me a Speedo the next day. Taylor knew what he was doing. Jenny was thirty and had been an All-American college swimmer, and an Olympic alternate. He knew I was a good swimmer, and he knew from experience how competitive I was. He thought that if she challenged me I would respond. And it turned out he was right.”

“Taylor made Jenny my personal therapist. We started swimming twice a day at the indoor or beach-side pools, for hours each time. She pushed me. Not wanting to look wimpy to her, I pushed harder. If she told me to hold onto the ledge and kick for five minutes, I kicked for ten. After each afternoon workout, we went back to my suite and she massaged my leg and put heat on it.”

In two weeks, they x-rayed my leg, and Taylor pronounced me fit enough to start walking therapy. Jenny and he took me into a therapy room, and stood me between two handrails. I held myself up with my arms, and didn’t put weight on either leg.”

“ ‘I thought you said this guy ran people over on the field’, Jenny said loudly to Taylor.”

“ ‘He did. Hell, he even made the Forty-Niner’s.’ “

” ‘I think you two are snowing me. This guy’s a wuss.’”

“ ‘Hey, I am in the room y’know. I can hear you’, I said.”

“She stood beside me. ‘Well put some weight on your feet Cindy, I’m right here.’ “

” ‘My leg will snap’, I said, ‘It’s not strong enough.’ “

” ‘Oh bullshit!’, she said. ‘You’re swimming over a mile a day. It’s plenty strong. In two weeks, you’re going to walk up the hill and buy me dinner. Get going!’ “

”I looked plaintively into her eyes. They softened, and she quietly said ‘Really Conor, it’s okay. If you weren’t ready I wouldn’t let him bring you in here.’ “

”Reassured, and not wishing to be called Cindy again, I slowly put all my weight on the leg. I hadn’t stood for months. There was less pain than I expected. It just felt strange, like it wasn’t mine.”

“ ‘Good. Now hold on to the bars and lift your foot just a little, and slide it forward.’ “

”I did that. Then brought the other foot up. I made two trips the length of the handrails. She was right, I was strong enough. Taylor was also right, it didn’t snap. It did tire quickly; they said that was expected.”

“We did this and weights each day, between swim sessions. Every day, I went farther. After a week of this, one day she brought me to the therapy room, and left me in my chair, just inside the door. I wondered what she was up to this time.”

“She leaned over and whispered in my ear, ‘It’s time to walk, Conor. If you get to the other side of the room with no support, after we swim today you can give *me* the massage. Back *and* front.’ She straightened up, and just smiled.”

Kathleen laughed. “That woman was reading your mind. I suppose you walked across the room?”

“I pushed myself out of the wheelchair, stood, and began very slowly shuffling unsteadily across the room.”

“ ‘Hurry up, Skippy, I need a good rubdown.’ “

” ‘I eventually made it across, then leaned on the wall for support and turned around. She was starting to bring the chair to me. I held up a hand. ‘Stay there. If I make it back without falling, then *I* get a massage, too. Back *and* front.’ “

”She grinned like a cat with a jar of catnip in front of her. ‘You’re on’, she said.”

“Did you make it?’, Kathleen asked. “I bet I already know.”

“Yeah, it was all downhill.” I gave her my best ladies-man look. “Let’s go back to the livingroom. We can have the ice cream out there.”

“You are a real piece of work, Mister MacKenzie”, she said, and started cleaning up the lunch dishes. “I think you should come with a warning label.”

We stacked the plates and dishes in the dishwasher. Kathleen went to the powder room while I went downstairs to run the generator, so the food wouldn’t spoil. And to keep the beer and wine chilled - after all, we had priorities.

The wall and floor in the generator room were damp, but not much worse than hours before. I got it started, and went upstairs, turning on the lights as I went into the living room.

“Hey, I have candles burning; what’s with the lights?” Kathleen asked.

“Well, while we have electricity, I thought we could have light.”

“Oh, no, I liked the candles. Especially while you’re telling the story. It helps the mood.”

“Alright, if that’s your pleasure”, I said, and went back and turned them off.

“Yeah, that’s my pleasure. One of them.”

She had brought two quarts of Hagen-Daz, bowls and spoons, from the kitchen. Mine was on the coffee table; she was already polishing off a bowl of strawberry.

“How were things downstairs?”

“It’s damp, no change, really.” I put a couple of scoops of chocolate in a bowl, then put both the quarts in the mini-fridge under the bar. “Remind me to turn off the generator in an hour.” Sitting down with my ice cream, I asked “Where was I?”

“You and your therapist were about to seduce each other”, she said in a very matter-of-fact voice.

I didn’t need to go into that much detail. “Jenny was wrong about one thing. It took three more weeks. Then I walked - slowly, it’s very steep - up the hill to town and took her to dinner. She had Mickey come and drive us home afterward. In another week, we walked up and back. That

became the walking part of the therapy - every day we would walk up the hill to lunch or dinner, and back down. I was a guest a few times at the Taylor's house, a nice place out on a promontory all by itself. Back then, real estate out there was reasonable, and they paid the doctor well. Their three-year-old, Faith, called me "Uncle Conah"; and followed me everywhere. We would go for walks around their property. Her little legs would tire at about the same rate as my weak ones, so we would stop and sit and look at the sea, and she would, as she put it, " 'splain " things to me. She was an extremely precocious kid; she was already reading, and Missy said that she exhausted them with questions all day long. She finished college at eighteen, and a doctorate in marine biology at twenty."

"I liked their life; it reminded me of my own before my mother died. And I began to think that maybe this was what I should do with my future."

"I was staying at the Taylor's one weekend, and they had a party. I had told Missy I was going to stay in the area, and she wanted me to meet some of their friends. It was a smaller community than it is today, and everybody knew each other. There were Taylor's surfing buddies, Missy's tennis friends, a bunch of medical people, even a couple of politicians. And single girls; Missy wanted to play matchmaker. I was out front with Faith, listening to her explain something, and two cars came down the drive: late arrivals. One was a Jaguar sedan, the other was a Porsche convertible, one I hadn't seen before. A well dressed middle-age lady got out of the Jag and walked right past us, muttering to herself. The guy in the sports car let it run for awhile. I walked over to look at the car as he got out."

" "They told me you need to let a turbocharged engine run for a minute before you shut it off.' he explained."

“ ‘What model is that?’ I asked him.”

“ ‘If you ask my wife there’, he nodded toward the woman from the Jaguar, ‘it’s the Devil’s car. It’s the new 930 slant-nose Turbo Cabriolet. I just got it. She took one ride, said I’ll kill myself, and told me to get rid of it. She won’t even ride in it again - thus we arrive in two cars. Wanna buy it?’ , he joked.”

Kathleen said “Wasn’t that a nearly full race Porsche? And a slant-nose with a soft-top, that’s rare.”

“You do know your cars, Detective. I walked around and looked closely at it, while Faith was asking the guy a hundred questions. It was deep blue, with a full white leather interior and white top. Huge wing on the back, bulging fenders, the widest tires I’d ever seen. Three-hundred-some miles on it. It was beautiful. I was going to need a car.”

“ ‘ I’ll take it’, I said.”

“The man looked surprised. ‘Are you serious?’ “

” ‘Yep. If you want to go home in her car, I’ll bring you a check tomorrow.’ “

” ‘Don’t you even want to know the price?’ “

” ‘Doesn’t matter.’ “

”He looked at me, young blonde kid with a cane. I looked like a beat up surfer friend of Taylor’s. He thought I had no idea it was an expensive car. ‘How about what I paid, less five dollars a mile?’ “

” ‘Fine. Show me the invoice, we’ll deduct for the mileage, and I’ll write you a check. Do we need a notary?’ “

“He didn’t want to embarrass me. A bit uncomfortably, he said, ‘Son, that’s over forty-thousand dollars.’ “

”In nineteen-eighty-two, that was a lot of money. I answered, ‘Yeah, I know. Will I get a factory warranty?’ “

“He walked over to me and extended his hand. ‘I’m sure that can be arranged, and there is a notary at my law office. I’m Jeff Miller. And to whom am I selling The Devil?’“

”Of course Taylor had no idea I had a lot of money. He thought I was nuts and was blowing all my Forty-Niners’ pay, and tried to talk me out of it. I told him I needed a car and Miller needed to get rid of one, so it was a good deal. The next day, I drove over to the clinic, picked up my checkbook and Jenny, and went to Miller’s office and bought the car. It turned out that Jeff Miller was a big-shot San Francisco attorney, with a branch office and weekend house in the Carmel Valley. Jenny waited in the reception area while I paid him.”

“ ‘Doctor Taylor told me you were one of the Forty-Niner’s quarterbacks’, he said. ‘Looks like you got some severance pay.’ “

” ‘Something like that.’ “

” ‘Would you like some advice?’ “

” ‘Sure.’ “

” ‘Real estate. California real estate. Buy all the houses and land you can, and hold onto it. Wait ten years. That’s what I’m doing. You’ll see I’m right.’ “

”Which he was.”

"I put the top down, and Jenny and I drove up and down the coast all that day. My left leg was still weak, and that car had a mother of a stiff clutch. It was fun, but by day's end, I was good and sore."

"I phoned my father that night, and told him I had bought a car. 'Sounds like you're feeling a lot better', he said."

" 'Dad, if it's okay with you, I think I want to stay out here.' "

" 'What are you going to do?' "

" 'I don't know. Find a place to live, first.' "

" 'Scott, you can't just bum around and blow all the money. You want a job?' "

" 'Of course I'll get a job. I'll have to figure out what I'm interested in.' "

" 'My friend Jim just got the head pro position at the Spanish Bay Links course, over there at Pebble Beach. He's going to need help. You have lots of experience. Interested in that?' "

" 'Well sure.' "

" 'Alright. You'll like him, and I'll know you're in good hands. I'll talk to him and give him your number. So, what kind of car did you buy?' "

"I told him. 'I should have guessed,' he laughed. 'You've always gone so fast at everything. You had better learn to drive that thing carefully, especially on those cliffs. Send me a picture.' "

"The next morning, I went to see Taylor. 'I'm ready to move out of here, if it's okay with you.' "

"He cracked up. 'Ready? Mac, you've hijacked my best therapist, bought a ridiculous car, and you're about done with that cane. Another month and you'll be jogging, and then I can teach you to surf. You're so healthy I'm about to kick you out; we need your room for someone who's sick. Where are you going to go?' "

" 'Right around here. I'm interviewing for a job at Spanish Bay golf club. Will Missy help me find a place to live?' "

" 'She's already been dying to do that. Faith will be happy her Uncle Conah will be around.' "

"That afternoon I went to see my father's friend Jim. I couldn't teach, I wasn't a professional, so he offered me a job working in the golf shop and generally assisting him. It didn't pay very well, but I didn't need much. And he offered a big benefit: once I could walk that far, I could play any of the three Pebble Beach courses any time I wasn't working."

"How could I refuse that job? A week later, Taylor took final x-rays, gave me a workout schedule, and let me out of the clinic. I sent Mister DeBartolo a thank you letter for everything he'd done. Missy found me a little cottage to rent, right in town in Carmel."

"From the day he had dumped me in the pool, my attitude and health had improved. Although this wasn't the life I had planned when I came to San Francisco, it was a good start toward something else. Things had turned out better than I could have imagined. I had money, friends, a job, a home."

"And most important, I could walk."

- SEVENTEEN -

“ **T**his is a good place to stop, while I go shut off the generator”, I said. “I had the air conditioning on, are you cool enough?”

“Um hum. While you do that, I’m going to the kitchen and make a root beer float. We have a lot of ice cream melting. Would you like one?”

“Sure. With chocolate ice cream. And bring some pretzels.” I picked up my flashlight and started toward the stairs.

“Oreos”, she called.

I stopped. “What?”

“I need Oreos with a float.”

“Try the pantry.”

“I’m going to work out non-stop for a week, after this”, she yelled as we went in different directions.

Downstairs, I shut the generator down. The walls were the same: damp, not leaking. I was dying to see what was happening outside. I knew I shouldn’t raise a storm curtain. But there was one way to see at least something. There was a water-tight steel trap door in the laundry room floor, with a steel ladder to the carport below. Curiosity got the better of me, and I went into the laundry, unlocked the trap-door, and lifted it. A hard gust of wind blew it out of my grasp, and slammed it completely open to the concrete

floor with a loud bang. I could feel wet salt air rush up at me. I looked over the edge, pointing my flashlight into the hole.

“Holy shit ! ”, I muttered.

All I could see below me was surging black water, about four feet down the ladder. If there had been a ladder that is. It was no longer there. That thing had been clamped to the carport ceiling and embedded in the carport concrete, through many storms for many years. More than half the first floor beneath me was under water. Another blast of wind splashed water on my feet. I put the flashlight down and gripped the heavy door. It took all my strength to force it back into place - it was like trying to push against a sail full of wind. I had to stand on it to get it locked again.

Towelng my feet dry, I decided to keep this discovery to myself. Nothing would be accomplished by further alarming my guest detective. When the storm was over she would learn that her police car had become a sponge. I knew that wouldn't upset her.

Back upstairs in the living room, Kathleen had set up quite a spread. She had found my quart-sized soda glasses, and piled them high with ice cream, vanilla for her. And brought two bottles of Stewart's root beer for us each. She had pretzels in a bowl, and a variety of cheeses and crackers on a serving tray. And a big bag of Oreos, already with a few missing. Maybe she could eat like this and get away with it, but at my age hanging around with her was gonna be bad for my waistline.

I took a cracker and cheese, and then began to eat some ice cream to make room in the glass for root beer. “Y’know, Miz Lynch, you are a bad influence. And I have little willpower.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll work it off.” One eyebrow raised, she said: “No willpower, huh? That’s not what I’ve observed.”

“I was speaking about food.”

“And I wasn’t”, she said, sipping her soda through a straw. “What happened to Jenny?”

“Oh, we saw each other for about a year, and ended up as good friends. Then she took a job as a swim coach in Australia. Some time later, she wrote and told me she was happy there, with a husband and two kids.”

“What was your life like in Carmel?”

“Well, for the first three years, it was pretty uneventful. When my leg was strong enough, Taylor taught me to surf. Then we both took up windsurfing. I worked in the golf shop five days a week. Played a few holes after work some evenings; sometimes Jim had me play with hotel guests on the weekend. I got to be a good golfer - though nothing like my dad. I went around with Jenny until she left. It’s very quiet on the peninsula, everything closes by nine, so some weekends I drove up to the city, saw Eddie, made some friends. I never went back to Celeste’s uncle’s restaurant. Though Eddie still ate breakfast there every day, I instructed him not to ask about her. After I bought the cottage in Carmel, I had Eddie’s room mate do the place over, inside and out. I still own that house. My salary paid the bills. Through the investment advisor, I took Jeff Miller’s advice and began buying properties in California, all of which I sold for ridiculous prices during the internet boom.”

“I had a routine single-guy life. Then one day when I was twenty-six, everything changed. It was a lazy Saturday summer afternoon. Jim and I were trying out some new putters, back and forth on the golf-shop carpet. A big white

Mercedes drove around the circle in front of the shop, and parked. We paused to watch, as a young Asian woman got out of the car. Her black hair was in a pony tail, and she was dressed for golf all in white - shoes, shorts, sleeveless knit shirt, sun-visor - all obviously expensive.

“As she walked toward the door, Jim said ‘This one’s for you.’ ”

“ ‘Why do you say that?’ I asked. ‘I’m not the pro.’ ”

“Jim was a happily married man in his late forties. ‘She’s gorgeous, she’s rich, she’s your age, and she’s not wearing a ring. Any other questions?’ ”

“Putter in hand, I walked to the front and greeted her as she came into the shop. ‘Welcome to Spanish Bay. I’m Conor MacKenzie, how can we help you?’ “

“She stopped and gave the shop the once-over, then looked at me. ‘I want to improve my game. I thought a playing lesson would help.’ “

“ ‘Oh. Well, you’ll want to talk to Jim,’ I nodded toward my boss, ‘he’s the head professional.’ “

“She walked past me to the counter in back, where Jim was now standing. ‘I would like to get a playing lesson’, she addressed him.”

“Jim pulled out his appointment book. ‘Let’s see... I have a morning open next Wednesday. How will that be for you?’ “

“She shook her head, her long black hair flowing behind her. ‘Not good. I live and work in the city. I’m weekendening with friends here, and I was hoping to have a lesson this afternoon.’ “

“ ‘I’m afraid I can’t today.’ “

“She glanced over the counter at his book. ‘But you have nothing at all on your schedule for today.’ “

”Jim thought quickly. ‘I have a weekly Club management meeting. I never write that down. But Conor can go with you.’ He lowered his voice conspiratorially, ‘And that’ll even save you money, I charge more than he does.’ “

”So softly that I could barely hear, and without a trace of conceit, she said ‘Jim, the cost is unimportant.’ “

”Still quietly, he said ‘Really Miss, he’s a good teacher. His grandfather and father are both golf pros.’ “

”She turned and eyed me suspiciously. A very smart girl, she realized exactly what was going on. Resigned to accepting our ploy, she sighed ‘Alright.’ To me, she said ‘Let’s go.’ “

”Pretending to have heard only her words to me, I said ‘We’ll have the boys get your bag out of your car and park it for you. Since you’ll be playing a lot of different shots, it will be faster to take a cart. I’ll go change shoes, get my clubs, and meet you out front.’ “

” ‘I will be on the practice green’, she said, not looking at me as she walked by me to the door.”

”Jim and I both watched her exit. ‘Romeo, if you can warm *that* one up, I will really be impressed’, he said, grinning.”

” ‘Yeah, that’s a classic case of Ice Princess’, I answered. ‘Thanks for the push, but I think this is going to be just golf.’ “

” ‘I can think of a lot of worse ways to spend a Saturday afternoon than golfing with a beautiful woman. You better get going before she leaves without you.’ “

“I got the cart and our clubs. She had taken her putter, and was on the practice green down the hill from the shop, near the patio of the clubhouse. I stopped at the top of the hill and watched her for a few minutes. ‘Ice Princess’, I thought, ‘that fits her perfectly, especially with the white outfit.’ She had one golf ball, which she was hitting directly at the holes, not taking break or speed into account. She missed by a mile every time. But she sure looked good doing it. I let the cart drift down the hill, got out, took my putter and three balls, and joined her on the green.”

“ ‘I can not putt worth a nickle’, she muttered.”

“ ‘Is that what you want to work on?’ “

” ‘This...’ she whacked another putt and we watched it go ten feet past a hole, ‘...and everything else.’ “

” ‘Well, it just takes practice’, I said.”

“ ‘Practice, practice, practice’, she sounded very frustrated. ‘That is all my father says. I have had lesson after lesson; hours at the driving range. I hate practicing, I want to play the game.’ “

”I dropped three balls at the spot from where she had just putted. ‘Golf can be a very frustrating game.’ I hit one; it stopped three inches to the right of the cup. ‘The truth is, both of you are right.’ I put the second ball a couple of inches past. ‘But the beauty of it is, you can enjoy playing the game, even if you never practice.’ I knew where the third one was going. I watched her face as the ball rolled up to the cup and fell in.”

“She looked at me in amazement. ‘How did you do that?’ Her opinion of me had taken an upward swing.”

"I chuckled, 'About twenty years of practice.' I walked over and picked the ball from the hole. 'Never practice with just one ball. By the third try, you should have it perfect.' "

"She reached over and took the three from my hand, dropped them fifteen feet from another hole, and proceeded to whack all three way past again. Turning to look at me, she leaned on her club and put her other hand on her hip. Impatiently, she said "That does not work for me, Smart Guy."

"If she didn't find some patience and a sense of humor pretty quickly, this was gonna be a long afternoon. I retrieved the three balls, and dropped them at her feet. 'Putting is fully half the game. It can make a bad golfer average, an average golfer good, and a good golfer a pro. It can just as easily have the opposite effect. You've seen players squat behind their ball and look to the hole. They're not doing that to rest between shots, there's a reason.' I knelt a few feet behind one ball. 'Get down here in front of me.' She looked at me skeptically. "Go ahead, I won't bite', I laughed. 'Alright, now stay there and watch.' I got up, stood over the ball, and whacked it straight past the hole, just as she had been doing. 'Did you see that? That's what you're doing.' She nodded. 'In golf, the way into the hole is rarely on a straight line.' I put another ball in the same spot. 'You have to take speed into account - how fast the green is, how hard you hit the ball.' I hit that one a bit too hard; it hit the pin and bounced back out. "Then there's the "break", this putt is anything but straight.' The third curved slowly toward the hole and dropped in the right edge."

"She stood. 'In skiing, you call that the "fall line". That was excellent, Mister MacKenzie. Watching from there, you just made it all perfectly clear.' She fetched the three balls, and aimed toward another hole twenty feet away."

"I stopped her. "Two more things. First, start at a short distance, maybe six feet. When you make three from that spot, move back and go again. Keep repeating that drill. Second, every course has different greens. Different grass, mowed to different heights, equals different speed. You'll learn to adjust." I moved the balls to six feet. "Come kneel behind there, line it up, pick a spot halfway through the line and putt to that spot." "

"She did as I asked. The first putt, she had the curve right, but hit too hard. The second, too short. I moved it out of her way. She put the third into the cup."

"Big smile. 'Look at that! I'm ready to go on tour!' "

"It was nice to know she actually could smile. 'You are a quick study. Of course I didn't mention things like the direction of the grain, or how damp it is, or that it always breaks a bit toward nearby water, or how the grass follows the sun which changes the same putt at another time of day. And some other stuff. Once you master all that, we'll put you on the Tour. In the meantime, you've already figured out the basics. Let's go play.' "

"She handed me her putter. 'You drive', she said."

"I put her club in her bag and got into the cart next to her. 'Would it be imposing of me to ask your name?' "

" 'My name is Su Li Chin, Mister MacKenzie.' "

" 'Can we use Conor and Su Li? You can call me Mister MacKenzie in twenty years.' "

" 'If I see you in twenty years, Conor, I will certainly call you Mister Mackenzie', she smiled ."

"As we played, the reason she wanted a playing lesson became apparent. She had obviously had plenty of lessons and time on the practice tee; every shot she hit made

the fairway. If she got her second shot onto the green, she was fine, once she got the hang of putting. But with anything other than a basic shot, she hadn't a clue. So we worked on her short game. Smart and a natural athlete, she caught on fast."

"Late in the afternoon, we finished the ninth hole, rode up the hill to the shop, and I parked the cart. 'You're going to be a good golfer, Su Li, maybe even a low handicap. What have you been shooting?' "

" 'I have no idea. I have never kept score, I've only gone around here by myself a few times. My friends don't play.' "

" 'We should play eighteen some time, and get you a score to start from'. No answer. 'Would you have dinner with me tonight?' "

"She was quiet for a moment, thinking. 'I'm sorry, no. I have plans.' "

" 'Tomorrow night?' "

" 'I will be back in the city.' "

"Feeling a little embarrassed, it was my turn to be silent."

" 'An iced tea on the terrace would be nice. Would you have time to join me, or does Jim need you back in the golf shop?' "

" 'I'm sure he wouldn't want me to leave you here thirsty.' "

" 'She got out of the cart. 'I will go freshen up, and meet you up there.' "

"I went back to the shop, washed up and changed my shoes and shirt."

"Out on the terrace overlooking the Pacific, she was already seated when I arrived. A pitcher of iced tea and a plate of scones were on the table. When the waiter saw it was me joining her, he brought me a bottle of Grolsch."

"Su Li had changed into a white v-neck cashmere sweater, a short white skirt, and white sandals. Apparently, white was a theme with her. She knew she looked terrific in it."

" 'I see they know your tastes here. You are not a tea drinker?' "

" 'A man drinks beer after golfing', I replied, taking a long drink."

" 'Oh. That is another rule of the game I was unaware of ', she said with a small smile."

"We sat in silence, listening to seals barking out on the rocks, admiring the view. Finally, she spoke, still looking out to sea. ' It is so peaceful here on the Peninsula. So very different from the city; almost beyond comprehension that in such a short distance one is in another world.' She sighed softly. ' It must be so calming to the soul to live here.' "

"I nodded. ' I've never thought of it that way. But you just summed up exactly why I live here... it's been calming to my soul.' "

" 'You are not from California? You look like a native.' "

" 'Yes, I hear that a lot. I'm from Ohio. I've lived over there in Carmel for three years.' Feeling a need to let her know I wasn't a golf bum, I added, 'I have a cottage in town.' "

” ‘And how does a young man from Ohio find his way to Carmel?’ “

” ‘I came to San Francisco to play football. It didn’t work out. I found myself here for awhile, and decided to stay.’ “

”She frowned and shook her head slightly side to side. ‘I do not know anything about football.’ Looking out to sea again, she wistfully said, ‘But I think you made a good decision.’ “

”Thinking ‘Hey, it won’t take much encouragement to get her to move down here’, I said, ‘You could do it.’ “

” ‘No, no I could not. That is not possible.’ “

”Oops. Maybe there was a husband after all. ‘I’m sorry... you don’t wear a ring, I thought you were single.’ “

”She looked at me. ‘I am single. It is not that.’ Again, she gazed out to sea. ‘It is complicated.’ She turned back to me, taking out her purse. ‘I have to be going. How much do I owe you?’ “

” ‘I wouldn’t dream of taking anything for such a nice afternoon with you.’ “

” ‘Well I have to give you something, this is your job.’ “

”Mimicking her tone and statement to Jim - that I wasn’t supposed to have heard - I said, ‘Su Li, the cost is not important.’ “

”She smiled broadly. ‘Ah, you have excellent hearing. I will have to remember that.’ Standing, she generously tucked a fifty-dollar bill under her plate. ‘At least let me take care of our refreshments. Will you walk me to my car?’ “

”Following her off the terrace, down to the parking lot, I thought, ‘She should always wear short skirts.’ When we got to her Mercedes, I opened her door, and asked ‘May I call you?’ “

”She sat behind the wheel, looked out through the windshield for a moment, then back up at me. Seriously she said ‘I don’t think that would be a good idea.’ Then, very contradictory, she gave me a sweet smile, and said ‘I learned a lot today Conor, and I had a very enjoyable time. You are a good teacher and a nice man.’ With that, she started the car. ‘Goodbye’, she said. I closed her door, and she drove off.”

“She left a very confused guy standing in the parking lot. I walked back to the shop, went in and handed Jim a twenty, not wanting him to know I had worked for free. ‘Here’s your cut’, I said.”

“ ‘How did it go?’ he asked, as I went into the back room to get my car keys.”

“ ‘She’s a natural’, I said, as I passed him on the way to the front door. ‘I’ll see you in the morning.’ “

”I drove home to Carmel, opened up a beer, burned myself a couple of hot dogs, and put Miz Chin out of my mind.”

“The next Friday morning, she phoned the golf shop and asked to schedule another playing lesson for Saturday. I was standing next to Jim when he answered, and he said ‘Let me check my schedule.’ “

” ‘You have your weekly meeting’, she interrupted. ‘I want Mister MacKenzie, if he is available.’ “

” ‘Oh yeah, my meeting.’ He grinned at me. ‘Glad you reminded me. I’ll schedule Conor.’ “

“ ‘Thank you. Please tell him that I will be there after lunch.’ “

” ‘She showed up at one the next afternoon, once again attired all in white. We played nine holes, this time keeping score. She shot fifty, and was none too happy about it. She never lost her temper, I could just tell that she was accustomed to sports coming easily. Other than the golf lesson, there wasn’t much conversation, and I didn’t try to force it... I could see she was enjoying some peace and quiet. I thought her work in the city must have been extremely stressful. Again, I asked her to dinner. Again, she demurred, but invited me to tea on the terrace. Again, she tried to pay me and I said no thanks. Again, she over tipped the waiter. I walked her to her car and said goodbye, gave Jim twenty bucks, and went home.”

“ ‘The next Saturday was exactly the same. Except when I handed Jim the twenty dollar bill, he gave it back. ‘She’s not paying you, is she?’ he asked.”

“ ‘Jim, I can’t take money for spending the day with her. Somehow that seems wrong. She’s offered, I’ve said no. Do you want me to cover her greens fees?’ “

” ‘No need, Romeo. Today, I was told that your Miss Chin bought a membership a few days ago. It seems you’re getting somewhere with her after all.’ “

” ‘The girl just likes the golf course, Jim. I can’t even get her phone number.’ “

” ‘Three Saturdays in a row? And she specifically asked for you? That must mean something.’ “

” ‘Yeah, Boss, it means you’ve been underestimating my teaching ability. Maybe I should get a raise’, I said sarcastically.”

“That changed the subject fast. ‘Let’s close up and go home’, he said.”

“The next weekend, she wanted to play eighteen holes. We started at ten, played nine holes, had lunch in the grill room, then played the back nine. She shot a ninety, and I had to convince her that was excellent for a beginner on a very tough course. We had our drinks on the terrace. She was a bit more talkative. This time, I walked her to her car, but left out the dinner invitation.’ “

”Another month, and four more Saturdays with Su Li. I noticed that as soon as I stopped asking her out, she began to flirt with me.” I looked at Kathleen sitting across from me, and smiled. “Women can be very confusing.”

Kathleen smiled back at me. “Yes we can. And usually we’re doing it to you men on purpose.”

Although I always suspected that, this was the first time one of the opposite sex had admitted this to me. I felt like I was being given a glimpse into a secret society. “But why? You make us crazy!”

“You just answered your own question, Mister MacKenzie. We’re genetically programmed for it. Plus, it’s fun. Back to your story”, she ordered. The secret society window was closed.

“Well, the more impersonal I became, the more she flirted.”

“I’m sure she did”, Kathleen said, noisily slurping the last of her soda through the straw. “You made her doubt her sex appeal. Now you had become a challenge.”

I just stared at her for a few moments. “I will never, ever, understand women. “

”No you won’t. So what happened next?”

“She had begun to open up a little about her personal life. I learned that she was twenty-three, had graduated from MIT at twenty, and she worked as an architect for her father’s construction company. Her parents were very traditional Chinese from Taiwan; she had been born in San Francisco. Apparently, her father’s Asian work ethic was mentally exhausting her. She said that she was much more laid back - “American”, she said - and she had begun coming to the Monterey coast on weekends as a way to de-stress.”

“The next Saturday, she off-hand mentioned that her friends were moving and she wasn’t staying with them, but she needed these quiet weekends and had made other arrangements. She didn’t say where, and I didn’t pry.”

“One night the next week, I was having a few beers with some buddies, one of whom was in management at Pebble Beach Lodge. He said ‘Hey Guys, did you see Mac’s new girlfriend? She is so fucking hot!’ “

” ‘She’s hot. But she’s far from being my girlfriend’, I said.”

“ ‘Well, the chick drives all the way down from the city every weekend, stays at the Lodge at six hundred bucks a night, just so she can golf with our pal here. I’d say she wants to be his girlfriend, he just can’t close the deal.’ Everyone, including me, laughed.”

“That’s how I found out where she was staying. The following Saturday, after our day of golf, I waited until Jim left the shop, then called my buddy at the Lodge. “Is she registered there tonight?” “

” ‘Lemme check. I’ll call you back.’ “

”A few minutes later, the phone rang. I picked it up and listened. ‘Yup, she’s here. And I checked a little further.

In case you're interested, she has a dinner reservation for one, at Chanticleer at eight tonight. Of course I didn't tell you that, I could lose my job.' "

"I said thanks, and sat at the counter thinking. And I decided to do something about her once and for all."

"I locked up the shop and went home. I showered, shaved, put on a blazer and tie, and got into the car and drove over to Pebble Beach Lodge, to the restaurant. The Maitre-D was also a friend. 'Yes, Miss Chin is here. I'm going to escort you to a table, we'll walk directly past her. From there you're on your own.' "

"As we approached Su Li's table, she recognized me. 'Mister MacKenzie... I mean, Conor! I am surprised to see you here.' She extended her hand in greeting."

" 'I see you know each other', the Maitre-D said, 'I'll let you find your own table Mister MacKenzie,' and he walked on without me and laid a menu for me on a table set for one."

"I took her hand, 'I give the chef a golf lesson, he pays in free dinners.' "

" 'You look so different', she said. Then quickly she added, 'I meant that in a good way.' "

"She was wearing a fitted white silk dress with a Mandarin collar. Diamond earrings. Just a little makeup accentuated her golf tan, and her shimmering long black hair flowed over her shoulders and behind her chair. I leaned over and spoke softly into her ear, 'And you, Miss Chin, are making all the other women in the restaurant wish you would go home.' I paused and stood straight. 'And I meant that in a good way.' "

" 'Thank you', she smiled."

“ ‘Well, have a nice dinner.’ I started to walk to my table.”

“ ‘Conor’, she called after me.”

“I walked back. ‘Yes?’ “

” ‘It’s silly for the two of us to dine alone, in the same room, isn’t it? Would you like to join me?’ “

”I pulled out the chair opposite her, sat down and motioned to a waiter. ‘I’ll be joining the lady for dinner, may we have another menu and place setting?’ “

”We had an excellent dinner. Having known each other for two months by then, we were quite comfortable. Su Li talked about her love of architecture and how she had spent summers traveling throughout Europe studying classic buildings. That her artist friends she had stayed with had moved to Big Sur. And how she was enjoying golf because it was much more mentally challenging than other sports she had done. I told her about my grandfather and father and our legacy of golf. And about losing my mother. I mentioned that my college roommate was a surgeon who lived near Carmel; and that she was my second Chinese-American friend, the first was a cop who also lived in the City. Our conversation was effortless, but she never mentioned anything about her family and home. I paid the bill, and she asked me to walk with her to the main lodge, where she was staying.”

“The night air was chilly, and I wrapped my blazer around her shoulders as we walked along the dimly lit pathways between buildings. Su Li again commented how peaceful it was there, compared to the bustle of San Francisco.”

“When we approached the lodge, I touched her arm and stopped her. ‘Su Li, the reason you won’t go out with me - is it because I’m just a golf shop worker?’ “

“She looked very surprised. ‘Is that what you think of me; that would matter to me?’ “

” ‘Well, I don’t know.’ “

” ‘I am not like that, Conor. It is *who* someone is, that I care about; not *what* they are. I have known you long enough to know you are a gentleman, and I like you. I like you a lot.’ “

” ‘Then why... ?’ “

” ‘My family would never approve of my dating a non-Chinese. They are very, very strict in that respect. It has nothing to do with you personally. They would make my life hell.’ We had reached the lobby. She handed back my blazer, then stood on tiptoe and kissed me lightly on the cheek. ‘Thank you for dinner and a lovely evening.’ “

” ‘As she walked away, I called to her. ‘Su Li.’ “

” ‘She turned and came back. ‘Yes?’ “

” ‘What time are you leaving tomorrow?’ “

” ‘Probably about two. Why?’ “

” ‘Tomorrow is my day off. How about a picnic on Carmel beach before you go?’ “

” ‘You are very persistent. I like that’, she smiled. ‘Alright, but I can’t stay late. Monday mornings at my office are no fun.’ “

” ‘I’ll pick you up here at ten. You can check out of the hotel. Bring clothes for your drive back to the City, you can change at my place and I’ll drop you here at your car.’ “

” ‘Just a picnic, Conor’, she admonished. ‘Nothing more.’ “

“ ‘I know. I’ll see you at ten.’ I walked out the door before she could change her mind.”

“Early the next morning, I dressed in shorts over my swimsuit, tennis shoes, and a Forty-Niner’s sweatshirt. I tossed a blanket and some beach towels into the Porsche, then went to a local gourmet shop and had them make a picnic basket lunch including a good bottle of wine. When I pulled up in front of the lodge, Su Li was already waiting for me, sitting on a bench in the front garden. She wore a white Pebble Beach sweatshirt, white shorts, and white Keds. Her hair was in a long braid down her back. A canvas tote bag with the Spanish Bay logo was at her feet, presumably containing clothes for her trip home.”

“I got out of the car, motioning away the parking valet, and she stood as I approached. ‘You are late, MacKenzie’, she said, eyebrows raised and looking at her Rolex. ‘I have already checked out and had my luggage put in my car.’ “

”I thought ‘Uh-oh, another Eddie-type, always precisely on time, and impatient with people who aren’t.’ In those days, I didn’t even own a watch. By the clock in the Porsche, I thought I was prompt. ‘What time is it?’, I asked her.”

“ ‘Four minutes past ten.’ “

”I decided not to start our day with a discussion of what “on time” means to me. I took the tote from her hand, led her to my car, and opened her door. ‘Oh, this is very practical transportation’, she said as she sat. ‘If you are Mario Andretti.’ “

” ‘Oh Brother!’ I thought, ‘This is not starting well. Maybe this was a mistake’. I smiled, closed her door, got in my side and started the car.”

“Su Li looked at me and laughed. ‘Don’t look so serious Conor. I was teasing you about the time because I have noticed you never wear a watch.’ “

” ‘I don’t have one.’ “

” ‘Hmm...must be nice to not need one.’ “

”I began to drive away. ‘Wait!’, she said sharply.”

“ ‘What now?’, I thought, as I abruptly stopped.”

“ ‘It is such a nice day, may we put the top down?’ “

” ‘Sure. I didn’t think you’d want to’, I said as I opened the latches and dropped the top. I put the car back into gear and took off. We left the Lodge road, and went out onto Seventeen Mile Drive.”

“We hadn’t gone far, when she threw her hands up into the breeze, and said ‘I love this car.’ Now I thought the day was looking better.”

“I drove down the hill from the highway into Carmel, turned onto my street and parked in front of my cottage. ‘This is my place’, I said as I opened her door. ‘We can walk to the beach from here.’ “

”She crossed the sidewalk and stopped with one hand on the fence gate. I could see the architect taking in all the details, even the neighboring homes.”

“ ‘The Porsche did not surprise me. This does. Conor, this is just darling.’ “

"Darling wasn't the word I would have used, although it did fit. 'Thanks. Would you like to go in?' "

" 'After the beach.' "

"I got the picnic basket, beach towels, and blanket from the car and locked her tote bag and purse in the front trunk. We walked the two blocks down the hill to the end of the street, where the beach begins. Unexpected among the cliffs and rocks of the Monterey coastline, Carmel's beach is wide, and its crescent shape encompasses Carmel Bay. You wouldn't even know it exists unless you go to the bottom of the hill, then you exit the tree-shrouded street, and suddenly you're on a beautiful beach. We laid our blanket next to a wind-gnarled old tree at the top of the beach. We were almost alone."

" 'A swim before lunch will be refreshing, don't you think?', she said. 'Will you join me?' "

" 'That water is colder than it looks', I answered."

" 'Oh don't be a wimp', she kicked off her shoes and peeled off her sweatshirt and shorts, revealing a small bikini - white of course - on a gorgeous body. 'Last one in has to serve lunch!', she yelled, already running toward the waves with her long braid waving behind her."

"By the time I had gotten out of my sweatshirt, t-shirt, shorts, and shoes, she was already diving in. I jogged to the water's edge and watched as she expertly freestyled straight out. My father had called me a "water-dog" since I was little because they couldn't keep me out of it. Su Li was obviously another water-dog. I liked that."

"She stopped swimming, turned toward shore and treaded water. 'Come on, you big baby. It's not that cold!' She waved and yelled to me."

“I started to wade in. Whenever I surfed, I wore a wetsuit for warmth. ‘You’re crazy, this is freezing!’, I yelled back.”

“She giggled. ‘If you can catch me, you can kiss me!’”

“That was an incentive. Suddenly the water temperature didn’t matter. I dived in, surfaced, and saw her start to swim south, parallel to shore. I started swimming at an angle to cut her off. She was very good. When I was half-way to her, I stopped to look. She had tried to fool me by reversing direction. Swimming as hard as she could, she didn’t know I had noticed. In half a minute, I caught her. I put my arms around her waist; she threw hers over my shoulders. We treaded water, both of us laughing while catching our breath. Water dripping down her face, she pulled me close and kissed me hard. We floated together for a moment, looking into each other’s eyes. That kiss had changed everything, we both knew.”

“ ‘There’, she said, laughing, ‘I always pay off my bets.’ She suddenly let me go. ‘Now I will race you to shore!’, she yelled as she turned and started swimming.”

“She really was very fast. With the lead she had, I couldn’t quite catch her. We ran up the sand and collapsed on our blanket, laughing. When she had caught her breath, she rolled toward me and kissed me again, this time long and passionately.”

“She laid her head on my chest. ‘Damn’, she said softly, ‘I was afraid this would happen.’ “

” ‘Afraid what would happen?’ “

” ‘You are going to make my life very complicated.’ “

” ‘Is that a bad thing?’ “

“She sighed, ‘I guess we are going to find out, Conor.’ Her arms held me tightly for a few minutes. She shivered, sat up and wrapped a towel around herself, then threw one over me. ‘I believe someone lost a bet, and has to serve me lunch’, she said, smiling broadly.’ “

”We ate lunch, basked in the sun and talked for awhile, then walked back to my place. Outside, the house looks like a typical English country cottage, with high pitched gable roof, leaded windows, and a heavy carved wooden door. Eddie’s roommate had painted the stucco an off-white and the wood trim dark brown. Inside, the first floor has a living room, dining room, den, kitchen, and a powder-room tucked under the stairs. The second floor has two bedrooms and two baths. There are fireplaces in the living room, den, and master bedroom. Eddie’s friend had designed the interior with the fact in mind that this was the home of a very masculine guy - no frills. All the furniture was classic soft contemporary, with just a few antique Asian pieces. The original kitchen had been torn out and replaced with a sleek modern one, though I never cooked. I had insisted upon a big television and stereo, which were in the den. Upstairs, my bedroom was furnished with a big platform bed with small side tables, and a small leather sofa where I would lay and read in front of the fireplace. My bureau was inside the walk-in closet. The whole house was decorated in about eight shades of beige and taupe. The effect was very serene.”

“I fetched Su Li’s bag from the car, and opened the front door for her. When we stepped in, I started to say I would show her around. She gently put a hand on my chest, and said ‘Shh... let me show myself.’ She walked around the first floor, pausing at the doorway to each room to absorb what the designer had done. When she had seen it all, I said there were bedrooms upstairs. ‘I know’, she said, ‘just wait down here.’ She went up, and was gone for a few minutes. I put the picnic things in the kitchen and waited in the den. She came down and said ‘You are full of surprises today, Conor. I know you had a designer do all this, but not many

straight single men your age would have the taste to do so. And he captured your style perfectly; I imagine you are very comfortable here.' I nodded yes. "This guy is very good. I'll want his number, I have projects for him.' She grabbed her tote-bag, 'Now, I need to shower and start for home.' "

"She showered and dressed in the guest bedroom. I did the same in mine. She met me downstairs, dressed in white turtleneck, white jeans, white sandals. On the drive over to Pebble to get her car, neither of us had much to say. I guess we were both thinking about what was happening between us."

"We got to her Mercedes, and I opened the door for her. She tossed her bag to the passenger seat, then turned, put her arms around my neck and kissed me. "The same schedule next weekend?', she asked."

" 'Absolutely.' "

"She got in, closed her door, and put the window down. 'I hope you are worth the trouble', she said. 'I'll see you on Saturday.' She smiled and drove away."

"The next weekend, as she had said, we did 'the same schedule'. Golf then a late dinner on Saturday, picnic on Sunday, then she went home. We did that for another four weekends."

"Then, during our round of golf one Saturday, she suggested that we make dinner at my place instead of eating at a restaurant. 'You have such a nice kitchen', she said, 'I assume you have pots and pans, etcetera?' "

" 'Geez, I don't know. I've never looked in all those drawers and cabinets', I said, kidding. 'We'll just have to go over there later and find out.' "

“When we finished our round, for the first time she said let’s skip the drinks on the terrace, and also for the first time, she wanted to drive to my place in her own car. She came into the house with a small bag, said ‘After I shower, we will go get groceries’, and went directly up to the guest bath. I showered too, and then we drove out to the grocery store and a fish market. We bought snapper, white corn, fresh fruit for salad, and a chocolate cake mix. I turned out that Miz Chin had a very healthy diet but a serious addiction to chocolate cake.”

“She also wanted to rent a movie for after dinner. ‘Do you like Casablanca?’ she asked.”

“ ‘I’ve never seen it.’ “

” ‘Oh, well then that’s what we have to get!’ “

”Back home, she had me husk the corn and slice the fruit, while she prepared the snapper and baked a cake. We ate by candle light on the deck out back.”

“After dinner, as we cleaned up the kitchen, she said ‘Is your guest bed made up?’ “

” ‘I have sheets, why?’ “

” ‘It seems there is no room at the Inn.’ “

” ‘Huh?’ “

” ‘The lodge is full, MacKenzie. I need a place to stay.’”

” ‘I wasn’t sure what she was up to, but I was fairly sure there were rooms available at Pebble Beach Lodge or Spanish Bay Inn. ‘Of course you can stay here, I’d like that.’”

"I built a fire in the den, and we settled in together on the sofa to watch the movie. Which is still my favorite, by the way."

"When the movie ended, she sat up and stretched. 'Does the fireplace in your bedroom function?' "

" 'Yeah, I use it all the time. Why?' "

" 'Boy, Conor, take a hint!' She stood, laughing, hands on hips."

" 'Oh.' This was unexpected. 'I'll need to get some firewood from out back.' "

" 'You get the wood, I'll get us cake and meet you upstairs.' "

"The next morning, as we lay in my bed, she said 'You know, if you had not been so patient, this would never have happened.' "

" 'From our first day at the beach, somehow I just knew to let you find your own time and way. Although, I didn't expect you to keep me up all night!' "

" 'I had a lot of pent-up desire. And I did not hear any complaints from you, Mister Non-Stop.' "

" 'I was having too much fun to stop', I said as I sat up on the edge of the bed.' "

" 'Hey, where are you going?' She grabbed me from behind and pulled me down. 'The fun is just beginning!' "

"From that time on, she began staying with me every weekend, arriving at my place on Friday night after driving down from the city. I introduced her to Missy and Taylor, and we began to do things together as couples. Su Li and Missy became good friends. Now that she was officially my

girlfriend, I couldn't spend my working Saturdays golfing with her, so they started hanging out with each other. Little Faith called her Aunt Susie. I would get a call from her once during the week, "touching base" as she called it. Things of hers began to appear at my house; Missy told me that Su Li was marking her territory. I didn't mind. She was exceptionally intelligent, very athletic, good-natured, beautiful, interesting, and had a wry sense of humor. Despite growing up in a wealthy family, she was very down to earth. And she liked me, for some reason. We became best friends."

"She never mentioned her family. All I knew was, she worked for her father's corporation, and she lived in the City with her parents. I asked her once if she had told them about me, and she replied 'Not yet, I'm waiting for the right moment.' One thing I was to learn about Su Li was, you didn't pressure her - when she was ready to say or do something, she would, not before."

"We went on like that for a year, Wednesday night phone calls and two weekend nights together. It became harder and harder for her to leave on Sundays; and on Friday evenings she arrived more and more frazzled from her job. She was burning out, I could tell. And I was living my whole life for the weekends."

"My father came to visit for a week. He liked her, but after she left on Sunday, that night at dinner he said 'Scot, I like Su Li, but frankly this "five-day-a-week-mystery-woman shit - it doesn't fly in my book. She's taking advantage of you, Son.' "

"As usual, Dad saw things more clearly than I. After he went home, Su Li and I had another of our routine weekends. During the next week, I thought about what he had said. If I wasn't good enough to be introduced to her parents, then what was I? What were we? So I decided to force the issue."

“The following Saturday night, I told Su Li that the chef owed me a dinner, and we dressed up and went to Chanticleer. I had intended to pop the question, but then lost my nerve. After dining, I suggested we take a walk around the lodge grounds. As we strolled along in the moonlight, she said ‘You have been very quiet this evening, Conor. Is everything alright?’ “

”I stopped walking, and faced her. ‘I don’t know, Su Li, is it?’ “

” ‘What do you mean?’ “

” ‘Do you love me?’ “

” ‘Of course I do. I tell you all the time.’ “

” ‘Do you miss me during the week?’ “

” ‘Yes of course.’ “

” ‘Then move down here, and let’s get married. You can start your own practice, there’s plenty of work.’ It wasn’t romantic, but I had made my point.”

“ ‘Wow, Darling, those are very big changes.’ She took my hand and we turned toward our car. ‘We can talk about all this tomorrow.’ “

”Our short drive back to my house was made in silence. I felt kind of a fool for proposing like that; and foolish because I didn’t get the answer I expected. Once home, she asked me to build a fire in the bedroom fireplace. We made love that night, but it was different than before - less like two young people lusting for one another, more like two old lovers saying goodbye. We fell asleep in each other’s arms.”

“When I awakened in the morning, she wasn’t next to me. I was accustomed to her getting up before me, but this

was different. Her clothes and bag weren't in the room. I pulled on shorts and went downstairs to find her. She wasn't there. Her car wasn't out front. I thought she had gone for groceries, and I walked back to the kitchen. There, on the counter, I found a note that said:

My Darling Conor,

My life has changed so much already - for the better- because you have become a part of it. But keeping you and our relationship from my family has become more and more difficult.

You have been so patient - and now you are right, it is time for me to make decisions about my future, and ours. This is no longer fair to you - and if I can not find a way to completely share my life with you, then I should set you free to find a woman who can.

You have asked and said everything you need to, and what you want for us is perfectly clear. Please give me a little time to think and to talk with my parents before I give you an answer.

Forgive me for leaving you this way. But I wanted us both to always remember Conor and Su Li as we were last night.

All my Love,

Su Li

Kathleen had gone to the refrigerator and taken out a cold bottle of root beer. She poured some into each of our soda mugs as I finished describing the note. "More ice cream?", she asked.

"Why not? At this point, what's a couple hundred more useless calories?"

She went back to the 'fridge, and brought the ice cream. "Want to know what I think?" she asked as she dropped two scoops into her mug. "Not to speak ill of the dead..." She was scooping my ice cream, and abruptly looked up at me. "Oh Mac, I'm sorry, that phrase just slipped out. I didn't mean to be rude."

"It's okay. I know you didn't. Go ahead."

She took the containers of ice cream back to the refrigerator. As she came back to her sofa, she said "All I meant to say was, I think leaving you a note was cowardly. You had been so good to her, it wasn't a nice thing to do. But that's just my opinion."

"She meant well; preserving that last memory for us in case she didn't come back was important to her. But I don't entirely disagree with you. At first I blamed myself for forcing the issue. Then I was angry with her. I went surfing and took it out on the waves. When I didn't hear from her after a few days, and she didn't show up the next weekend, I reminded myself of all the women who had come into and gone out of my life, and thought 'Well there goes another.' "

"Two weeks went by without a word from her. Then, on Monday night as I lay on the sofa watching football, the doorbell rang. I opened the door and found Su Li standing there, two big suitcases beside her."

" 'Excuse me sir, would you have a spare room for a homeless unemployed architect?', she said in a small voice."

" 'No, I'm sorry, I don't', I said, and a look of surprise and a little panic came over her face. 'But you can share *my* room, if you like.' I stepped out and picked up her bags. "Get in the house Woman, it's cold out and you have no coat."

"I followed her in, and closed the door. She threw her arms around my neck and pulled close to me. 'I'm sorry I didn't call first. I hope you really meant what you said.' "

" 'About what?' "

" 'Moving here. Marriage. Starting a practice. Everything.' "

" 'Oh that...' I started to make a joke, then realized this wasn't the time to tease her. 'Of course I meant it.' "

" 'Good. Because everything I own is in my car.' "

"She followed me into the den, and I turned off the TV. We sat facing each other, her on the sofa, me on the coffee table. "I had just about given up on you", I said. "What happened?" "

" 'I have just experienced the worst two weeks of my life.' She took a deep breath. "Then I was in such a hurry to get away and get down here to you... I almost put my car off the road.' "

" 'You're shaking. Let me stoke the fire and get you a drink. When you're warm and calmed down, you can tell me all about it.' I threw two logs into the fire, stopped to kiss her forehead, and went to the kitchen to get her drink."

"When I came back, she gave me a wan smile. 'I want to share in the expenses. I have money saved, and I own the Mercedes, so I could sell that if need be.' "

" 'I sat next to her and poured her a drink. 'Su Li, remember saying the cost is not important? Trust me, money is not a problem. You won't need to sell anything. You'll never even have to work. I'll tell you all about it later. Now drink this.' "

” ‘But I want to work.’ “

” ‘Then you will. We’ll set up your office in the second bedroom. I know everyone around here, even the owners of the Pebble Beach Company. You’ll be turning clients away.’ “

“ ‘I don’t want charity.’ “

” ‘No charity. I’ll introduce you. From there on it’s up to you. Drink up.’ “

” ‘Conor, I don’t drink Scotch.’ “

” ‘That’s my dad’s thirty year old Glenfiddich. As he says, “It’ll put hair on your chest”.’ She took a couple of sips, made a face. ‘Want to tell me what happened?’ “

” ‘Alright, I will try. A few days after I last left here, my father returned from a trip to Taiwan. He has business and a family home there. That night at dinner, I told my parents and brother that I had fallen in love and wanted to marry. They were pleased with this news, until I told them it was a man whom I met in Monterey.’ “

” ‘Do we know the young man?’, my mother asked.

‘No’, I answered.

‘Is he Chinese?’, my father asked.

‘No, he is Caucasian’, I said.

‘I told you she should not be allowed to go out alone’, my brother gloated.

‘Silence!’, my father said to him, then asked, ‘And what does this person do for a living?’

‘He is a golf professional’, I said.

‘So you expect us to allow you to marry a white playboy who wants you for your money? Never!’, my father exploded.

‘Then I will marry without your permission’, I said.

‘If you do, then you are no longer my daughter!’ “

“ I left the table then, and went to my room and cried all night. I had hoped that they would at least try to understand that I am a Western woman, not a Chinese. In the morning, I did not go to work. My mother came to my room and I told her about you. She listened, then said she understood my emotions but that we have our family heritage to preserve, and that my father had my best interests at heart. I went to the office for the next few days; my father and I avoided each other.’ “

“She took a gulp of the Scotch. “That weekend I just wandered around the city, my brother unaware that I knew he was following me. I am afraid of him. He is very unstable, he has always gotten into trouble and Father makes it disappear. I know they are not going to change their minds, and I want to be with you. So, last week I briefed my assistants about our projects, then I spent the weekend at home, and today after everyone had gone for the day I packed and left. I left them a letter that said if they want to, they can contact me through the golf shop at Spanish Bay.’ She let out a big sigh. ‘And now I am here drinking Scotch.’”

”As she spoke, I realized what a commitment she was making. She was giving up her family and career, for me.”

“ ‘Suddenly I am starving’ she said. ‘And I am drinking Scotch on an empty stomach. Is there anything to eat, or is that a silly question?’ “

” ‘Um, there’s pizza left from Saturday. And hot dogs. Or we can go out; I think there’s a bar over in Monterey that stays open late for Monday Night Football, we can grab a burger. Everything else is closed by now.’ “

”She headed toward the kitchen, laughing. ‘Hot dogs it is. I may as well start getting used to them, I am never going to reform you.’ ”

“So we had hot dogs and sodas in the den, while I tried to explain the football game. And that began our new life.”

“When I phoned my dad to tell him the news, he asked if I had given her a ring yet. I said no, and he told me not to, he was going to send me something. A few days later, a package arrived at work. Dad had sent me my mother’s engagement ring. A note enclosed said “Scotty, your Mom would be very happy for you. I know she would want you to have this. Let Su Li get a new setting if she wants to, but these are pretty good diamonds.” My mother had died so long ago, I didn’t even remember the ring. I called Dad to thank him. He told me that one summer he had won a couple of state golf tournaments and he had decided to get my mother a proper ring. He took his winnings and Mom to a jeweler, bought the diamonds, and she designed the ring.”

“The next Sunday, I planned a picnic and took Su Li to Point Lobos, where we found a private spot overlooking the ocean, and I gave her the ring. I told her where it had come from, and that she could re-set it if she liked. She loved it as it was, and loved that it had been my mother’s.” I stopped talking for a moment. After twenty years, I had just remembered something strange.

“Mac, if this is too difficult to talk about, I’ll understand”, Kathleen said.

“No, it was long ago, and telling someone all this is probably good for me. That’s not why I stopped.”

“Why did you?”

“Because I just realized that when I asked about her accident, the Monterey police showed me their report. It included a list of her personal items they had sent to her parents.”

“They showed you their report? That’s unusual, especially considering…”

“This was after they had verified my alibi. I was insistent, so they finally showed some of it to me, I think to get rid of me.”

“Okay, so what did you just realize?”

“That her one-and-a-quarter carat diamond ring wasn’t on the list.”

“Maybe she wasn’t wearing it at the time of the accident. She was divorced, after all.”

“You didn’t know Su Li. She wouldn’t have left it at her parents. She was very sentimental. If she was going to leave it anywhere, she would have left it in our house when she went, especially since it had been my mother’s. I’ve always believed she was on her way back to me, why else would she have been on that road that night? No, I think she was wearing that ring when she died, but not when the police found her.”

“Then maybe one of them took it. I hate to say this about my profession, but it happens.”

“It’s something I should have noticed, and questioned. I just let it go… I shouldn’t have.” I sat, thinking back to my confrontation with a certain Monterey cop. “I need a beer”, I said to Sergeant Lynch, “want one?” I could tell she was thinking like a detective.

“I’ll have some wine, thanks’, she answered.

I poured a glass, handed it to her, and sat down with my beer. “Anyway, back to the story. The next weekend, while Taylor and I went surfing, Su Li and Missy started planning our wedding. We were married a month later, in the garden at the Taylor’s. There were quite a few guests;

my father and his girlfriend, Eddie and his boyfriend, my boss, and a lot of friends from around Carmel. But no one from Su Li's family."

"We settled into a normal young married couple's life. At our wedding reception, I had introduced Su Li to Jeff Miller - the guy I bought the Porsche from - and his wife. A week later they called. They had bought land south of Carmel and were going to build a new house, and asked my wife to go with them to the site and give them her ideas for it."

" 'I hate our architect', Mrs. Miller told her, 'I couldn't live in that angled spaceship he has proposed, and he won't change it. He says he knows what is right and we don't, because he's famous. Well it's our land and our money, so he can go be famous somewhere else.' "

"Su Li took a surveyor's tape measure and a big sketch-pad. I didn't go along, this was her profession. When she came back, she told me about the meeting. 'What do you two want?', she had asked."

"She said the Miller's were surprised. 'No one has asked us', Jeff had replied, 'even when we've done our other homes.' "

" 'I want a *home*', Mrs. Miller said. 'Our penthouse in San Francisco is so formal; our house in France is historic. I want a place to relax. I want to see and live in these natural surroundings. I want our grandchildren to desire to stay here with us. I want serenity and warmth inside - like in your husband's cottage.' "

" 'Can you do all that?', Jeff asked."

" 'Let's walk around your land, and show me why you bought it.' Su Li replied. They spent an hour walking the property. She sent the Miller's home with a promise of

showing them preliminary drawings the next week. Then Su Li perched on a boulder at cliff's edge, and looked back and sketched the site."

"She came home late that afternoon, and asked me if I could make our dinner by myself. 'I want to get some ideas on paper before I lose them', she said. I wound up taking dinner up to her at her desk, she was so focused. 'I immerse myself in my inspiration while I have it', she said, 'no matter when it comes. I hope you will get used to that. Like I am getting used to hot dogs and beans', she grinned as she bit into my speciality. 'Now go away, you distract me. I will reward your patience later.' "

"That is something I learned from her. When I get an idea I stop and sketch it right then. Sometime after one o'clock the next morning, she came to the bedroom and awakened me. 'I'm too excited to wait until morning. Will you look at these now?' I sat up and she handed me six large sketches of a house for the Miller's. First was the one she had done of the empty land. Two through five were the four exterior sides. Sixth was an interior view from the foyer. I hadn't seen her work before, I didn't know what an incredible artist I had married. The drawings were so realistic they looked like black and white photos, detailed down to the leaves in the trees. Her design was so perfectly suited to the landscape, it looked like they had been conceived together."

" 'Honey, this is beautiful. If the Miller's don't build it, we'll do it for ourselves', I said."

"We didn't get it, because the Miller's loved it. So her first independent commission was that ten-thousand square foot house. Soon after it was built, it was featured in Metropolitan Home magazine. After that, she was so busy she was turning work away. And Eddie's roommate became her favored interior designer, a big boost for his career."

“My wife had first begun to come to the Monterey area to get away from the fast pace of life and work in the city. After her success with the Miller’s project, she could easily have put her self back into the same box. As more and more projects were offered to her, she had to re-think that decision. She was smart enough to envision that in a short time she could have an office, staff, payroll, overhead, deadlines - all that stuff she had wanted to leave behind. The fact that I had enough for us both, took away pressure to make big money, and allowed her to structure her practice exactly as she liked.

She decided to keep working from our home, and would not take on more work than could be done by her alone in five six-hour days a week; and she would only do projects that interested her, for people she liked. I told her I thought she was doing the wise thing. This meant she could design about four large houses and a few small remodels a year. The quality of her designs and limited availability gave her a certain exclusive cache’. Some people waited for her, some didn’t. She did seventeen new houses and maybe twenty redesigns before she died. Today, a house with “SLM Architect” on it is an extraordinarily valuable property.

We were - at least I thought we were - very happy. Best friends. Unquenchable lovers. I got certified as a teaching golf pro, and got heavily involved in real estate investment, often with Jeff. We bought a sailboat and spent lots of time on it. During our second year of marriage I was able to purchase a magnificent piece of land on a cliff with a small beach below it. Su Li took one look and decided it was time for us to build our own home.

She designed a house to fit the land, and to fit us, involving me in every detail; ‘After all, it is our home, not just mine’, Su Li said. It wasn’t large - we didn’t want something ostentatious - but it was really beautiful: a two story Asian contemporary of wood, stone, and glass, with a fireplace in each room - even the master bath. She had a twenty-five yard long heated lap pool built for me, and a huge bath tub overlooking the Pacific for her. It took a year to build, when

it was done we rented out our cottage. We lived there for just over a year, until everything changed in one day.”

I was abruptly interrupted when we heard a loud bang from the far end of the house. Kathleen and I both sat up and looked in that direction. “I better see what that was”, I said.

“I’ll go with you.”

We grabbed flashlights and walked toward the kitchen, playing their beams across the shuttered windows and over the ceiling. Everything looked fine, though we could see the metal storm curtains breathing in and out with the wind. Kathleen’s light revealed a basketball-sized dent in the metal guarding one of the breakfast room windows. We both put light on it.

“I guess this is what we heard. Flying debris. Looks okay to me.” I had to shout to be heard over the wind howling outside.

“Yeah”, she said, unconvinced. “I guess so.”

We started back to the living room. Just as we were passing the last glass door near where we had been sitting, BANG ! Something big hit the storm curtain. We were about two feet from it, and we both jumped back. Kathleen actually pushed me away from the glass, shielding me with her body. Realizing we were unharmed, we both picked up the flashlights we had dropped, their beams at angles across the floor, and shone them in the direction of the noise. There was a deep dent several feet long near the curtain’s top. Looking more closely, we could see that the steel was split open in the dent’s center. The curtain was rattling loudly, and the indentation was banging against the glass.

“That, I don’t like”, I said. “I better get some tape and put it on this door, or we’ll soon have glass all over the place. There’s duct tape downstairs, I’ll be right back.”

“I’m right behind you”, the Sergeant replied. “You’re not leaving me up here alone.”

Metal and glass banging loudly behind us, we went down to the utility room. I found the tape and a knife, and we hurriedly returned upstairs.

“It will be faster if we both work on it”, Kathleen said. “I’ll cut strips and you can apply them.”

We quickly put tape diagonally and then up, down, and across the door. The metal continued to hit it, but the glass held. I criss-crossed some strips over the adjoining doors. Then we pushed furniture away from the windows. When we were finished, we stood back and shone our lights on our work.

“What do you think?”, she asked.

“I think it may break and leak, but it won’t send glass flying.” Something hit another storm curtain, with a thud. “I also think we’ll be better off downstairs in my room. If the dune hasn’t been completely washed away, it will deflect some of the wind and debris from the second floor.”

“Right. Should we take anything with us?”

“Let’s grab food and drinks, and candles. There’s a mini-fridge in my sitting room.”

“Of course there is. Everyone has a refrigerator in their bedroom”, she said sarcastically, as she began to gather our things from the coffee table.

Arms full, as we started down the stairs, I asked “Hey, what was that about earlier? Pushing me away from the glass and shielding me?”

“Cop training, I guess. Shielding the civilian. That noise was like a gunshot.”

“Well, wouldn’t *you* get shot if you did that?”

“When I was in uniform, I wore a flak vest.”

At the bottom of the stairs, we turned and went into my room, and put our things on a table. “Must have been a custom-tailored vest”, I said looking at her nearly bursting April’s black t-shirt. “I can’t imagine they had one to fit you off the shelf.” I smiled.

She reflexively crossed her arms over her chest. “Ha Ha. Very funny, Buster.” She walked toward the sitting room, then turned suddenly and dropped her arms. Her nipples were hard against the cotton tee, and she knew that. “Just for your information, yeah, it was custom made.” Hands on hips, turning to show her amazing profile, she grinned at me. “Where’s the biffy?” I pointed to the bathroom door. Laughing, she closed it behind her.

- EIGHTEEN -

While my guest was in the bathroom, I put her wine and my beer into the refrigerator. As a precaution, I crossed some duct tape on the deck door. I decided we should be as far from the glass as possible, and dragged two chairs from the sitting room back near the bed. Then I lit a few candles.

“I assumed that the bucket of water in there was for flushing”, she said as she left the bathroom. She looked toward the dark empty sitting room, then at the bed and candles, then at me. “Well. Isn’t this cozy.”

“I thought we would be safer back here.”

She gave me a bemused look. “Uh-huh.” Sauntering over to the bed, ignoring the chairs, she propped two pillows against the suede headboard and reclined against them. “Will you call room service and order me a glass of chilled Chardonnay?”

I played along. “I’m sorry, Ma’am, the phones seem to be out; there’s a storm, you know. I’ll have to get it myself.” I took my flashlight and went to the ‘fridge.

She called out in a mock patrician Bostonian voice, “And some cheese and crackahs would be nice Deah, while you ah up.”

I decided then to fund a scientific study on how someone could eat as much as Sergeant Lynch did and still look like that. I put her wine and food and a beer for me on a tray and placed it on a bedside table.

“Will there be anything else, Ma’am?”

Still using the affected accent, “Not at present. Perhaps a massage later.” She patted the bed next to her. “You may sit and resume your tale.”

I picked up my beer, looked down at the reclining Babe, and decided it would be safer if I took a chair instead. “Where was I?”

“Something between Su Li and you changed.”

“Oh yeah. Do you know the phrase ‘In a New York minute’?” She nodded, yes. “That’s how fast everything changed in my life with her. One minute she was there, the next she was gone.” I thought back to one of the worst days of my life. “I was thirty-one and content with life. For a few weeks, my wife had been uncharacteristically quiet. She had not wanted to make love as much as usual, but had been hugging me more often, and she slept tightly against me all night. When I asked what was wrong, she said she was stressed out about her current project and wasn’t feeling well. She went to her doctor, whom, she told me, prescribed vitamins and rest. She arranged for another architect to finish the job. But all the vitamins and a reduced schedule didn’t seem to make her feel better. If she hadn’t seen a doctor that Taylor recommended, I would have been concerned. And had I remembered my mother’s early symptoms, I would have really been worried. But Taylor assured me the physician was competent, and I trusted that.”

“Then one evening I came home from work to an empty house. Su Li hadn’t told me she’d be late. I went upstairs to change clothes, and found a letter addressed to me, on our bed. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?”

“It said:

Dearest Conor,

*It tears my heart to do this, to do what I must do today.
I have loved every day with you, but now I have to leave.*

*I know there is no way I can explain or reason with you
that this is the right thing to do. Please believe me that it is.*

*I know this will hurt you - I hope only for a while. It
hurts me deeply also. I have given this long and careful thought,
this Leaving. I am sorry, this is the only thing I can do now.
Please do not blame yourself - you have been wonderful - the reasons
are mine alone.*

*I do not know if I will ever return. Go on with your life -
please do not wait for me. Find new happiness, Conor, find the
peace and happiness that I can no longer bring to you.*

*Please do not try to follow me. I go to my parent's home,
I will be safe. I go, so that we may both have our futures.*

*Even though I must let you go, I will always love you -
you are part of my soul.*

For ever and ever,

Su Li

That was all it said."

Kathleen got off the bed and came to my chair. She leaned over and hugged me tightly for nearly a minute. Then without a word, she returned to the bed. Brushing tears from both eyes, she looked at me with a shy smile, and said "I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me. I just had to do that."

I didn't know how to react. I went to the bath, brought back a box of Kleenex and handed it to her. Standing beside her as she dabbed her eyes and blew her nose, I touched her hair and said "I'm alright Kathleen. It was long ago. But thank you, that felt good." Looking at her then, I knew that her ex-husband had never known how special she was.

"I don't know how you can smile so much after all you've been through", she said.

"Oh, I've had my moments of self-pity. I feel like I have always just stayed in one place and life has happened all around me. Somehow, when the dust settles I'm alone but mostly okay. I've found the happiness Su Li wanted for me. Maybe soon I'll find the peace." I thought my tale might have touched a nerve in Kathleen's life, so I said "We should play cards or something to pass the time. I think this story is too maudlin for you."

"Don't even think of stopping now."

"Alright." I got myself a cold beer, re-filled her wine glass, then sat back in my chair with my feet up on the end of the bed. I let my thoughts go back to that night again. "I read that letter over and over, all night. That's why I can quote it from memory. In the morning, I called Missy and went to see her."

" 'Have you talked to Susie in the past two days?', I asked. Everyone we knew had taken up the Taylor's daughter's way of calling my wife "Susie". "

"Missy knew I was there because something was wrong. 'No, why?' "

"I handed her the letter. She read it quickly, then again more carefully. "This doesn't make sense, Mac. Why would she leave?' "

” ‘I don’t know. I thought she might have told you.’ “

” ‘Well she hasn’t been herself, but she didn’t say anything to me. Have you two been fighting?’ “

” ‘Missy, this may be hard to believe, but we have never had one argument in five years.’ “

” ‘I believe it. You two have never stopped being newly-weds. All the other couples envy you.’ She poured me a cup of coffee. ‘Have you told my husband yet?’ “

” ‘I came right here. You’re her best friend, I thought you might know what she’s up to.’ “

” ‘What are you going to do?’ “

” ‘I’m going to go get her back.’ “

”I went home and called Jim, told him I had a family emergency and needed to take a few days off.”

” ‘Is it your dad?’, he asked. “

” ‘No, he’s fine.’ “

“ ‘Are you okay?’ ”

“ ‘I guess so.’ “

” ‘Is Susie alright?’ “

”I didn’t answer.”

“ ‘Okay, Son, you take all the time you need. Call me if there’s anything I can do.’ “

”I hung up, threw some things in a gym bag, then went out and headed the Porsche to San Francisco.”

"I got to the city in late afternoon, just before rush hour. It took me another hour to find a safe long-term parking place for the car. Figuring that Su Li's parents would live in Chinatown, I checked into a cheap hotel near Union Square. As soon as I got into the room, I pulled the phone book from the nightstand drawer. There were seventeen pages of Chins in downtown San Francisco. I had no idea what her father's first name was. So that plan was spoiled. I dialed Eddie Yee's home number, and got an answering machine. Reaching him at police headquarters, I said I was in town and would be right over to see him."

"On Market Street, I caught a cab and rode the few blocks to the Justice Building. Eddie was now on the third floor, working a special detail assigned to gang violence, and he had changed his appearance to fit the part. He wore blue jeans, a faded black tee shirt, well-worn running shoes, and a big watch on a wide leather wrist band. A red and white leather racing-motorcycle jacket hung on the back of his chair. His black hair was very long and slicked back, and he had about a three day stubble of beard. A forty-five Baretta was conspicuous in a shoulder holster."

" 'I wouldn't have recognized you', I said as we shook hands."

" 'That's the whole idea. I have to look like this to get respect from the gang-bangers. And nobody - *nobody* - can know I'm gay, I'd get killed. I'm not crazy about this look, but I have to tell you it gets me more dates than my old persona', he laughed. 'You, on the other hand, look like hell. Sit, and tell me what's going on.' "

"I took my wife's letter from my coat pocket and slid it across the desk. 'This', I said. 'Last night'."

"Ed pushed it toward him with a pen, by the paper's edge, careful in case it might be evidence. 'Is this Su Li's handwriting?', he asked as he glanced at it. When I nodded

yes, he picked it up and studied it. Finished, he pushed it back to me. 'Okay Romeo, who's the girl? Is Jenny back in town?' "

" 'What girl?' "

" 'The one your wife found out about.' "

" 'Eddie, I swear, there is no girl. And Jenny's in Australia, not that it would make any difference. I don't want anyone but Su Li. I'm not the kind of guy who cheats, either.' "

" 'Then, what is this all about?' "

" 'I haven't a clue. I thought she was really happy. I showed this to Missy this morning, Su Li hasn't said anything to her.' "

" 'Ed crossed his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. 'Every time I wonder if it would be easier to be straight, I think about something like this and realize that women are so complicated they will drive a man nuts. So what are you going to do?' "

" 'Talk to her. Find out what's bothering her. Fix it and bring her home.' "

" 'If you are here for advice, I think your plan is a good one. Go do it.' "

" 'I don't know how to find her. You know she's kept me and her parents apart, I don't know where they live. There are seventeen pages of Chins in the phone book. Can you help me?' "

" 'No, I can't. That would be against department policy.' He was nodding his head "yes" all the while. 'Where are you staying?' "

"I pulled the hotel key out and read the address."

" 'Are you broke, or just naive?', Eddie grinned."

" 'Far from broke. I thought I should be close to Chinatown.' "

" 'Right church, wrong pew. If I recall, the father is rich. They will be in the city, but not in Chinatown.' He stood and put on his jacket. 'C'mon, let's go to Tadich's, you can buy me a good steak and salad, and we'll talk.' "

"Ed ate dinner. My steak went almost untouched, I had no appetite. Outside, as we waited for cabs, he told me to go to my hotel and get some sleep. He would find Su Li's parents and call me the next afternoon."

"I decided to walk to the hotel, it was just eight o'clock and I was restless. Having nothing better to do, I just kept on walking and walking, up and down the hilly sidewalks. Up Van Ness and across Sacramento, I found myself on Fillmore. I went up Fillmore and stopped on the corner across from the little restaurant owned by Celeste's aunt and uncle. Looking at the place, a rush of memories came over me, and I had to admit I felt a little pang of sorrow. I could have gone in and asked about her - but I was on a different mission now. I moved on, up the hill toward the building I had stayed in, then past it. I had never walked these streets, I had been in a wheelchair. As I started back to my hotel, I began to wonder what was wrong with me; I couldn't keep a woman in my life. Every one of them I had known, including my mother, had left me in one way or another. Now Su Li had left; apparently even marriage couldn't keep one around."

"Around eleven, I bought a six-pack at a convenience store, and went up to my room. In such a rush when I checked in, I hadn't noticed what a dive it was - Eddie was right. I didn't see any point in changing hotels because I

didn't expect to be in the city for long. So I opened the window and laid down on the bed and drank a beer. Hours later, I was awakened by sirens passing on the street two stories below. I heard parts of conversations and the noise of traffic from outside. Down the hall, someone yelled angrily and a door slammed. A woman moaned in the room next door. I thought, how can anyone live in a city, it's so crowded and noisy? Obviously millions disagreed with me, but I already missed the tranquility of our cliff-side home. I turned on the TV to drown out the lovers in the next room, took a beer and sat out on the fire escape in the chill of the foggy night, watching life go by. When dawn came, I showered then took a cab to the Grubstake Diner and had breakfast. Eddie had said he would call me at the hotel in the afternoon, so I had time to kill. I thought I might help my own cause, so I took another taxi to Chinatown. There on the streets, I showed Su Li's photo from my wallet, to Asian passers-by and shop owners. Most of them looked at me with suspicion. Some smiled and said she was very pretty. None gave me any information. One elderly shop lady asked me who the girl in the picture was. When I said it was my wife, she sternly said "Then why don't you know where she is?" I had no answer for her. On the walk back down to Union Square, I bought a Sports Illustrated and went back to my hotel to await Eddie's call. Finally at six, the phone rang."

" 'Just checking. Stay there, I'm on my way', Ed said."

"Ten minutes later, he knocked at my door. I had three beers left in the ice bucket. 'Want one?' I asked."

" 'Yes.' He looked around the dreary room. 'There is nowhere to sit', he said. 'Just a bed.' "

" 'It's not the Ritz. I've been sitting out on the veranda', I gestured toward the fire escape. 'Let's go out there.' "

“We went through the window, and sat side by side on a cold metal step. Ed said that his morning had been spent trying to settle a territorial dispute between two gangs, but that he had put the word out on the QT to some fellow Asian cops that he was looking for the parents of Su Li Chin or Su Li MacKenzie. That afternoon, with some information from them, and knowing her father was in the construction business, he found the address.”

“ ‘You didn’t make it any easier, a big white dude showing her picture around Chinatown. I should have known you wouldn’t stay out of it. Anyway, I was right, they’re not in Chinatown. They’re in the Russian Hill - Nob Hill neighborhood. A big four-story pale grey house near the top of Jones Street. About an hour ago, I went up there.’ I started to protest, and he held up a hand. “I know you wanted to go, but I knew since you’ve been asking questions, they would already have been warned. They might be hostile to you, but talk to another Chinese. Plus, Su Li knows me, she would talk to me.’ He stopped and took a long drink from his bottle.”

“ ‘And?’, I said anxiously.”

“He shook his head side to side. “There is no way to soften this, Mac. She got on a plane to Taiwan yesterday. I couldn’t get to the parents, though I know they were there. The housekeeper told me. I used my badge and verified it with Cathay-Pacific, her first-class ticket was on their passenger list.’ We both sat in silence for a moment. Eddie put an arm over my shoulder, ‘I’m sorry, Coner. For the second time. You’re a good man, you deserved better from both of them.’ “

”I sat there, numb, staring down at the street but not seeing it. Feeling guilty. What had I done to her, why couldn’t I see it?”

“ ‘Why don’t you come stay at my place for a few days?’, Ed said.

“ ‘No, tomorrow I’ll go home and try to figure out what my life will be now. I couldn’t even find her here, there’s no point in going to Taiwan. But thanks for the invitation, you’re a good friend.’ “

”Eddie insisted that I let him take me to dinner. I knew he didn’t want to leave me alone, and it would make him feel better. It wouldn’t help me at all, but he was a real friend, so I went with him to Fog City Diner and ate meatloaf. Then we went out drinking and I got so loaded I woke up in the hotel the next morning without knowing how I got there. My head throbbing with hangover, I lay there staring at the ceiling, trying to decide how I felt about my wife leaving me.”

“And what did you decide?”, Kathleen asked.

“Of course I felt a great sense of loss. I knew I loved her, but sometimes you don’t realize just how much until the person is gone. I was surprised that I also was angry with her. I was supposed to be her best friend and she left me without even speaking to me. I think there came a time when she wanted to tell me, but she didn’t make it back. All these years later, that still bothers me.”

“While I cleaned up, I decided I wanted to talk to her mother. I checked out of the hotel and walked all the way up to Jones Street, looking for their house. It wasn’t hard to find, it was the only pale grey four-story on the block. An imposing house even without considering the cost of real estate in San Francisco, it had an amazing view down past the TransAmerica building to the Bay bridge beyond. There were rows of mullioned floor length windows on each floor, the second and fourth stories with balconies, and I could see the shrubbery of a garden on the roof. At street-level on one side there was an iron gate, I supposed leading to a service entrance. I rang the bell, and the housekeeper came to the door. ‘I want to speak to Mrs. Chin’, I said.”

“ ‘Who, may I ask, is calling?’ “

” ‘I’m Su Li’s husband.’ “

”I saw a look of sympathy cross her face, quickly replaced with cold formality. ‘Mrs. Chin is not home’, she said, and she began to shut the door.”

“I shouldered the door open and stepped into the foyer. ‘Then you won’t mind if I look for her myself.’ Not waiting for an answer, I quickly climbed a grand formal staircase to the second floor. I heard someone move in the living room to my right, and went in.”

“ ‘My daughter is gone, Mister MacKenzie. You will not find her here.’ A very refined Asian lady in a grey silk suit sat on a sofa, facing me. It was easy to see where my wife got her looks, her mother was still a beautiful woman and at one time must have been as stunning as Su Li.”

“ ‘I just want to know what happened. Why did she leave, did you and your husband have something to do with it?’ “

”In a very calm manner, she replied ‘I am afraid I can not tell you why. The decision was hers alone.’ She stood and gestured regally toward the stairway. ‘Now I am afraid I must leave you; I am certain Marta has alerted the police. I believe you know the way out.’ She walked past me and ascended the stairs to the next floor, and out of sight.”

“I heard a commotion downstairs, and went down to find two uniformed officers waiting, with guns drawn. They cuffed my hands behind my back, and were leading me to their squad car, when a black Camaro convertible roared up the hill and stopped at the curb. Eddie Yee jumped out of the car.”

“He pulled off dark glasses, and spoke to the uniformed policemen. ‘Hey Guys, what’s going on?’ “

”The younger cop, holding me by the arm, said ‘Forced entry. Assault. Dude here just accosted the homeowner in her living room.’ “

”He looked at me and shook his head side to side. ‘Goddamn it Mac. What did you do?’ “

“ ‘I just asked Mrs. Chin a question. She couldn’t - or wouldn’t - answer. That’s all.’ “

” ‘Can I talk to you for a minute?’ he asked the cop who wasn’t holding me, who was the senior officer. They walked a few yards down the hill, and my captor and I watched as they had a very animated discussion. Finally the uniformed cop nodded yes, the two shook hands, and came back to us.”

“Ed pulled me away from the other two, and quietly told me ‘Okay, here’s what is going to happen: they are going to put you into their car, drive around the block, then turn you over to me. I explained about your wife - both these guys went through messy divorces, so they understand. Now I owe them a favor - a really big one - and we cops have long memories. And I will speak with the Chin’s, but if they choose to press charges, you gotta promise me you’ll come back to the City and turn yourself in.’ “

” ‘I will.’ “

” ‘Don’t make me come get you.’ He wasn’t kidding.”

“ ‘I promise.’ “

” ‘And you won’t come back to this house again. I’ll have to vouch for that to the Chin’s.’ “

” ‘Why would I?’ “

”He nodded to the younger cop standing by the car’s back door. The officer opened the door and did the head-duck thing with me, then closed it and we slowly drove up the hill. As we left, I saw Mrs. Chin watching from a fourth floor balcony window. At the hilltop they turned right and pulled to the curb, followed by Ed’s convertible. Motor still running, neither cop moved in the front seat. The driver spoke to me, looking in his rearview mirror. “That is a very good buddy you have there, Mister. We should be booking you.’ He turned to look at me ‘We don’t want to see you again.’ I nodded yes, and the other cop opened the door for me and took off the cuffs. He didn’t say a word, just got in their car and they drove off.”

“Eddie was standing next to his car. ‘Let’s go Mac.’ I got in and he floored it. ‘One nice perk of my new job’, he yelled over the sound of motor and squealing tires, ‘I get this car.’ I didn’t say anything, I was holding on for life. ‘I would call you an idiot for what you did back there, and bawl you out, but you already know you’re an idiot. I can’t yell at you knowing all you’ve been through since I met you. And even though what you did was stupid - you could have been shot, y’know - I have to say that in your place I would probably do the same thing.’ The car sped up and down hills, then turned south on Van Ness and mercifully slowed in traffic. ‘Now, where’s your car? I’ll deliver you to it, then you can get outa Dodge, and I can get back to work.’ “

”At the parking lot, I climbed out of his car, then leaned back in to thank him.”

“ ‘You would do the same for me’, he said. ‘I wish I could have helped. I wish you had found her. Call me to talk anytime.’ We shook hands and he drove off.”

“A day after I got home, I drove over to the pro-shop and told Jim what had happened, and asked for a month off. It meant he would have to hire a replacement, but he reluctantly agreed. He asked what I was going to do. I said I didn’t have a plan. He offered me some money, I said I was okay. After I left the shop, I went to the marina in Monterey and put the sailboat up for sale. Then I went home and phoned my father to tell him the news. After that I went surfing until nightfall. I couldn’t sleep that night - I felt too many memories in that house. Although I knew it would be difficult for me, I decided to stay there in case Su Li came back. I sulked and surfed and drank heavily for another week. None of that made me feel better, so I went back to the golf shop and asked Jim if I could come back three weeks early. Luckily, he hadn’t filled my job yet.”

“So that’s all I did. Teach golf and surf. And I’m not proud of it now, but I have to admit that during that time I had a lot of women. I decided that I would get even with my high school girlfriend and Celeste and Su Li, and I stopped being a nice guy. There were plenty of opportunities with guests at the resorts and tourists, and I didn’t even care if they were married.”

Kathleen said “Gee Mac, I can understand your anger, but that doesn’t sound like you at all.”

“Well that was me for a good while. About nine months after she left, I received a big envelope from a law firm in San Francisco. Su Li had filed for divorce. She didn’t ask for any settlement though she knew how much I was worth, and she gave me her share of our house. I thought about it for a few days, then took it to a notary, signed it, and sent it back. And just like that, I was single.”

I stopped for a moment to listen to the storm. “It doesn’t sound like it’s let up at all”, I said as I went for another beer and some pretzels.

“No it doesn’t”, Kathleen answered. “I never knew a hurricane could last for so long.”

“I think this is very unusual”, I said, pouring her another glass of wine. “I wish we could get some news. Can you imagine the destruction out there?”

“A lot of people are going to be homeless. I wonder if I am one of them...” she mused.

“There’s room here, if you need it until you find a place.”

She raised her glass to me. “Thank you kind Sir. On with your entertainment.”

I pulled the chair closer to her, so I wouldn’t need to talk loudly over the wind. “You probably know most of the rest, from your look at the police reports. Eleven months and three days after Su Li left, I was working in the golf shop when a Monterey police detective came in and identified himself. Lieutenant Gonzales asked if we could talk in private, so I led him back to the shop office. Jim was working at his desk, and after I introduced the detective, he asked if he should leave. I said I thought he should stay.”

“The cop sat across from my desk and began to ask me questions. ‘Mister Mackenzie, when did you last see your wife?’ “

” ‘Ex wife’, I corrected him. ‘Nearly a year ago.’ “

” ‘And where was that?’ “

” ‘At our house, down past Carmel’ “

” ‘Have you heard from her since that time?’ “

“ ‘Yeah. She sent me divorce papers two months ago. I signed them and sent them back to her attorney.’ “

” ‘And you claim you have had no other contact with her?’ “

”I didn’t bother to answer that one.”

“ ‘You haven’t seen her in the past few days?’ “

” ‘No.’ This was beginning to sound suspicious.”

“ ‘Did you see her or talk to her last night?’ “

” ‘I told you, no. Why all the questions?’ “

”He stood up. ‘I’m not at liberty to say right now.’ Starting out of the office, he turned and asked ‘Can you tell me where you were last night, around nine o’clock?’ “

”Jim had been listening intently. ‘He was here with me, taking inventory until well after midnight.’ “

”The Lieutenant nodded and gave me one of those “I know something you don’t” smiles. ‘I’ll be in touch.’ And he left.”

“ ‘What the Hell was that about?’ Jim rarely swore.”

“ ‘I don’t know. Maybe she robbed a bank’, I joked.”

“Jim picked up his phone. ‘My wife has a friend who is a dispatcher over at the police department.’ He dialed and asked for Marge. ‘Marge, Jim Philips, how are you? Oh, she owes you a recipe? I’ll remind her tonight. Listen, we just had a visitor from your place, a Lieutenant Gonzalez. Oh he is, is he? “Prick” is the polite description? Well he asked my friend a lot of questions about his ex-wife and last night, but wouldn’t say why. Yes, MacKenzie, that’s right.’ Jim turned pale as a ghost. Very quietly, he said ‘Thank you Marge’,

then slowly put down the phone. He looked over at me. 'Conor...' he said, then paused."

" 'What?' "

" 'She said it's been on the news; there was no reason that cop couldn't tell you.' He took a deep breath, composing himself, then walked over and sat on the corner of my desk. 'This morning they found a white Mercedes in the ocean, at the bottom of a cliff just north of Monterey. It was registered to Su Li MacKenzie.' He placed a hand on my shoulder. 'Su Li was in the car. I'm sorry Scotty, she's gone.'"

"For a few minutes, I just stared into space."

"Jim broke the silence. 'Are you alright, Son?' "

"I reached into my desk drawer and got my car keys. 'I have to go, Jim. I'll see you tomorrow.' "

" 'Take some time off', he said. 'Go see your dad.' "

" 'No, that's okay. I'll see you in the morning.' I went out and got into the Porsche, then sat with the motor running, immobilized with shock and grief. I had never given up hope that she would come back one day. I never got to say goodbye. Now I would never know why she left."

"Sitting there in the car, I began to wonder what she had been doing on the road last night. Then it dawned on me: she was coming home. When I left the office, I had intended to go home and get drunk. Instead I put the car in gear and drove north on the two lane coast highway. I needed to be at the place where she left the road. At least at the end, I would meet her halfway."

"A few miles out of Monterey at a very sharp curve in the road, the state had plowed an earthen barrier to the

cliff's edge, and made a small dirt parking area for sightseers. They did this in places on the coast to prevent accidents, by giving people distracted by the scenery a place to stop and look. This one was distinguished by a bunch of orange wooden sawhorses placed to block a big opening in the bank of dirt. There was some broken glass and a lot of tow-truck tire prints in the lot. I parked a few yards away and walked to the gap. Dirt and stones from the berm had been pushed over and strewn down the cliff. On the hillside, I could see by new scuffs in the rocks and the smashed vegetation, that crews had pulled a car from the sea below. Waves broke angrily on the boulders at the bottom, leaving no sign that anything had happened. There was nothing to tell that someone had died there the night before. Nothing but the barricades and broken glass. Su Li must have been going tremendously fast, to have her car smash through a three-foot high wall of dirt and stone. That wasn't like her, she never drove fast...which I supposed was how she had lost control. It was so out of character that it made me wonder, had her brakes failed? The poor girl must have been so frightened those last few seconds...I felt it and wanted to hold her and tell her it would be alright - but I couldn't. I sat on the berm choking back tears, thinking about us: how we had met, how happy we had been. And somehow, though her drive and her life had been cut short, I knew for sure that she had been coming home to me."

This last part had been difficult for me to say, and my voice must have dropped to a whisper; Kathleen had leaned very close to hear me.

She spoke softly: "She knew you still loved her. And you know she was coming back to you. That's so much better than never knowing, Mac. At least you do have that."

I nodded yes to her. Clearing my throat, I began again. "As I sat there on the dirt wall, a black Ford sedan left the road and parked, blocking my car. Lieutenant Gonzales got out and walked toward me."

“ ‘Was she a reckless driver, Mister MacKenzie?’ he asked as he stopped next to me and looked over the cliff.”

“ ‘No. I used to kid her about being a slow poke. She was always very careful.’ I looked down the deserted road he had come from. ‘Just passing by, Lieutenant?’ “

”He shook his head, no. ‘I was following you. Figured you’d come here. Been watching you from the lookout down the way.’ “

”I turned to face him. ‘Why were you following me?’ ”

“ ‘I never told you what had happened, yet here you are’, he said. ‘I think you know something about this “accident”. Maybe you were even here. Maybe you came back here now to see if you missed anything last night.’ “

”I wasn’t a farm kid from Ohio anymore, I was a grown man. I knew exactly what the cop was implying, and I didn’t like it one bit. ‘I have one thing to say to you, Gonzales’, I stood over him, right in his face.”

“ ‘What’s that?’ he barked.”

“ ‘Get your fucking car outa my way, or I’ll do it for you’, I said through clenched teeth.”

“Beads of sweat broke out on his face. Trying not to let me see that I had intimidated him, he drew himself up to his full five-foot-six height, thus sticking his big gut even farther out, and said ‘We’ll talk again. You’ll slip up, I’m sure.’ He turned and strode to his car and took off fast, leaving me in dust.”

“I slumped back down on the earthen barrier. Not even yet used to the fact of Su Li’s death, now I also had to deal with this fat cop accusing me of having something to do with it. It appeared I would have no time to grieve.”

“Picking up a round stone and placing it on the dirt wall, I spoke as if she could hear me: ‘I was still waiting for you, Baby. If only you would have called me first, I could have said hello instead of goodbye.’ I looked down the cliff again, at the waves smashing on the rocks, then got into my car and slowly drove home.”

“The next morning I told Jim about my confrontation with Gonzales. He thought I should call my lawyer, just for protection. I phoned Jeff Miller and filled him in. He expressed shock and sympathy, then instructed me not to speak to any cops without his presence, and said he would call the police chief and tell him I had an airtight alibi and get his Lieutenant off my back. That only made Gonzales dislike me even more. He didn’t try to talk to me, but I kept seeing his car conspicuously following mine. Wherever I went, when I left he was parked across the street, watching me. Then they called Jeff and asked him to bring me to the station, where two other detectives asked me the same questions Gonzales had. We surmised he watched through the mirrored window. I gave the same answers I had given him, and we left. The next day, they had Jim come over, and Jeff also accompanied him. They grilled him about every moment of the night of Su Li’s death. Apparently, they thought he was lying. But when Jeff provided a list of other people who had seen us in the shop at all hours that night - including a copy of the gate guard’s log which showed I left at two A.M. - they had no choice but to drop the investigation.”

“Right after her accident, I tried to find out about Su Li’s funeral. Her parents telephone number was unlisted, so I asked Eddie to contact them for me. They wouldn’t speak with him. He tried calling all the funeral parlors in the city; she wasn’t there. He called the Monterey morgue; they told him her body had been sent to the San Francisco morgue. The San Francisco Medical Examiner’s records showed that she had been picked up by a Chinese undertaker; Eddie found out the name was a fake. His contacts in Chinatown wouldn’t help. We figured all this

secrecy was to keep me away. It worked; I wasn't able to attend her funeral, and to this day, I don't know where she is buried."

"All my friends were sympathetic, and everyone who knew Su Li well agreed it was a strange accident for such a slow driver. I tried to see her car, but the Monterey police denied me access to it. They told me that since I was her ex-husband, I was not a relative and had no legal right to see it. I found out where their car impound lot was, but by the time I got there and bribed the guards, the car was gone; they didn't know to where. It was the same story when I asked to see the accident report. Finally, Jeff Miller filed a "freedom of information" suit, and the cops sent him a copy of her file, less the autopsy report. I didn't really want to read the autopsy anyway, so we let that go. Noticeably, Gonzales had not signed off on the report. The report said that nothing had been found wrong with her car, and concluded that the accident had been caused by excessive speed and driver error. I was surprised to read that she hadn't been wearing her seatbelt. Not because I thought it would have saved her life, but because she never started a car without first fastening her belt. I noted that her personal effects and contents of her car had been mailed to her parents, and glanced at the list, but it wasn't until now that I realized her rings weren't on it. I'm betting that someone took them off her body. I also called the police and asked for the name of the tow-truck company that had retrieved the Mercedes. They claimed they didn't keep a record of that. That was bull, so I called all the local tow services. Not one said they had been there. I think Gonzales told them to keep quiet."

"One evening about a month later, I left a tavern in Carmel after dinner, and the fat detective was waiting on the sidewalk. He stepped in front of me. 'MacKenzie, off the record as one civilian to another: I don't like you. I think you had something to do with her car going off the road. Maybe you weren't there, but I think you were involved somehow. Officially, it's now been ruled an

accident. Unofficially, I think you're dirty as hell. I just want you to know that I know.' "

"I was enraged. *'What do you do, Gonzales, watch "Colombo" reruns all night? I loved that girl, and it pisses me off that you would try to make anyone believe otherwise. If I ever hear anyone repeat what you just said, you're gonna be up to your double-chins in lawyers. Then I'll kick your ass so bad you'll wish you had died, and you're so unpopular around here people will line up to swear you hit me first.'* The cop was shaking and I think he wet his pants. He was desperately looking around us, but there were no witnesses. *'Now get out of my way, you little fat Fuck!'* I waited for him to move. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. Then he stepped aside, and I went to my car and left. I was so agitated, at home I stood on the cliff and threw rocks into the Pacific as hard as I could until I had exhausted my anger. I was already angry that Su Li had died, and Gonzales accusation infuriated me. We were both lucky; had I lost control, I probably would have killed him."

I had not been looking at Kathleen while I described that confrontation... I was back there with Gonzales. When I stopped, and I looked at her, she was sitting straight upright on the bed, staring at me with a shocked expression. Suddenly I realized that I was standing, all tensed up, fists tightly balled at my sides. I opened my hands. "I'm sorry, Kathleen, did I frighten you?"

"You didn't frighten me, you worry me. Mac, you obviously have a lot of pent up emotions about your ex-wife's death. I think you should get some help."

"I'm going to take care of it. When this storm is over, I'm going to deal with it all."

"I don't think you are in the right state of mind to deal with anything involving Su Li", she interrupted. "I'm afraid you might do something you will regret."

“I’ll be fine. The only person I’m angry with now is myself.”

She gave me a dubious look. We both relaxed again, and I refilled her wine glass.

“There’s more”, I said as I went back to my chair. “A couple of days after I ran into Gonzales, I was alone in the golf shop. Jim had gone somewhere else in the clubhouse, leaving me to close up. It was twilight, and I had turned off nearly all the lights; the shop was dark except for the dim glow from the table lamps in two corners at the front windows, and the small desk lamp where I was working behind the counter at the back. The only sound was the low murmur of the nearby surf.”

“I was busy sorting the day’s orders, when I suddenly became aware that I was not alone. I looked up from the counter, and was startled to see a man standing on the other side. I had not heard anyone enter the shop. He was tall and slim, but powerfully built, about six-foot-four and two-twenty-five, I guessed. Linebacker size. His black hair was worn in a military crew-cut. He was very light complected, with pale grey eyes that were devoid of any expression. Under his open black trench coat, he wore a double breasted black suit, a white dress shirt, and steel-grey silk tie; all obviously custom tailored to his powerful shape. His shoes were black cap-toes made of the kind of leather too soft to have a high shine, their laces tied perfectly symmetrically. Oddly, he was also wearing black leather driving gloves.”

“The man looked around the shop, taking everything in as if committing it to memory. He made no sound, and it seemed as if his movements were in slow motion. Yet that was an illusion, created because his every motion was deliberate and without waste. An envelope of quiet surrounded him, it made you want to speak in hushed tones...or not at all.”

“He was so obviously out of place that I knew he wasn’t here to purchase golf equipment. ‘Is there something I can do for you?’, I asked quietly. Maybe he had gotten lost and needed directions out of the Pebble Beach property compound.”

“‘No, I don’t think there would be anything you could do for me’, he replied. There was even less emotion in his voice than in his eyes. ‘You are Conor MacKenzie? And you work here?’ “

” ‘Yes, I’m MacKenzie, and yes I work here. And what do you do?’, I asked.”

“ ‘You mean professionally?’ “

” ‘Okay, *professionally*’, I answered. This character made me uncomfortable. I wanted to get this conversation over with and send him on his way.”

“ ‘Personal Cancellations’, he said, slowly and deliberately enunciating each syllable.”

“I looked at him more closely, then. Inside the well-dressed exterior was a disquieting cold seriousness I had never seen in any human before. His eyes looked at me dispassionately, but with singular purpose. Like a tiger observing the prey it had selected from a herd - he had no interest in me except as the means for his next meal.”

“ ‘Do you ever laugh?’, I asked. I really wondered if he ever had.”

“ ‘I haven’t experienced anything humorous.’ His gaze never left my face, but I knew he was well aware of everything around him.”

“ ‘What does it mean?’ “

” ‘Nothing humorous?’ “

“No. “*Personal cancellations*” ‘, I said, mimicking his pronunciation.”

“He paused before answering. My mimicry had not amused him. Neither of us had moved. Outside the windows, the moonless night was now completely dark. It was so quiet in the shop I could hear the ticking of the clock in Jim’s office a room away.”

“ ‘Whatever my client wishes it to mean.’ “

”Now it was my turn to pause. I looked straight back into his dead grey eyes. Very carefully, and very quietly, I asked: ‘And do you have a “*client*”, now?’ “

” ‘Your ex-wife is dead. You probably cared for her, but she left you. So her death was none of your business. My client wishes me to make sure that you let her rest in peace. And that is what I will do.’ He paused, making sure I had understood. ‘Let it go, Friend... you can’t bring her back.’ “

”Just then, the phone in the back office rang loudly. Startled by the shattering of the quiet, out of habit I turned to walk back and answer it. Almost immediately, I turned back to the stranger. He was gone.”

“I stood behind the counter, contemplating what he had said: threat and advice interwoven.”

“ ‘Were you talking to someone?’ I hadn’t noticed Jim had come in from the repair room behind me.”

“I nearly jumped out of my skin. ‘Jesus, don’t sneak up on me like that !’ “

” ‘Sorry. Was someone here? I thought I heard you talking.’ “

” ‘No, I guess I must have been talking to myself. No one was here.’ “

Kathleen had moved to the edge of the bed, and leaned forward in rapt attention as I described my golf shop visitor. When I finished, she said: “That was a professional assassin, Mac, not just a hired thug. I have been on the force for ten years, and I’ve heard of them, but I have never even seen a photo of one. No one has. They are never seen, they’re like shadows. I would wager that you are the only target to ever meet the man, and live to tell about it. Did you tell Eddie?”

“No, you’re the only one who knows any of this. What could Eddie have done about it? Nothing. I thought about what the guy had said. He had a point: What good was I doing? Getting everyone all riled up wouldn’t bring her back. It wasn’t that he scared me - I don’t care if I die, so I don’t fear it - what he did was make me recognize I wanted to give up.”

“I was bored with my life in California. It had become monotonous, and everything there reminded me of Su Li. So I gave Jim two weeks notice. I put our house up for sale, and gave the couple in the Carmel cottage a long-term lease. At the end of the two weeks, I packed some clothes in a duffel bag, then drove over to the Taylor’s house, and asked him to give me a lift to San Francisco airport.”

“ ‘Sure, but why don’t you drive yourself?’, he asked.”

“ ‘Because I’m not coming back.’ “

” ‘Where are you going?’ “

” ‘I’m going to go see my dad. After that, I don’t know.’ “

“I had him drive us in my Porsche. He loved that car, but he and Missy were too conservative to spend money on something like that. When we got to the terminal, we both got out of the car, and hugged each other.”

“ ‘Mac, you know how badly I feel about the way things have gone for you’, he said. ‘Missy and Faith and I, we feel like you’re part of our family. When you feel better, we want you to come back.’ “

” ‘I’ll miss you three, Taylor. But I think I need to find a new place to start over. One without memories.’ “

” ‘I understand’. We shook hands. ‘I’ll take care of the Porsche for you until you send for it.’ “

”I handed him the keys. ‘The car is yours. The new pink slip is in the glove box. It’s a handful; don’t make Missy a young widow, she’d never forgive me.’ “

”I clapped him on the shoulder and started into the terminal. When I got to the door, I turned to see him staring at the keys. ‘Hey Taylor !’, I yelled. He looked up. ‘Thanks for making me get outa that wheelchair !’ “

He smiled and waved, and I walked into the airport. I was thirty-two. The man that went to Ohio that day was very different from the boy who had come to California ten years before.”

- NINETEEN -

“**M**y father met me at the Cleveland airport. I hadn’t seen him for a year, and he had lost a lot of weight. We started to shake hands, then he grabbed me and we hugged.”

“ ‘Welcome home, Scotty, I’m really glad to see you.’ He looked at my duffle bag. ‘Let’s go get your baggage.’ “

” ‘This is it, Dad. I gave everything else away.’ “

”He nodded. ‘Memories. I’ve been there myself.’ “

”I was relieved I wasn’t going to have to explain. That was my father, he always knew the right thing. Driving home, I looked at him closely. He had aged too much for one year, and he was gaunt. ‘Looks like you’ve missed my cooking, Dad. Don’t they sell hot dogs in Ohio anymore?’“

” ‘Sure they do. I guess I’ve been working too hard lately. I’m eating the same, but I can’t keep the weight on.’ He smiled at me, ‘I should look good to you; like all those skinny California people.’ “

” ‘Well, let’s go to the diner, I’m hungry for some good meatloaf.’ “

”I stayed with my father for a month. I knew his hopes were that I would feel I was home again, go to work for him, and eventually take over as club pro. But after two weeks, I was stir crazy. That world was just too small for me. Two weeks later, I told him I had to leave.”

“ ‘Where are you going?’ “

“I gave him the same answer I had given Taylor. ‘I don’t know. I’m just going to see the country; find out if I fit anyplace. Dad, I’m sorry, but this is your life, not mine. I hope you understand.’ “

”I was surprised by his reaction. A very sad look came over his face; he slumped a little in his easy chair. ‘I understand, Scot. I had hoped you would stay on, but I understand. He sighed deeply, and looked down at his folded hands. ‘It’s just...well...I get pretty lonely sometimes. I’ve never been able to replace your mom.’ “

”He had never told me this before. I thought he had girlfriends. Now I felt guilty. I had sent him tickets and brought him to Carmel each year at Christmas time. But I had never been back home since I left for California. ‘I’ll come visit you often, no matter where I am. I promise, Dad.’“

”For the next twenty months, I wandered from place to place. I worked as a logger in Oregon, on a fishing boat out of Seattle, mended fences in Texas, worked at a dude ranch in Montana, skied in Colorado and Utah, did carpentry around D.C., cooked lobsters in Maine, waited tables in New York City, was a lifeguard on a beach in Delaware. I made a point to go see my father at least once a month. Although he was only fifty-seven, every time I saw him, he had aged a little more. He put up a cheerful front, but I could tell he wasn’t feeling well. He was too thin, and had stopped playing golf. When he quit coaching football, I knew something was seriously wrong. That’s when I stopped traveling and moved in with him. I discovered that he was getting short of breath, and was having dizzy spells, so I took him to a doctor. He had been avoiding doctors because he thought he had what killed my mother. He didn’t. They found that his heart was failing. The doctors couldn’t find any reason for that, until tests revealed that at some time in the

previous few years, he had contracted a virus which attacked his heart. The virus was long gone, but it had done irreparable damage. Dad's heart was slowly dying. He was put on a transplant waiting list; unfortunately no donor turned up in time. I sat with him every day as he spent the last month of his life in a hospital. Then one morning, he simply didn't wake up." I stopped talking, remembering his last days and all the desperate calls I made trying to find him a heart. "We had enjoyed reminiscing; it was like he was making sure I would remember everything, so I could tell my children someday. Dad and I had always been so close, I was glad I had spent those last four months with him."

"I am so sorry, Conor", Kathleen said. "He was too young."

"Yes, he was. I minded that more than he did. He said it was okay, he had done everything he wanted to do - except see me give him grandchildren. Dad was so proud of me, but I told him that if he had not been so smart and bought that insurance policy, I would probably be a crippled bum. He laughed, and said I was a bum - but a wealthy one with two good legs." Kathleen and I both laughed at his joke.

"What did you do with the farm?", she asked.

"Oh, I still own that house and twelve acres. I rent it to a young couple. The country club wanted to buy it, but I could never sell. My grandfather would probably haunt me.", I smiled. "I like owning property, it makes me feel I'm a part of something."

"So you have the farm, and what else?"

"Not that much. That place, the cottage in Carmel, this property we're trapped in, the building the cars are in, another one for furniture, and some investments in California."

“Not that much”, Kathleen said sarcastically.

“Kathleen, I would trade everything for one living relative. Your big family is worth ten times my properties.” I rose from the chair and stretched. “I’m hungry. Let’s go check around the house, then get some sandwiches.”

“Yes, let’s. I’m starved. But, can we bring the food down here? I feel a lot safer in this room.”

I picked up a flashlight. “Sure. Then maybe we should get some sleep.” She lit her flashlight and followed me up the stairs.

- TWENTY -

Up in the livingroom, Kathleen and I could tell that Hurricane Dorothy had not weakened. The dented steel storm curtain continued banging against the glass door it protected. The glass was still intact, but upon closer inspection we could see that it had cracked. Our duct tape was doing a good job of holding it together. There was a trickle of water on the floor; I hoped not enough to damage the wood parquet. Everything else looked fine, but the howling wind was much louder than in my rooms one floor below.

“We’re still safe.” As we entered the kitchen, Kathleen spoke loudly to be heard over the storm. “This is one helluva strong house.”

I yelled back, “Yeah, apparently it is. When we get back downstairs, I’ll tell you how I came by it. What are you serving for dinner?”

She was rummaging through the pantry, then the refrigerator. “Well, we have cold hot dogs”, she made a face. “Or we have peanut butter, bread, and I think I saw some grape jelly in the fridge. There are some root beers. That’s about it.”

I had no idea I owned peanut butter and jelly. Thankfully, April had stocked a little of everything...but she certainly never ate anything as fattening as peanuts. “Then I guess it’s PB and J’s, just like kids again.”

She brought everything to the counter and began making sandwiches. “What do you mean, ‘kids *again*’, Old Timer?”, she teased, “Some of us are still young. I eat this stuff all the time.”

“ ‘Old Timer’, huh? I can still do two times more of anything than you, Miss Detective Sergeant.”

Very thick layers of peanut butter and jelly were being applied to the bread. “Be careful what you say, Mister Quarterback.” With her Boston accent, it sounded like ‘Kahtabaak’ “Sometime soon you may have to back up that claim.” She gave me a sly grin and a tray of fat sandwiches. “I have the root beer, let’s get out of this noise.”

Flashlight in one hand, two bottles in the other, she led the way. Hands full, I put my flashlight on the tray, aimed it at her, and followed. “Damn”, I thought, “this girl should wear nothing but tight short shorts”. As we went down the stairs and turned to my room, I continued that thought: “Or just the *nothing...*” I decided I’d better start thinking about baseball, or cars, or anything but Miz Lynch’s physique.

We put the drinks and sandwich tray on a bedside table. Kathleen plopped back in her spot on the bed, and I moved a chair in close to the food. Those long tan legs were crossed seductively right in front of me as I took a sandwich and a root beer. Concentrating on the food wasn’t distracting me enough, so I began storytelling again.

“I laid Dad to rest next to my mother. Then I began cleaning out the house. It was touching to find that my father had kept a lot of mementos of my mother through all those years. I packed up things I wanted to keep, and donated everything else to their church. I was there for a month after the funeral, and people were constantly dropping by the house. My father was immensely popular. Some of the

people even knew the story of his passing up the British Open the day I was born. It was comforting to know that, although his life was short, it was filled with people who cared about him.”

“When I finished with the house and turned down the county club’s offer to buy it, I looked for someone to rent the place to. Some friends of my father had told me their son had just been laid-off from the Lordstown auto factory. I gave the young guy a call and asked him to drop by. He showed up with his wife and three-year-old boy. The couple were in their early twenties, and a little down on their luck. We sat on the porch and drank lemonade, and watched the boy chase the ducks in the yard. The wife gave me a hand-made sympathy card, apologizing that she made it herself because they were on a tight budget. They were good people, I liked them, and they needed a break. When I mentioned that I was going to rent the farm instead of selling, I saw wistful looks on their faces.”

“ ‘Where are you living now, Charlie?’ , I asked.”

“ ‘We have an apartment near the car plant. But since I got laid-off, we don’t need to live near there no more. And Melissa is expecting, so the place will soon be too small. When I find work, we’ll probably move.’ “

” ‘What kind of work do you do?’ “

” ‘Well, that depends...’ “

”The wife interrupted, ‘Charlie can do anything, Mister MacKenzie. He’s a real good worker.’ “

” ‘If you don’t mind my asking, what’s the rent on your apartment?’ “

”She spoke for them again. ‘It’s five-hundred a month, plus utilities.’ “

“ ‘What a coincidence,’ I said. ‘That’s just what I was going to ask for this place, if I can find a couple that will take good care of it for me.’ “

”Charlie shook his head side to side, ‘Gee, if only I had a job, I’d like to ask you if we could have it. We’d take care of it like it was our own.’ “

”I sat back and put my feet up on the porch rail. ‘I happened to hear that the maintenance man over there at the country club needs an assistant. Why don’t you see about that tomorrow afternoon, then come back and we’ll talk about the farm?’ “

”Melissa got up and filled my glass. Very politely, she said ‘Would you mind taking your feet off that rail, Mister MacKenzie? You might scuff the paint.’ She smiled sweetly. Our deal was sealed.”

“I figured Charlie might not wait until afternoon, so I phoned the club’s president, and made arrangements to meet him there early the next morning. I knew that they wanted seventy-five yards of land, to move some tees farther back. There was only one place for them to get it. When I left there, they had their little piece of land, and though he didn’t know it yet, Charlie had a job.”

Kathleen smiled at me, “That was very nice of you, Mister MacKenzie.”

“I think my father would appreciate me keeping our farm and my grandfather’s golf course tied together in some way.”

“I’m sure he does.”

“In the eight years since, I’ve never raised the rent. I don’t need the money, and they care for the place well. There’s a little girl there now, named Mackenzie.”

“How sweet !”

“I still didn’t know where I belonged, but I was ready to leave Ohio, so I threw my things in Dad’s pickup, and just drove. The only place I hadn’t been was down south, so when I got to the ocean I drove all the way down the coast. Months later, I found myself here.”

Kathleen leaned forward to pick up her root beer. That T-shirt really was too small for her. She sat back against the pillows again, languidly crossing her legs. I got caught staring. “Am I bothering you?”, she asked, head tilted and eyebrows raised.

“No. I... ah... I was just wondering if we have enough food. If there’s any root beer left.” I thought I had covered myself brilliantly.

“Yes, there is more food and root beer. But it isn’t in my shirt”, she grinned at me. “So why did you pick Boca Raton?”

Apparently, I wasn’t as brilliant as I’d thought. I regrouped. “I had driven down the coast from Delaware, either beside the ocean or the Intracoastal Waterway. One morning, I came upon the park up the road from here. I left my truck there and walked south on the beach. I must have walked three or four miles, and on the way back to the park, I stopped to rest on some steps that climbed over the dune. These steps.” I gestured toward the ocean side of my house. “As I sat there looking at the warm turquoise water, I realized that I had run out of country, and still had not found home. I was so absorbed in that thought, that I didn’t notice a white-haired lady in a big floppy sun hat, walk right up to me.”

“ ‘It is a beautiful view, isn’t it, Young Man?’ “

” ‘Oh, sorry Ma’am. I didn’t notice you.’ “

“ ‘Yes, the sea will do that to you.’ She patted my arm, ‘Don’t let me disturb you.’ I realized that she wanted to go up the steps, so I stood and moved aside. The first step was pretty high off the sand, and she was having some trouble getting started. ‘This step keeps getting higher, and I keep getting older’, she said with good nature. ‘It is an unfortunate combination.’ “

”I stepped behind her. ‘May I help you?’ She held out a hand, but instead I picked her up at her waist and set her down on the second step.”

“ ‘My, that is convenient. That’s what I need: an elevator on the shore.’ She began climbing the rest of the steps. ‘Thank you, Young Man’, she called over her shoulder, ‘You may sit there as long as you like. Have a nice day.’ At the top of the stairs, she disappeared beneath the sea-grape trees that had overgrown the walk.”

“I watched her go, wondering where that walkway through the jungle on the dune led, thinking it funny that she gave me permission to sit on a public beach. Looking to the sea, I thought I should get back to my truck and find some breakfast.”

“ ‘Oh Young Man!’ The old lady had reappeared at the top of the steps, one hand shading her eyes from the sun.”

“ ‘Yes Ma’am?’ “

” ‘You look a bit parched. Would you help me a bit more, in exchange for a cool drink?’ “

”That was the first time I had heard someone say ‘parched’ outside of a western movie. I started up the steps, ‘I’d be glad to help you, a reward isn’t necessary.’ I caught up with her, and followed as she walked through the trees again. I was surprised to see that the walk didn’t lead to

steps down the other side of the dune, it led directly to the deck of a house. *This* house. I could only see the part of the deck directly connected to the walkway, the house was surrounded and overgrown by jungle.”

“Reaching the deck, she stopped and said ‘A large palm bough has fallen across my driveway, and I can’t move it myself. Would you mind?’ Not waiting for an answer, she walked across the deck, pushing overhanging branches out of her way. I followed her to the stairway - the one you and I used yesterday - and down to the driveway. Or, should I say, what was left of a driveway. It was nearly gone, the encroaching foliage left a path barely wide enough for a car.”

“As we walked down the hill, I asked ‘Do you live here, Ma’am?’ “

”She stopped. ‘Oh dear, I have forgotten my manners’, and held out her hand. ‘My name is Mrs. Franke, and yes, this whole darn forest is mine.’ She had an accent that I couldn’t quite place.”

“I shook her small soft hand. ‘I’m Conor MacKenzie. Very pleased to meet you.’ We came to the obstacle in the driveway. It was an entire small palm tree. I picked it up and laid it at the edge of the moss-covered pavement. ‘Anything else, while I’m here?’ “

”She surprised me with her hearty laugh. ‘Conor, that list is so long it would scare Hercules. You have freed my automobile, let us go have our refreshment.’ Surprisingly spry for an old woman, she led me quickly back to her house. Walking up the driveway, I could see it was a long, three story oval structure, almost obscured by landscaping gone wild. At the top of the drive, she led me up the stairs to the front door, which was unlocked. She opened it, turned to me and in a motherly way told me to wipe my feet, and I followed her in.”

“My first reaction was not the same as everyone’s is today, chiefly because the jungle outside hid the view of the Atlantic. But I was truly impressed by the size and beauty of the home.”

Kathleen asked, “What was it like inside, back then?”

“Pretty much the same as you see it now. Except it just looked tired. There were faded heavy dark red draperies at the glass wall - those are gone now of course, I had the glass tinted instead. The rugs and upholstery that were there were badly sun-faded. I’ve redecorated, but the room was the same. I followed her down the foyer steps, out through the dining room to the kitchen. The dining room furniture was the same I have now. I had no idea, nor would it have meant anything to me at that time, that the furniture is by Emile Jacques Ruhlman and the chandelier and sconces are from Lalique. Later on, I would learn that is a very big deal, as were, and are, all the furnishings in here. The kitchen was generally as it is now; I’ve replaced the metal cabinets with wood and re-polished the granite. The table, chairs, and bar-stools, are all my own designs. Those fancy appliances are all original. The whole house was spotlessly clean, just sun and time faded.”

“ ‘You will please forgive me, young Conor’, Mrs. Franke said, ‘I am not accustomed to visitors these days. Of course you would like to wash your hands. There is a powder room out near the foyer.’ “

Kathleen interrupted, “There is? I’ve never noticed.”

“You weren’t supposed to. They didn’t want a bathroom door to be conspicuous. You’ll never see it unless you’re looking for it. Even knowing, it took me awhile to discover it. By the time I returned to the kitchen, she had laid out a luncheon, and sat patiently at the table waiting for me. Lox, bagels, cream cheese, pickled herring, corned beef, iced tea, and lemonade.”

“ ‘You didn’t have to do all this, Mrs. Franke... all I earned was some ice water.’ “

” ‘Nonsense. I am a very astute old woman, I can see that no one has been taking care of you. Now sit and eat.’ “

” ‘We talked while we ate what to me at the time was an unusual lunch. ‘Where is Mister Franke?’, I asked, already guessing the answer.

“ ‘My husband, Guy, passed away ten years ago.’ She pronounced it the French way: Ghee. ‘Is there a Mrs. MacKenzie?’ “

” ‘No. I mean, there was, but not now. We were divorced. She was coming back, but she died two years ago.’ “

” ‘She shook her head, ‘Tsk, ts. Much too young. Here in Boca Raton?’ “

” ‘No, we lived in northern California.’ “

” ‘Then how did you wash up on my beach?’ “

” ‘I’ve been wandering the country since she died. Then about two months ago my father died in Ohio. He was my only living relative. Since then, I’ve just been driving around in his truck. I found the park up the beach this morning, and decided to take a walk.’ “

” ‘She was nodding. ‘Your soul is lost. I saw that in your eyes when I met you.’ “

” ‘I hadn’t thought of it that way.’ “

” ‘You need to find your home.’ ”

“ ‘I’ve been trying for three years. I don’t know where it is.’ “

"We had finished our meal. Mrs. Franke slid her chair back, and stood. Her hand lightly on my shoulder, she said 'You won't find home by looking for it, Young Conor. Home is not a place, it is in your heart.' "

"I helped her do the dishes. Then she said 'It is time for my nap, so you will go now.' We walked to the glass door to the deck, and as I started across the dune walkway, she called 'If you wish, meet me at the steps tomorrow morning at eight. We will walk, then have breakfast.' "

"I had nothing better to do. 'It's a date', I called back. Up the beach at the park, I got in my truck and went to look for a place to stay."

"When I arrived the next morning, my new elderly friend was sitting on the bottom step waiting for me. 'Good morning, Young Conor. And how was your night?' In all the time I knew her, she never said Conor without putting Young in front of it. We began walking south on the sand."

" 'Fine. I found a Holiday Inn up the beach. They have a restaurant called "The Barefoot Mailman".' "

" 'Oui, I know it. That is in Hiland Beach. A very long time ago, that is how the mail was delivered; once a week, a mailman walked barefoot in the sand making his deliveries all the way up the coast.' "

" 'Hiland Beach? How do you know what town you're in?' "

"She waved her hand dismissively. 'Ah, they make them up. It is all the same shoreline, the same road.' "

"I laughed. 'So, how far do we walk?' "

" 'I walk my property every morning. Then I have a

late breakfast, then a nap. Now, in winter, when it is cool, I often come out on the steps for the sunset. Long ago, when Guy was alive, we could see the ocean from our veranda.’ “

”Being a former Californian, I said ‘But don’t you have to be on the west coast to see the sun set?’ “

” ‘To literally see it set, oui. But it can be quite beautiful here. The sun’s rays shoot to the horizon and do wonderful things to the sky above the sea, and the water turns to silver. Then it is over, and the moon rises. It is lovely, you will see.’ “

”We walked in silence for a while at water’s edge, where the sand was firm. ‘When you say “my property”, Mrs. Franke, what do you mean?’ “

” ‘Long ago, when my husband and I came here from France, we were seeking privacy and safety. And so Guy purchased two miles of land on this shore, and from beach to the road. It was quite wild back then... well I suppose it is again, isn’t it, it is so overgrown. We built the house in the middle.’ “

”So her accent was French. I stopped walking. ‘You mean you own two entire miles of beachfront property?’ “

”She had also stopped, and was letting the surf run over her feet. ‘Except for the small piece we gave for the park, and the little gazebo we built for the public down here at the south end, yes, it is mine. I am bothered constantly by men who want to buy the land - I have had to un-list my telephone. Guy would not want it to be built upon, and I do not require the money, so why should I sell? But these developers, they do not understand *No*.’ She handed me a pretty white seashell. ‘That is called a jewel box. Do you understand my reasons, Young Conor?’ “

” ‘My wife and I built a home on a cliff south of

Carmel in California. She designed it. There was nothing around us, we didn't even need curtains. Yes Ma'am, I understand perfectly.' "

'We had reached the end of her beach. In the large gazebo on top of the dune, we could see several people sitting on benches, reading their morning papers. Four old men playing cards at a table, waved to us. Mrs. Franke waved back. 'I have no idea who they are', she smiled, 'but they are there every morning and they wave to me. Shall we go have breakfast? I had fresh pastries delivered this morning.' "

"Now that was more my kind of morning fare. There was a French pastry chef at the Boca Resort, who doted on her. She had only to phone, and he would bake whatever she desired. If she didn't call for awhile, he would whip up something and bring it himself, then they would sit and talk in their native language."

"She brewed fresh coffee, and we sat chatting happily while she ate maybe one pastry and I wolfed down about six. I told her I was amazed at the differences between the cold dark Pacific off northern California and the warm clear blue Atlantic of the tropics. I planned to spend the afternoon swimming off the Holiday Inn's beach."

"When we finished clearing our dishes, it was time for her nap. 'How long will you stay?', she asked."

"I shrugged. 'I don't know. I guess until I decide where to go next'.

" 'Well, I walk at eight every day. You are welcome any time. And if you leave, please come say au revoir.' "

" 'I'll see you in the morning', I said. She smiled, and I left for my hotel."

"The next morning we walked north to the park. I showed her my father's pickup truck, and told her about

renting the farm to Charlie and Melissa.”

“ ‘That was your childhood home, oui?’ “

” ‘Yes. Until I was twenty-two.’ “

” ‘Then why did you not stay?’ “

” ‘I tried it for awhile, while I took care of my dad. But that wasn’t my home anymore, I couldn’t go back.’ “

” ‘Oui. That was how it was with my husband and I.’ “

” ‘She had opened a subject I was curious about. ‘How did you two come to live in Florida? Why did you leave France?’ “

” ‘If you come this evening at five-thirty, we will watch the sunset, and I will tell you how Guy and Marie Franke came to this country.’ “

” ‘Alright. And then I’ll take you to The Barefoot Mailman for dinner.’ “

” ‘All my friends have passed away. I have not been out to dine in such a long time !’ “

” ‘Well tonight, you will.’ “

” ‘Early that evening, I parked my truck in the carport under Mrs. Franke’s house, next to an old white Jaguar sedan. That’s the car you’ve seen me driving; it was like new, all I’ve done to it is add air-conditioning. She was waiting on the deck, and we went out and sat on the top step of the walkway. Patting my arm, she said ‘We can talk during dinner. Now, just watch.’ She was right about the sunset. There were clouds over the ocean far out at the horizon. As the sun sank behind the dune, it’s rays lit up the clouds. The sky turned pink at the waterline, the color deepening to shades of purple until it turned dark blue above

the clouds. We had a funny saying in the mid-west when I was a kid: "sky blue pink". Now I saw that phrase literally happen. The sea was calm, a breeze made dapples of little diamond-bright triangles dance across it's surface. As the sun went down, the water turned from dark blue to a shimmering silver, like liquid mercury. In half an hour the sky was dark and paved with stars. The full moon began it's ascent, seeming to rise right out of the water at the horizon. It's reflection threw a beam of light gleaming across the water toward us. The orb glowed yellow, and when it fully cleared the horizon it was so big I felt as if I could touch it. We sat in silence until Mother Nature had finished her display."

" 'Well, what do you think?', the old woman asked."

" 'That was spectacular', I replied. 'I never would have thought it worth watching a sunset in the east.' "

" 'Very few do. I think most people do not appreciate subtlety, and they miss so much beauty.' "

Kathleen spoke up, "She was so right. If you hadn't told me about it, I never would have looked. But now I will."

"We went back to the house, and Mrs. Franke changed into a dress. She said we should take her Jaguar, and insisted that I drive. The hostess at the restaurant knew by then that I was a guest at the hotel, and seated us immediately at an ocean-front table. We both ordered broiled lobster, and a bottle of French wine. And as we ate my elderly guest told me why and how she and her husband had settled in Boca Raton."

" 'My husband and I grew up together in Paris. We both attended the Sorbonne. When we finished the university, we married. Guy had studied art history, and went to work in his family's gallery on the Right Bank. I studied Interior Design, and took an intern position with a

gentleman named Ruhlman who would one day become quite famous. Thus, we began a rather idyllic life. We were never able to have children, but we were able to take joy in many children from our large Jewish families. Our life was full and happy, until Germany began its love affair with the Nazis and their concept of Aryan superiority. From his contacts in the art world all across Europe, Guy began hearing stories of German government officials forcibly taking works of art from Jewish homes. The Nazis had another name for that - but it was theft. Then Guy heard of Jews being evicted from their homes, and of Jews being required to wear a Star of David on their clothing and being beaten in the streets. And soon, we heard worse rumors of whole Jewish families disappearing.' She paused for a moment; I could see that as she told her story, she was reliving harsh memories, and her accent had become heavier. "Then Hitler unleashed his wolves on Poland, and every other country in Europe was subjected to his threats. My husband was a very wise man. The Germans and French never liked each other; we never will. Guy told me he knew they would try to over-run our country, and we were not well prepared for war. In truth, we were still recovering from the last one. He intended to join the army, then word from a non-Jew client in Germany was passed to him: The Franke family and their art gallery were on a list of French Jews from whom the Nazis intended to confiscate everything. Guy informed both of our families, and urged them to leave the country. Not one of them would listen to him.' She stopped eating, and took a long drink of wine. "This was the downfall of the European Jews. The German Jews knew what was happening, and were too meek to fight back. The rest of them heard, and denied belief of what was happening before their very eyes. They put their heads in the sand, as the saying goes.' "

" 'And so my husband began selling all of our possessions. He convinced his father that they should sell the art gallery, and quickly sold it at a low price to a Gentile competitor. We decided that we would only be safe with an ocean between us and the Nazis. Guy took all the money he had accumulated - which was quite a bit - and bought

extremely valuable rare stamps. He hid these stamps in several volumes of French art history books, which never left his possession. By this time, travel outside our country was becoming difficult. Again with the help of Gentile art clients, he was able to bribe the right people, and we said a tearful *au revoir* to our families and left for Britain. We thought we would be safe there, but soon the bombs came and we were proved wrong. Guy managed to convince an official at the American Embassy that he had taken a professorship at a university, and he and I were given visas to enter the United States. We took a ship to New York, all the while concealing our Judaism, and landed in America just as the Germans marched into Paris.' "

"As she talked, her voice carried more and more sadness. 'We had studied America, looking for some remote place where we could feel safe. Southern Florida was our choice', she smiled at me, 'well, it was remote back then. A lot of American Jews were making Miami their winter home. We bought a car, and drove south from New York City. Once in Miami, we rented an apartment to stay in while we looked for a home. With great difficulty, I convinced my husband that American banks were trustworthy, and the stamps were placed in a safety-deposit box, much to my relief. For several months, we took short trips, driving around southern Florida looking for a place to settle. Then we happened upon this area. Flagler had built the Breakers Hotel up in Palm Beach, and Addison Mizner was beginning to build his now famous buildings and homes, but there really was not much else here. One day, we stopped here and walked the quiet beach, and I looked at him and said "Here we will build our castle." And so, Guy found the man who owned all that land, sold a few stamps, and soon we had two miles of seashore and jungle.' "

" 'By this time, America had entered the war, and the news from France and all of Europe grew worse every day. We could get no news of our families. There were rumors of Nazi spies landing on the beaches at night. We knew we had been on a Nazi list. Guy designed and supervised construction of our new home. But he didn't build a castle, he built a fortress.' "

Kathleen commented, "He sure did. That hurricane out there is proving his design can withstand anything."

"Right", I said. "I'll skip her details of how the house is built; you've already seen for yourself. While we were having coffee and dessert, I asked Mrs. Franke what had happened to their relatives in France."

" 'We never saw any of them again', she sighed. 'After the war, we went back to France to look for them; we spent weeks searching. Their homes had been stripped clean. Dozens of family members... not one was found. Those Goddamned Nazi Devils killed them all.' She paused to take a lace-trimmed handkerchief from her purse and dab at her eyes. 'There was nothing left there for us, it was just a place of terrible sorrow. We left Paris behind and returned to Florida, this was our new home. As soon as we could, we both became citizens.' She dabbed at her eyes again, then with a sad smile, said 'Well, Young Conor, I do hope my history lesson has not spoiled this lovely dinner for you.' I shook my head, no. 'Now it is very late for this old woman, will you take me home?' "

"That night, I sat on the deck outside my hotel room, drinking beer and watching the ocean while I thought about Mrs. Franke's story. In a way, we were both orphans. She reminded me of the grandmother I didn't have enough time with, and I liked her. Neither of us had any purpose to fill our days. But there was a project that would give me something to do, and her something to look forward to. The next morning, I was already waiting at the steps when she came out for her walk."

" 'My, aren't you the early bird today, Young Conor!' "

" 'Yes Ma'am. I was anxious to talk to you.' We began to walk on the beach. 'Mrs. Franke, you hardly know me, I know. But I wonder if you could trust me a little. I can give you some personal references, and this has nothing to do with money.' "

“ ‘You won’t need to provide references, Mister MacKenzie. Josef Bayer, my attorney, has already taken care of that.’ I looked at her with surprise, and she gave me a quizzical glance. ‘Surely you didn’t think I would leave my house with you, without knowing it was safe? And Josef tells me you have no need for more money. So, what is this idea of yours?’ “

” ‘Already checked me out?’, I thought. That was a good lesson I’ve never forgotten: find out about people before they get close. I asked, ‘Do you have photographs of your home, from the days when it was new?’ “

” ‘Oui, certainmont! Hundreds! Guy loved photography. He took pictures from the day ground was broken. And movies. Would you like to see them?’ “

” ‘Very much. Here is my idea: we both can use a project to occupy our time. Using Mr. Franke’s photos, I’d like to restore the grounds around your house to their original condition. Take that dark jungle away. Let you see the ocean from your veranda again. I’ll do it all myself. It will take some time, but I would enjoy the work.’ “

” ‘That will be a very large project for one man.’ She stopped walking and took off her big sun-hat. ‘I would like to see my home as I remember it, before I die. It is a wonderful idea. Of course I will pay you for the work.’ “

” ‘Honestly Mrs. Franke, I am so bored I would pay you for the privilege. As your attorney told you, I don’t need money. You can pay for tools and materials. What do you think?’ “

” ‘I think you may call me Marie. And I think we should make a plan while we have breakfast!’ “

” ‘And so I began to restore the grounds. The first thing I did was add some steps so Mrs. Franke didn’t need to struggle down to the sand. Then I bought a chainsaw, and

cleared off the dune in front of the decks; that alone took a month. She was thrilled when she could see the ocean from her living room again. We watched the old black and white movies of the house being built, and of Guy and Marie on the beach. I studied the old photos, bought books on tropical landscaping, and we drew up plans. Almost everything had to be cut down and dug out - most of that jungle was just overgrown brush. I filled so many dumpsters I lost count. As soon as I began to clear the jungle, real estate people started stopping by. Next it was the developers. They were like vultures circling a meal. Mrs. Franke had me shoo them away, but others came - they still do. I took "before" photos, I'll have to show you sometime. The pool and putting green were added after she was gone. After a month, Mrs. Franke insisted that I leave the hotel and take her guest suite. It took me almost a year to re-do the grounds, then I painted the house. We became each other's family; for the first time since Su Li had left, I felt like I had a home."

"She and Mr. Franke had been great movie buffs, so I bought her a nice television and VCR for the living room. Marie didn't care much for current films, she wanted to watch classics. One evening I was out on the deck watching the sun set, and she handed me a list of classic movies - everything from the Marx Brothers to Casablanca - saying if I hadn't seen them, I should. She told me stories about them; like how John Houston shot "The Maltese Falcon" verbatim from the Dashiell Hammet novel, didn't change one word. So I started renting them for us... Friday and Saturday became our movie and popcorn nights."

"I was on the deck grilling dinner one night, when she came out and said 'Do you enjoy automobiles, Young Conor?' "

" 'Yeah. I had a Porsche cabriolet out in California.' "

" 'Then tomorrow, no landscape work. I have something to show you. You will drive us there.' "

"The next day, after her nap, we got into the Jaguar

and she directed me to the building you followed me to a couple of days ago. I parked beside it, and followed her up the ramp. 'I haven't been inside in years. Will you lift the door? It is too heavy for me.' "

"I raised the garage door, and Marie stepped in and threw the light switch. There were sixteen cars lined up, all with covers on them. 'Marie, who do all these belong to?' "

"She laughed, 'My husband made his living buying and selling stamps. But he made his amusement buying automobiles. I had my little hobby, also... tomorrow you will see. Now uncover Guy's toys, and tell me what you think.' "

"One by one, I pulled the dusty covers off the cars. Every one of them was pristine. At that time, I didn't know what most of them were. She didn't have them insured for anywhere near their real values, so I had them appraised. Seven years ago, they were worth six million. The Jag is the one I use daily, but they all get driven."

"My God!'", Kathleen exclaimed. "I didn't have time to see them all. Can I go sit in them some day?"

"Sure, anytime, if they're still here after this storm. But I don't want them scratched, so the rule is: to sit in them you have to be naked," I teased.

"Hmm... that's the rule, huh?" She either thought I was serious, or was pretending I was, to call my bluff. "Well... with the door closed, it *is* very private in there. All that shiny paint and soft leather... Okay, it's a deal."

I cleared my throat and resumed, "'Guy loved driving these,' Marie had said as she lovingly touched each one after I uncovered it. 'Now they look so sad, just sitting here. Can you make them run again, Young Conor?'" "

” ‘Marie, I know farming, golf, football, sailing. I drive well; but I don’t know anything about most of these cars, and I know nothing about the mechanicals.’ “

” ‘We had many books about automobiles, and manuals for each of these, I’ll get them for you to read. There was a boy who worked at his father’s service station after school. He loved these almost as much as my husband did. Guy liked him; he was the only person allowed to work on them.’ She put a finger to her lip, thinking. “Oh, what was that young man’s name? Mai oui, I remember! It was Dominic, Junior. His father’s station was on Palmetto, at the corner of Federal Highway. Let’s go see if he is there. I want to ride in each of these again; I want you to drive me.’ “

”Dominic was there. He owned the business by then. When we drove up in the old Jaguar, he came out smiling. He remembered Mrs. Franke, he remembered the cars. Once I finished the landscaping, we began to meet at the building, and one by one we got the cars running. After her daily naps, Marie would ask to be taken for a ride along the shore in one of her husband’s treasures.”

“The day after she showed me the autos, she had me drive her to another building in the same area. This place was also eight feet above street level, for flood protection. We went in and turned on the lights. It was a warehouse full of furniture, lamps, accessories, all manner of things, similar to what was in her house.”

“ ‘Guy had his automobiles. This was my passion. I had an interior design business, until he passed away and I lost interest. I knew all the important designers in Europe; most of these pieces are originals that are quite valuable today. I let the air conditioning and dehumidifier run constantly to preserve it all. And now all this just sits here, waiting. Furniture needs a home, just as you and I do, Young Conor. Does this interest you?’ “

” ‘Marie, I know even less about this than the cars. My homes in California were decorated by a friend and my wife. I know I liked what they did, but I didn’t know why. Like I know your things here are nice, but nothing more.’ “

“ ‘If you like, I will teach you. You have the eye for beauty and proportion, I see that in your work with the landscaping. You have a natural talent, Young MacKenzie, it would be a shame to let it go undeveloped. Your work outdoors is almost finished, this...’ she gestured to the furniture gleaming under the lights, ‘...this could be our next project - passing my knowledge to you.’ “

”As a guy, the cars interested me way more than the furniture. I still thought of myself as a jock, and what does a football player care about interior design? But Mrs. Franke wanted to teach me, and I guess I saw it as a way to touch Su Li’s world again, so I became Marie’s student.”

“That’s how you got into the business you’re in?” Kathleen asked.

“Yeah. It turned out that I have some talent in that area. Marie taught me everything she knew. She had me re-design the guest suite where I was living. What you saw there is my third try. Then awhile after she died, I did the whole place.”

“How many tries until you got this bedroom to look so beautiful?”, she gestured to our surroundings.

“One.”

“Nice job. When did Mrs. Franke pass away?”

“About six years ago. What you really want to know, Detective, is how did I get the house? Right?”

“The records show you paid one dollar for the whole property. Is that so?”

“Not exactly. One evening, about a year and a half after we met, Marie and I were sitting out on the deck, which she called her veranda, and she said ‘Young Conor, I want to discuss some important matters with you.’ “

“ ‘Alright, Marie.’ “

” ‘First, it is time you find yourself a girl. Someone young and lively and pretty to break you out of the shell you have pulled around you. Second, I have been thinking about my home and my property and what will become of it when I am gone.’ “

” ‘You have plenty of time to think about that.’ “

” ‘I am eighty-eight. Every morning when I awaken, I am surprised that I am still alive. It is well past time for me to be practical and plan for the future. You know that I have no heirs. Over the past year and a half, you have become like a grandson. I want to leave everything to you.’ “

” ‘Marie, that’s very kind. But it isn’t necessary. I have more than enough to take care of myself.’ “

” ‘I am aware of that. You can decline if you wish, which is why I am discussing this with you now. My intent is not to take care of you, it is to take care of my home. I do not want this land to fall into the clutches of the developers, to be laid bare and filled with concrete towers that blot out the sun. There should be at least one place left to be natural and undisturbed. I want mine to be that place. I know you understand this, and that you share my feelings. You, Young Conor, are the only person I would trust to guardian my things. If my husband were here, I am sure he would agree. It would give me piece of mind to know you will be here when I am gone.’ “

” ‘In that case, I would be honored.’ “

” ‘Do not say oui just yet. There are conditions you must agree to before you accept.’ She took a page of notes from her jacket pocket, and read them to me.”

“ ‘First, you must live here. You may have other houses, but this must always be your primary residence. I do not want this house to be empty, it needs life. Second, you may do as you wish with the property, but you may never sell it. If you should die without any heirs, or decide you no longer wish to live here, the entire property will pass to the city of Boca Raton with a covenant that it be used as public parkland and never built upon. Only your children may inherit the property, and they will have it with the same stipulations. If you have a wife and no children, and you predecease her, if she wishes she may live here until her death, at which time the property will pass to the city. You may build as many as four more houses on the property, each no taller than this one. However, they may only be occupied by relatives of yours, by marriage or birth, and they will come under the same covenants. In summary: you or your direct descendants may live here in perpetuity unless you or they choose not to, but the land may never be used for development.’ ”

“ ‘If you agree to keep my wishes, then I would like to sell you the property for one dollar. As to the furniture and contents of the house, and the automobiles, they will be yours with only one condition: anything from the original inventory may be sold, but twenty-five percent of the proceeds must be donated to a charity. If you accept all these stipulations, tomorrow I will have my attorney, Josef Bayer, draw up a will and contract for us to sign.’ ”

”I told her I would be happy to accept. So you see, I am just the custodian. And I would like that transaction and terms to remain confidential.”

Kathleen held out her wine glass for a refill. “Of course it will. That was a good arrangement for you both. It must have made Mrs. Franke very happy to know that her lovely home would be well cared for. And all this will always belong to the MacKenzie family.”

I took her glass to the 'fridge, filled it and returned it to her. "Well, when I'm gone it will be donated to the city. I've no children, and I'm forty-two."

She gave me a glowing smile. "Don't give up yet, Stud. You're a very young forty-two... you never know what might happen." As if to punctuate her statement, with a loud bang the hurricane threw something at the storm curtain in the adjacent sitting-room. "See," she laughed, "Mother nature agrees with me."

I opened another root beer and returned to my chair. "During the next year, Mrs. Franke seemed to be in a rush to teach me everything, and not only about design. 'You will not always be an athletic young man, you need to have more than sports in your head.' I laughed and told her that was exactly what my mother had said when I was in grade school. Marie taught me French and eventually that was what we spoke most of the time. She made me promise to go to France after she was gone, to see all the places she talked about."

"It seemed like she heard her life's clock winding down and she wanted to leave as much of herself as possible, and now in me she had a child to give it to."

"Then one morning as we took our usual walk on the beach, she complained of having no energy, and we cut the walk short. I had to help her up the steps, and when we got to the house, she wanted to sit on the deck instead of going in for breakfast. It was a typical winter day, seventy-two, not a cloud in the sky, a breeze off the sea. Reclined on a chaise, she looked different that morning. Not like she was ill or anything tangible - she just appeared, I guess diminished would be the word."

"'Would you be a nice boy, and bring me a cup of hot tea?', she asked."

"I did so, putting it on the table next to her. 'Is there anything else I can do for you, Marie?' We were now speaking in French."

“She took a sip of tea. ‘Just sit here with me for a little while and watch the waves.’ “

“I pulled a chaise close to her, and sat. I said ‘Marie, would you like me to have your doctor come over?’ “

” ‘No, no, I am just tired today.’ She sighed quietly. ‘Until you washed up on my shore, I thought I would never again sit here and see this wonderful view.’ She patted my hand softly, leaving hers on mine. She spoke in English then, ‘Thank you, Young Conor. You have made these past two years unexpectedly bright and happy.’ “

” ‘And I have enjoyed every day with you, Marie.’ “

”She smiled as we sat together looking out to the warm blue sea, her hand on mine as light as a leaf. And then I felt her hand go limp, and, still smiling, she was gone.”

Kathleen dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. She sniffed and spoke softly, “Such a lovely and peaceful way to go. Happy and content. You really are a sweet guy, MacKenzie.”

“Marie was truly a beautiful soul. She gave me a home and a place to heal, a family when I most needed one. She opened a new world for me, literally changing my future. Her funeral had been prearranged in the Jewish tradition, and so I laid her to rest with Guy. A week later, Josef Bayer asked me to come to his office. Of course I already owned the house, but at that meeting, I learned that she had willed everything else to me, with the exception of a large donation to a Holocaust victims fund. She left the cars and furniture, and the buildings, which I expected. And a very substantial amount of money and investments, which I didn’t. It seems Guy Franke had been a very shrewd investor with the proceeds from his flight-from-Nazis stamp collection. There was much more than I can ever use, so I give all the investments dividends to charities. After explaining all this to me, Josef handed me a large white envelope.”

“ ‘This, Mister Mackenzie, is what I would term *the qualifier*. It was Mrs. Franke’s last wish that you follow the instructions she has written to you. If you choose not to, I am to rescind the will, and another takes it’s place. The alternate will designates your eventual children as the beneficiaries, and you yourself receive no money. Marie did not divulge the contents of that envelope to me. You will open it now, please, read it for us both, and tell me if you will comply.’ “

”I opened the envelope. Inside was an Air France folder, and a letter to me from Marie, handwritten in French on linen stationery. I read it twice, silently. I will tell you the translation, Kathleen:”

My Dear Young Conor,

As you read this, I am finally happily reunited with Guy. I know he will agree with my leaving all our things in your care; you are a good man and the son we never had.

I know you will love and care for our home and our ‘hobbies’ almost as much as we did. But it will not be a real home for you until you have someone to share it with. I wish for you to have what my husband and I did, and you will not find love by staying in your house.

So here is my real gift to you - a doorway to the world outside Boca Raton. Cross the threshold for at least a month - longer if you wish. I will be with you in spirit.

May your life be filled with wonder and happiness.

With love,

Marie

“I opened the Air France folder. Inside was a first-class round-trip ticket to Paris. Departure date two weeks from that day, return date open. And a room reservation for what turned out to be a charming small hotel on the Left Bank, away from the Right Bank tourist hotels. I smiled to myself. This was what Marie had been preparing me for, sly old gal. And as usual, she was right, the trip would be good for me.”

“The attorney had been waiting patiently for me to finish reading. ‘May I see her instructions, Mister MacKenzie?’ “

“I handed him the letter. ‘It’s in French,’ he said. ‘Do you read French?’ “

” ‘Yes.’ “

” ‘I will of course have this legally translated, but in the meantime, can you tell me what she wrote?’ “

” ‘She says I am going to Paris in two weeks, and won’t be back for at least a month.’ I put the plane ticket back into the envelope, and stood. ‘Let’s get you a photocopy of that letter, I want the original. And Josef, you should have room for a new client now. I’d like to retain you to look after everything while I’m gone.’ “

- TWENTY ONE -

I left my bedside chair for a moment, and took another PB&J from the tray on the dressing table. “Another sandwich, Miz Lynch?”, I said over the din of the storm.

“No, thank you, Mister MacKenzie. I am quite full.”

Halfway to her with a sandwich on a plate, I stopped abruptly. “*You are full?*”, I said in astonishment.

“Oh you are so funny,” she said sarcastically. “Come finish your story, I’m getting sleepy.”

I sat down and took a few bites of sandwich, while I watched Kathleen have a big yawn and stretch languorously... one of those women who are entertaining just to watch.

Washing the peanut butter down with cold root beer, I began again. “I returned to Boca after wandering around Europe for nearly four months. Not knowing what to do with myself, I decided to completely redecorate the inside of the house, to make it my own. I left this master suite until last, it would have felt wrong to just rush in here so soon after she was gone. One morning I was at Kravet”, Kathleen looked puzzled, “it’s a designer showroom... selecting fabrics. A very refined Latin woman in well-tailored clothes was also in the showroom, and I could overhear her conversation with the salesgirl. The lady seemed frustrated and overwhelmed by too many choices. As usual, I knew exactly what I wanted,

picked up samples, and told the manager, “Write these down for me: I need this, this, this, and this one. I’ll fax you the yardages.’ ”

“The Latin woman glanced quickly at what I was ordering, and asked, “ ‘How do you know?’ ”

“ ‘I honestly do not know how, Ma’am. I just do,’ I answered.”

“She sighed, ‘Well I definitely do *not*. My husband bought a bank in Miami. Then he bought a big house on the Bay, without my seeing it. And I come here and it is empty, and he tells me ‘make it beautiful’, like it is so easy. My decorator in Buenos Aires cannot obtain a visa, and I know no one in Florida. Are you a decorator, Mister... ?’ “

” ‘MacKenzie. Call me Mac.’ I shook her hand. ‘Not exactly.’ “

”The showroom manager interjected, ‘Mrs. Arqueno, Mac trained with one of the finest French interior designers. And as you can see, he has impeccable taste.’ “

” ‘Could I interest you in helping me, Mac?’ “

”I looked over her shoulder, at the manager. She gave me a subtle nod - the lady was okay. ‘I suppose I could take a look at your place; maybe give you some ideas...’, I said, not sure what I was getting myself into.”

“Carlita wrote the address and handed it to me. ‘Can you come for lunch tomorrow?’ “

”That’s how I got into the design business. The house was ten-thousand square feet. She paid me well to design it. The husband and I became friends; still are. A lot of well-to-do people saw the house and soon I had my pick of projects. I do one or two a year now, for fun. That all led to some contracts to design furniture.”

I took a couple more bites of my sandwich. “As soon as Mrs. Franke’s obituary appeared, the real estate developers had started circling. They began sending me invites to all sorts of things, and I thought it would be fun to play with the bastards a bit. So I started to accept some of the golf and dinner party invitations. I figured after a few struck out, word would get around and they would all realize I was playing them. But they never did. I’ve been doing it for years and they still haven’t. They’re just too damn greedy, all they see is empty land and dollar signs.”

“I guess it was a little over a year ago, I received an invitation to a charity golf tournament and black-tie dinner, to be held at a country club up in Palm Beach. The event sponsor was Blaine Development Corporation, which told me why I was invited. But I wanted to play that course, so I went. Not by coincidence, I was put in a foursome with Daniel Blaine himself. I was really on my game that day, and our team won the thing. To my surprise, DB didn’t speak at all about my property. He is a low-handicap golfer and a very competitive man, and most of our conversation that day was about my beating him on his home course.”

“They seated me for dinner at a table with DB and his wife, and some other society types. I thought I would eat, write the charity a check, then go before the dancing started. After dinner, I was standing at the bar waiting for my opportunity to leave, when a Blaine vice president introduced himself, gave me his business card, and said if I ever wanted to talk about a joint venture developing my land, they would like to be considered. I gave him the same ‘I’ll think about it’ line I give them all, wrote him a charity donation, and we had both fulfilled our obligations for the day.”

“I finished my drink and was ready to go, when I heard a female voice laugh and say, ‘Was that subtle enough for you?’ “

"I turned to find a stunning young blonde woman in a very slinky gown, giving me a light-up-the-room smile. 'He was better than most,' I said. 'I'm Conor MacKenzie.' "

" She offered her hand. 'I'm April.' "

" 'All of it?' "

" 'All of what?' "

" 'April.' I wasn't letting go of that hand. 'You're my favorite month.' "

" 'I can't believe I haven't heard that one; I need to get out more. Are you going to give back my hand?' "

" 'That depends upon where you're taking it.' "

" 'I was about to leave this old fogey's dance and go find some fun. Care to tag along?' "

"I let go of her hand. 'I'm right behind you.' "

"I had driven the Gullwing Mercedes that day. The valet brought it around, followed by April's new Saab convertible - she likes those for some reason, buys a new white one every year. As she went to her car, she paused briefly and looked at mine. I heard her thoughtful 'Hmm', as she lightly ran a finger along a fender, then she said 'Follow me.' "

"She sped over the bridge from Palm Beach to West Palm, to a casual open-air club and restaurant called E.R. Bradley's. The parking valets all knew April and were happy to see her. 'Hi Guys!' she fairly yelled over the music pounding from inside. 'He's with me,' she pointed back at my car, 'you better put a fence around that one.' And they did just that - parked it up front and roped it off."

“ ‘Aren’t we a bit overdressed?’ , I asked as I took her hand and she got out of her car.”

“She reached up, undid my bow-tie, pulled it off, then opened my two top buttons. ‘Tux or jeans - it doesn’t matter at Bradley’s. Give me that,’ she pointed at my cummerbund, and I slipped it off and handed it to her. ‘Toss these in my car, please, Sean,’ she said as she gave my things to a valet.”

“Taking my hand, she led me across a boardwalk where a hostess was waiting for us, ‘Hi April, I have a table for you.’ I followed as the two of them chatted like pals. Every employee, and quite a few of the customers yelled ‘Hey April!’ as we passed. She smiled and waved at everyone.”

“After we ordered two Killian’s Red’s, I decided we wouldn’t be able to hear each other across the table and I moved to the chair next to her. ‘I guess this is your regular hangout,’ I said.”

“ ‘I’ve been living in Paris. I haven’t been here in over a year,’ she answered. That was my introduction to the “everyone likes April” phenomenon.”

“We stayed until three AM, dancing and having a good time. Then I got her keys from the valet and walked her to her car. ‘May I see you again?’ , I asked.”

“ ‘Oh, so formal,’ she teased. She reached into her purse for a pen and note pad, wrote a number and handed it to me. ‘That’s my cell, it’s always with me. Can I get yours?’“

” ‘I don’t have a cell phone,’ I said, and she rolled her eyes. ‘But here’s my home number,’ I wrote it on her pad. “I never got your last name. Or my tie, either.’ “

” ‘No you didn’t,’ she said as she got into her car. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow for dinner!’, she called as she drove off.”

“I was out on the deck having coffee when she called the next morning. She didn’t say hello, just started with ‘I’m famished. Where are we going for dinner?’ “

” ‘That depends... who is this?’, I teased.”

“ ‘Oh you have that many girlfriends, huh?’, she giggled. ‘You say “that depends”, a lot.’ “

” ‘Well *that depends* on your definition of “a lot”. How about Italian?’ “

” ‘Please don’t say the Olive Garden...’ “

” ‘No. Lilly’s on Palmetto. Local’s place. Make their own pasta.’ “

” ‘I’ve never been, but I trust your choice. I’ll meet you there at eight.’ And without another word, she hung up.”

“Lilly’s doesn’t take reservations, and it’s a really small building. But we would have no trouble getting a table, eight o’clock being an early dinner in South Florida. When I arrived at eight-fifteen, April was there waiting and had already become friends with Lilly. Her long hair in a ponytail, she wore an ice-blue silk tank-top, white linen skirt, and sandals. She looked as stunning as she had in the evening dress. Everyone looked at her and she had a smile for them all.”

“As the hostess guided April to our table, Lilly took my arm and held me back. ‘I know this is none of my business Conor,’ she whispered, ‘but that isn’t the kind of girl a man keeps waiting.’ “

” ‘Thanks Lilly. I’ll apologize.’ “

“April was already seated. As I sat down, she smiled and said ‘It’s a good thing I like you so much, Conley, or I wouldn’t have waited more than ten minutes.’ She picked up a bread stick, broke off a small piece and took a tiny bite. ‘We need to get you a cell phone.’ “

” ‘It’s Conor, not Conley. And I’m sorry. I have a punctuality problem; I guess from being independent for a long time. It’s sort of “I’ll get there when I get there”. I’ll try to do better in the future.’ “

” ‘Mmm, we have a future already... I like that thought. Okay, apology accepted. But I should warn you, I’m very prompt.’ She paused to take another nibble of bread. ‘Lilly showed me the menu while I waited. I’m going to have a salad and the linguini with shrimp and no sauce and a glass of Pinot Grigio, how about you?’ “

”The waitress took our order, then April leaned toward me and said ‘I had a good time with you last night. But since we’re having a future, maybe you should tell me about yourself.’ “

” ‘Not much to tell. I’m forty-one, originally from Ohio, self-employed.’ “

” ‘Just to be sure... there isn’t a Mrs. MacKenzie, is there?’ “

” ‘I’m long divorced.’ “

” ‘Where do you live?’ “

”I nodded toward the east. ‘Over there across the intracoastal bridge. Just north of Palmetto, on the beach.’“

” ‘But that’s...’ A look of sudden realization crossed her face. ‘Ohhh. Now I know why a young single man was invited to that affair yesterday. You are the guy with all the land.’ “

“Our meals arrived, and we each started in. ‘Okay, now we both know who I am, but only one of us knows who *you* are,’ I said between bites. ‘I don’t even know your last name. Want to enlighten me?’ “

” ‘Now I’m not sure if I ever should. I’m afraid you won’t trust me. Promise you will let me explain before you decide?’ “

”I laughed. ‘Why? Are you a famous criminal or something?’ “

” ‘Or something.’ She put her fork down and looked seriously at me. ‘I mean it. Promise me. Promise you won’t run away.’ “

”I held up my hands. ‘Alright, I promise.’ “

”She took a big gulp of wine. ‘My last name is Blaine. DB is my father. *Oh no, please don’t get that look!* You weren’t set up; I don’t work for my father. I have my own business and it has nothing to do with real estate. I honestly did not know where you live, and it wouldn’t have mattered. I just liked you the moment we met, it has nothing to do with what you own. You do believe me, don’t you?’ “

” ‘Then why didn’t you tell me your name last night?’ ”

“ ‘I never tell it until I know if people like me for me, not for my father’s money. You were no different.’ She placed a hand palm up on the table, wanting me to take it. ‘Please Conor, it’s important that you believe me.’ “

”I thought about that. It made sense. How many times had I been suspicious of people’s motives when they knew I own the land? Besides, my instincts told me April wasn’t capable of dishonesty. I put my hand on hers, ‘I do the same thing sometimes. Of course I believe you.’ I let go, ‘Now eat, before it gets cold.’ “

“Suddenly, the happy girl was back. ‘This is so good! How could I not know about Lilly’s, I live a few blocks away. I hope they have tiramisu!’ “

”Three days later, she spent the night here. That was surprisingly soon for us both. We’ve been inseparable ever since. She looks after me, and though I don’t really need it, it is nice. But she knows to give me my space; we have our own routines. April doesn’t officially live here, and yet more and more of the time, she does. I suppose I should have invited her to move in... but I’ve been alone for so long, I guess I just didn’t know how.” I paused, thinking about our last conversation, out on the steps in the rain.

“She loves you, you know,” Kathleen said, then quietly added, “That’s not a very hard thing to do.”

“Well, it appears that’s now in the past,” I replied. “Anyway, when I explained to her why I had accepted the invitation to the event where we met, April thought it was pretty funny how I used the developer’s greed to get a free meal. She wanted to play the game, too, so she nicknamed it ‘Developer Dinner Roulette’. I would get invitations all the time, and when one came up that sounded like a good free night out, she would RSVP, and we would go.”

“So, that’s why April and I were up in North Palm Beach the night before the head, and you, came into the picture.”

I took a very deep breath. “Now that you’ve heard everything, I think you understand why I’m going out to California. This thing that just happened, it’s made me realize I walked away from something I shouldn’t have. Maybe that’s why I still have nightmares about Su Li’s death. I took the easy path, and I owed her much more than that.”

“Those cops in Monterey, they weren’t telling me the truth, they were hiding something from me. And I let that big grey-eyed stranger give me the rational for ignoring it. But he was both right, and wrong. No, I can’t bring Su Li back, but she believed in me; she would trust I would find out what really happened to her. I’m not coming back here until I do something about it. She deserves at least that.”

Kathleen spun her legs around, and sat on the edge of the bed, facing me. "So that's why you were so shaken at the sight of the reconstructed head? Because she was Asian? Because it was severed?"

I looked at her for a long moment. I had trusted her enough to tell her every important detail of my life. I had to tell her because she needed to know that her case and my Su Li, were somehow connected. I had to tell her in case something happened to me, so someone would keep asking questions until the truth came out and the people responsible were punished. I had to trust someone, and Sergeant Kathleen Lynch was that someone.

"No. It was because she looked exactly, in every detail but one, like Su Li MacKenzie."

Kathleen blinked in surprise. Then she moved closer to me, and said in a matter-of-fact voice, "I'm going with you."

"No, you aren't."

"I am going with you," she said, more firmly this time.

"Kathleen, this is something I've let go too long. It isn't that I wouldn't enjoy your company. It's that I *need* to do this by myself."

"But ... "

"Besides, think like a detective. If I show up with a cop in tow, anyone with anything to hide will just clam up or go underground. It's better if we work on our two mysteries separately. Then if they intersect, we will discover that faster. She gave me a dubious look. "And Kathleen, you are the only one who knows everything, and you're a police detective. I know that you will stay with this until you have all the answers - in case I can't."

She put a hand on my knee. "Alright, I will do it your way, but with two conditions: First, you will let Detective Yee know you are out there, and why, and give him my number. Two, you will telephone me regularly and tell me what you have found out... if I am to be your backup, I have to know everything as it happens. I will keep what you find out, and what you do about it, to myself. Unless it is needed to solve my case, or I have to come out there and solve them both, with or without you." She squeezed my knee lightly. "Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Good. Now, can we get some rest? I think your life story has worn me out... suddenly I am so sleepy." She yawned as she laid back against the pillows.

"Sure. I'll go down the hall to the guest room."

Kathleen raised her head, "Like hell you will. You are staying right here with me. It's still storming out there and I'm not going through it without you." She patted the bed next to where she lay, "Climb up here and cuddle, Conor MacKenzie. We may not have this chance again for awhile. I promise you will have no nightmare tonight."

I blew out all but one candle, crawled up on my bed next to her, and she rolled into my arms.

PART THREE

- TWENTY TWO -

I awakened all entangled in Girl. Tanned arms and legs and tousled auburn hair; soft breath on my neck, soft skin in my hands. I lay still, not disturbing my slumbering detective. Something was different. It took a few moments to focus my sleep-drugged brain, then I realized what it was: the room was completely quiet save Kathleen's rhythmic breathing; no wind or rain beating upon the metal storm screens. I listened for a minute, to be sure I wasn't dreaming. It was finally over, Hurricane Dorothy had packed up and moved on.

Very careful not to awaken her, I loosened my grip and unwound myself from Kathleen, then slid off the bed. The candle was down to the bottom of its wick and the room went dark just as I found my flashlight. I pulled the sheet up to her shoulders as she lay peacefully on her stomach, then tiptoed out of the room. I tried the light-switch in the hall - still no power. Flashlight on, I climbed the stairs to the living room, where I quickly surveyed for damage. The cracked glass in the deck door was still held intact by our improvised duct-tape patches. The towels we had thrown beneath it were saturated, a puddle had formed around them. Otherwise, the room was undamaged. The dining room was untouched. In the kitchen, the storm-screen that had been dented last night had come out of its track and hung askilter; the window it protected had a diagonal crack that could be

temporarily covered with more duct-tape. I turned the tap, expecting nothing and getting what I expected. Alright, I thought, the stored water and the generator would last the short time until we left, which would be long before the utility companies made their repairs.

I took out two mugs, mixed bottled water and instant coffee in them, lit the candles in Kathleen's improvised stove-top, and held the mugs over it until the coffee steamed. Tucking a box of graham crackers under one arm and the lit flashlight under the other, I carried the coffee down to my bedroom. I put Kathleen's mug and the crackers on the night table beside her, lit a candle across the room, switched off the flashlight, then sat in the chair facing the bed, sipping my coffee and watching her sleep. It has been my observation that no matter how pretty a woman is, without exception she is even more lovely in repose. Slumber replaces the cares of her waking world and she relaxes into peaceful contentment. Kathleen was no exception to my theory. The stress of divorce and police work were completely erased from her expression as she slept. Now, facing me, she had passed beyond beautiful to breathtaking, in the same way that April went from perfect to angelic as she slept.

I was halfway through my coffee and theorizing, when the smell of the coffee finally got past her dreams. She woke almost with a start, lifting her head and looking quickly left to where I had been, then right to where I now sat. Her hair whipped left and right also, then partially covered her face in the most darling manner. She stayed on her stomach in that pose while her groggy brain caught up with the coffee's scent drifting from the night table. "Whaa...? When did you get up? I thought you were..." Raised up on her elbows, she looked over at my rumpled pillows.

"Storm's gone," I said.

She looked back my way again. "It's over?", she asked, sleepily brushing her hair away from her eyes.

“Yes. Finally. We made it through in one piece.”

She rolled onto her back, stretching as she did. “How long have you been up?”, she said through a big yawn.

“Fifteen or twenty minutes.” I gestured to the night table with my mug. “I made you breakfast.”

She lay with the sheet pulled up to her neck. “I see you did. Room service. Thank you.” Suddenly a serious look came over her face. She grabbed the edge of the sheet with both hands, lifted it quickly so that it billowed over her body, and peeked under it. Pulling it back down, she gave me a goofy smile. “Thank you for being a gentleman,” she said.

I raised my mug in acknowledgment. “You are welcome.”

“If I didn’t know about you and April and all the others by now, I’d be wondering about your sexual orientation”, she said sarcastically. “Are you that full of willpower, or am I just that ugly?”

“You are astonishingly beautiful, Kathleen. The timing isn’t right, now.”

“*It isn’t you, it’s me*”, she mocked. “Well, the clock’s aren’t working, and nobody’s wearing a watch,” she complained.

“You know that isn’t what I meant by ‘timing’.”

"Yes, I know," she said. She kicked off the sheet, sat up with her feet on the floor, and reached for her coffee. The black t-shirt and shorts were bed-rumpled and askew, as much as clothing so tight could be. She opened the graham crackers, took a stack, then handed the box to me. Between bites, she said "I used to have these with milk before bed, when I was little."

"Me too."

"Have you been outside?"

"No, no rush. I'm sure it will be awhile before we can get out of here. Assuming there is something left to go to." I handed back the cracker box. "Besides, I wanted to serve you breakfast in bed." I drank the last of my coffee and watched her eat. "I think we'll open the front door first, then if it looks safe I'll run the generator so I can roll up some storm curtains."

"I'm cold," she said, shivering and crossing her arms.

I stood and wrapped the comforter around her. "It's no wonder, you barely have anything on." That brought a sexy smile to her face. "The water-heater will run while the generator runs. In awhile you can take a nice hot shower."

"That will seem like such a luxury. Let's go look outside." She stood, dropped the comforter, and adjusted her clothes. As we walked out of the room, she grabbed me around my waist from behind. "Maybe you'll take a hot shower too."

Flashlights on, we went up to the living room, then up the foyer steps and opened the front door. It was an absolutely beautiful morning. Bright sun, not a cloud in the sky, no humidity. We stood out on the front porch and surveyed the damage.

Sergeant Lynch's police sedan was down near the end of the driveway, wedged among a pile of fallen palm tree trunks. There was all manner of debris everywhere, as far as our eyes could see. The sea-grape trees at the bottom of the lot were still intact, though the second part of the storm had blown off half of their big round leaves. Their limbs were full of junk. From where we stood on the third floor, we could see over them to the other side of the road. There was not one tall palm left in sight. Buildings were still standing, but who knew how much they were damaged. The temporary, I hoped, lake that had formed down by Ocean Drive, had grown. We wouldn't get out of here for awhile.

"My poor car," Kathleen said. "They'll have to pull it out of there. Now everyone will know I was here for three days. Oh my boss is going to love it."

"You have plausible reason to be here. You were working the case, and got trapped."

All she said was, "Hmm."

We went back into the house. She stayed in the living room while I went down to start the generator and water heater, and pushed the buttons to open some of the third floor storm curtains. When I went back upstairs, I saw that the damaged metal curtain had only gone up part way. The early sun was shining brightly into the house. Kathleen was out on the deck, throwing debris over the side.

I joined her and looked around. It was a surprise to find the wooden walkway from deck to beach still standing. Some of the dune had been redeposited against the concrete of the first floor. As out front, the sea-grapes had held their ground. We went to the north end and looked down at the

pool. It was filled with dirty water and sand. At the south end, I was surprised to see that the putting-green was undamaged, apparently the water had just washed everything right over it. The adjacent sand trap was flooded.

I stepped out onto the dune walkway, holding up my hand to stop Kathleen from following until I was sure it was sturdy, then motioning for her to walk out with me. At the far end, the steps no longer reached the sand, though it wasn't as far a drop as I expected. It appeared the second half of the hurricane, wind in the opposite direction, had brought some of the beach back from the sea. The Atlantic, source of all the damage, was as blue and calm as I had ever seen it, and there was not one boat in sight.

We turned around on the walkway, to look at my house. The roof was intact, not one barrel tile missing. Other than the broken storm-curtain and glass door, we could see no damage. "That Mister Franke was some architect", Kathleen said.

"Well, I guess if you start off to build a bomb shelter, this is what you get."

As we returned to the house, she stopped short of the deck, and turned to me. "Notice anything else?"

"No, what?"

"All the outdoor furniture is gone. Did you put it away?"

"No, I didn't have time. I thought I saw some of it among the debris out front." I shrugged, "It's insured. But since my deductible is something like twenty-thousand..."

“Let’s go out front and see if there’s a way around all that water,” she said. I followed her down the stairway at the north end, and out to what used to be my beautifully landscaped yard.

We walked as far as we could to either end of the property, there was no way past the newly formed pond. “I used to have a couple of plastic kayaks,” I said. “If we can find them, we can cross this water to the road.”

“Mac, if the water is this high up your yard, don’t you think the road below it is flooded?”

“Oh yeah, I guess you’re right.” I stood next to her, watching the water moving almost imperceptibly southward. I had to get out of there. The discovery of that head on my beach was a message. Something had happened that involved me and Su Li, and a sister. I didn’t know what it meant, but it was obvious someone wanted me scared, and had gone to a lot of trouble to do so. Whoever had done it was soon going to realize they had poked the sleeping bear. “We should have hot water now,” I said to Kathleen. “Let’s go in and shower, then figure out what to do.”

Inside, after some teasing from her about conserving hot water by sharing, she went to the guest room and I to my suite, to shower and change. I came out of my bathroom naked, to discover my guest, wet hair slicked back, wrapped in only a towel, once again rummaging through April’s little cache of clothing. Startled, she looked up, staring at me for a second before my nudity registered. Quickly, she turned her eyes back to the drawer while I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around my waist.

“Sorry,” she said as she took some things and closed the bureau drawer. “I thought I would be out of here before you came out.”

“That’s alright, I’m not bashful. Find what you need?”

“Yes, thanks. Same outfit, in white.” Holding her towel in place with one hand and the two little pieces of clothing in the other, she turned to leave the room. At the doorway, she called over her shoulder, “Hey, now if I’m ever asked, I can testify without a doubt, you are a real blond!” She cracked herself up. I could hear her laughing all the way down the hallway.

Wearing April’s white tank-top and shorts, Kathleen came up the stairway to the living room just as I turned the television on. We watched as a bunch of fuzz appeared on the screen. “I thought a sports nut like you would have a satellite dish,” she said.

“I did. It blew away. There’s cable, too, April had it installed for the high speed internet.” I pointed the remote control at the grey screen, and switched it off. “That was the cable. No radio, either. Phone’s still dead.” I tossed the remote onto the sofa, and Kathleen followed me out onto the deck. We leaned on the railing, looking at the calm Atlantic and the perfect sunny day. “We’re just as stranded as we were during the hurricane,” I said.

“I’ll bet the emergency frequencies are back on. We should try my police radio now. I left it in the kitchen; I’ll be right back.” In a minute she returned, radio in hand. “The battery’s dead.”

“Don’t you have a charger?”

“It’s in my car.”

“Let’s go see if we can get it.”

We went through the living room, out the front door, and down the driveway to where her car was wedged against the tree trunks. There was no way we could open the mangled doors.

“Smash a window.”

I looked at her, “Seriously?”

“What’s the difference?”

I shrugged. I found a broken tree limb, and handed it to her. “It’s your car, Officer.”

She hefted it like a baseball bat, closed her eyes, and let fly. The window shattered with a loud crack. She turned to me, swinging her weapon a few times, then tossing it to the ground. “Boy, that felt surprisingly good... should have done that to my ex when I caught him.”

I knocked loose glass from the frame. “Where’s the charger?”

“In the glove box, I think. Is it all wet in there?”

I crawled through the window, feet hanging out. “No,” I called back, “only the floor’s soaked. Amazing.” I pulled the glove box handle and it dropped open. Handcuffs, spare bullet clips, boxes of bullets, notepads... ah, a portable charger. “Got it,” I yelled. “Help me get outa here.” She pulled my feet and I slid back through the window. “Let’s go. I’ll run the generator and we’ll see if we can raise anyone on your radio.”

Back inside, she plugged her charger and radio into an outlet in the kitchen. Then we made some more peanut butter sandwiches, got some now warm sodas, and went out to the end of the dune walk and had lunch. We chatted and laughed about nothing, avoiding the serious subjects, aware that our break from real life was about to end. We jumped down to the beach and took a short walk at water's edge. I found a big conch shell and gave it to her; she said it would always remind her of our cozy shelter from the storm. Then it was time to go back and try her radio. We walked in silence across the walkway and into the house.

Kathleen unplugged the radio from the charger and took it out onto the deck to get an unobstructed signal. She called the dispatcher at police headquarters, and got no answer. Then she tried the desk Sergeant's personal radio.

He answered immediately, so loudly I could hear. "Where have you been? Are you okay? I've been trying to get you since the storm was over; sent a unit to your apartment and no one's in the building."

She put her hand over the mouthpiece, and whispered to me, "It's Sarge. Well, here goes..." Then she moved her hand away and said "I'm fine. I got trapped by the storm, I couldn't get home. How are you? Is everyone alright? I haven't been able to get any news." I watched as she listened. She put her hand over the phone again, and repeated in a whisper: "Power and phones out from Key Largo to Vero Beach... two to three feet of water all the way out to Powerline Road... even parts of I-95 flooded... National Guard on the way... massive destruction... Boca government temporarily setting up out west at a mall... police and fire just reorganizing, they're looking for small boats to patrol in." Now talking to the Sergeant, "Yes, really, I'm fine, thank you. Well I was at the MacKenzie residence on that case, and got flooded in. Yes, I'm still there, there is no way

out. My car was destroyed anyway. From the ocean? At the beach in back of the house? When? Alright, I'll be waiting. Sarge? Can we give Mister MacKenzie a lift, too? Yes, just he and I. Alright, thank you." She put the radiophone down, and turned to me. "You heard? Everything is a mess. Mostly flood damage. Even the Intracoastal Waterway overflowed. They were looking for me, I can imagine the shit I'm going to get from the Captain for being with you. Sarge is sending a friend here with a boat to evacuate us, in about an hour. They'll call me when they clear the inlet, so we can get down to the beach before they get here. Miami's airport is open, so I assume you'll want to hitch a ride with us."

"Yes, thanks. I better go throw some stuff in a bag."

She looked down at her skimpy attire. "And I had better change back into my business suit. There are going to be enough raised eyebrows about where I've been, without adding this outfit to the fire."

I threw clothes for the northern California climate in a big duffel bag, then went to the utility room and threw the switches to close all the storm curtains again, and then turned off the generator. In my office, by flashlight, I jotted Eddie Yee's home and police department numbers, and the Taylor's number, each on two scraps of paper - one for me and one for Sergeant Lynch.

Kathleen was waiting in the living room, re-attired in her suit and carrying her raincoat, purse, high-heeled shoes, and her conch shell.

I dropped my duffel. "I've locked the place down, so we'll go out the front door and walk up the outside stairs to the deck and go down to the beach that way." I handed her the note with the phone numbers; she glanced at it and put it

into her purse. "And here's a key to the front door, just in case. Jo and April have keys, but I don't know where Jo is, and April... Kathleen, when you have time, would you check on Jo for me?" She nodded, yes. "The alarm system will re-arm when the power comes back on. The code is D-A-D, that's 2-1-2, can you remember that?"

She nodded again then stepped close and embraced me, whispering "I won't be able to say goodbye like this once we're on the boat." I hugged her in return. "You have to keep your promise; you will be careful and you will call me." She pulled back a little and looked into my eyes, "And you will come back to Florida. Promise me you will."

"When I'm done."

"I will miss you, Conor MacKenzie." She stood on tiptoe and kissed me. This time, I lightly kissed back.

Then her radio came to life. "This is the Rusted Anchor, calling Detective Sergeant Lynch. We're through the inlet. We'll be off your beach in fifteen minutes and send a skiff to shore for you. Okay?"

She grabbed her radio. "Alright, Rusted Anchor, we'll be on the beach." To me, she said "That's our ride."

I slung my bag over my shoulder, followed her out and locked the door behind me. By the time we had gone down the front steps, then around to climb the outside stairway to the third floor deck, and down the walkway to the beach, the dinghy from the Rusted Anchor was ashore waiting for us.

Out on the boat, a forty-five foot Bertram, the captain introduced himself, and told us the nearest dry land was in

Fort Lauderdale. We cruised south on the smooth Atlantic and an hour later he dropped us at the docks in Port Everglades. I thanked him with a hundred-dollar bill in a handshake, and he headed his boat back out to sea toward Boca to find more stranded storm victims.

A Boca Raton police cruiser was waiting for Kathleen. The uniformed cop inside got out as we approached. "Hey Detective, how you doin'? Hear you lost your vehicle." He nodded to me.

"Yeah," she replied. "I imagine Captain Stoltz will chew me to bits for that."

"Oh, you didn't hear?" He smiled broadly. "Mister Eff-Bee-Freakin'-Eye got himself fired. Couldn't stand bein' cooped up with his Missus that long. Got drunk and beat her up, then drew a gun on an ambulance crew. He's gonna be locked up for a good while." He laughed as he got behind the wheel, "Yeah, we're all really gonna miss that shithead."

I opened the car door for Kathleen. "I guess some hurricanes have a silver lining," I said.

She made a show of shaking my hand, very businesslike, for the officer. "Thank you Mister MacKenzie, for the shelter from the storm." So he wouldn't hear, she silently mouthed "I'll be waiting."

They drove off, then I went into the Port Authority building, borrowed a cellphone, and called for a cab to Miami International.

- TWENTY THREE -

Late that afternoon, I landed in San Francisco, at an airport terminal far more sane than the post-hurricane chaos I had encountered at Miami International. My bag arrived at the carousel shortly after I did, then I went over to Alamo and rented a black Mustang. I drove the half hour into the city, and went directly to the Justice Building on Bryant Street. After passing through the lobby metal detector, I went up to the fourth floor to look for Eddie Yee. A wooden door with an opaque window had '450 Homicide' painted on the glass. I knocked and stepped into the outer reception room. A lone secretary sat among mis-matched file cabinets, her old wooden desk piled high with stacks of papers and folders. To my right, two well worn wood chairs sat under the Homicide division's in/out board. The board displayed one Lieutenant and fourteen Inspectors, SFPD's term for detective. Inspector Yee was listed as off duty.

As I looked at the board, the pleasant and plump secretary asked, "May I help you , Sir?"

"I'm looking for Eddie Yee."

The space was so small, I had to step aside as the door opened behind me. A handsome, very muscular black man entered. He wore a tight navy polo shirt with 'SFPD' in small gold-thread letters on the chest, black slacks, and black shoes with heavy rubber soles. A large automatic pistol was

snapped into a black leather holster worn high on his right hip, and a gold badge that identified him as a Lieutenant was clipped to the left of his belt buckle. He didn't look anything like the homicide cops on TV. Before the secretary could answer me, he said, "Why are you looking for Inspector Yee?"

"I'm an old friend."

He looked at the secretary. "Anything for me, Janet?"

"Captain Marshall said to let him know when you came in, he said he'll come down here."

"Alright, tell him I'm here." To me, he politely said, "Step inside, please, Sir."

I followed him through another wood-framed glass door marked 'Authorized Personnel Only', to the inner office. I expected to see neat individual cubicles. Instead, there was a room about thirty feet square, packed tight with a jumble of mis-matched old desks and filing cabinets, all piled high with mountains of bursting file folders. To a 'neat-freak' like me, it looked like a tornado had dropped every piece of furniture and all the paper from the whole building into one little room. One Inspector sat at a desk, pecking away at the keys of a lap-top. The Lieutenant, again very politely, asked, "May I see some identification, Sir?"

I took my driver's license from my wallet and handed it to him.

He looked at it carefully. "You're a long way from home, Mister MacKenzie; how do you know Inspector Yee?"

“I lived here a long time ago. Eddie introduced me to my girlfriend.”

He handed back my license, extended his hand, and we shook. “I’m David Roberts. Ed is on vacation in Hawaii, he’ll be back day after tomorrow. Is there something I can help you with?”

“No, thanks. I’m on my way to Carmel, I own a house there. Just thought I’d touch base with Ed on my way through”, I lied.

“I’ll tell him you were here. Does he have your number down there?”

“Tell him he can find me through Taylor. Doctor Taylor. Thanks.”

As I was about to leave, the Captain walked in. I expected him to be in a dark business suit, instead he wore a crisp white uniform shirt, black tie with an SFPD clasp, and dark uniform slacks. There was a gun on his hip and a gold badge pinned to his shirt pocket. Silver-haired and with a military bearing, he shook my hand in a friendly way when the Lieutenant introduced us. “We are very proud of Edward, he is the first Asian to make Homicide Inspector.”

We all shook hands again and I left, waving to the secretary as I went out. I had never met such polite policemen before, except for Kathleen Lynch.

On the way to my car, I stopped at the MacDonald’s adjacent to the Justice Building and bought a fish sandwich for the road. Big Mac’s was full of rough characters, and a line of hookers waited to use the pay phone in the parking lot. Nothing about this whole stop to see Eddie had been as I had expected.

I took the Mustang up the ramp to the 101 Freeway, drove the short distance to the Pacifica exit, down the steep hill to the ocean side Cabrillo Highway, Route 1, and headed south toward Monterey. An hour-and-a-half later, I slowed as I passed the outlook lot where Su Li's car had gone over the cliff. There was a steel guardrail at the edge now. Knowing I would go back there the next day, I drove on. It was dusk, and I had to find a hotel room before everything closed up for the night. I checked into the Monterey Plaza on the Bay, then walked down the road and had a crab sandwich at a bar on Cannery Row. Then I went back to my hotel room and tried to sleep. Tomorrow, the work would begin.

In the morning, I threw on a sweater and had eggs at the hotel's bay-side deck restaurant, while I thought of a plan. I had known a cop in Carmel on an informal basis; maybe if he asked some questions instead of me, it wouldn't raise an immediate red flag. I decided to drive down there first, and pay him a visit.

The hotel parking valet brought my car around, and I drove south. As soon as I left the hotel driveway, I noticed a Monterey police cruiser behind me. Thinking that was just coincidence, I made sure to go exactly the speed limit through town. When I left the city limits and got onto Route 1, the squad car continued to follow, and it seemed less coincidental. They followed me all the way to Carmel, making no effort to be inconspicuous. I turned off the highway, drove slowly down the hill into town, then off to a side street to the little police station. Typical of Carmel, it blended in; if you weren't looking for it, you wouldn't notice it. I parked the Mustang right in front. The Monterey cruiser stopped two spaces away. As I walked to the station door, I smiled to myself; whatever those two cops were up to, I was sure they didn't expect the police department to be my destination.

Inside, one young uniformed policeman sat at a desk studying what appeared to be a procedural training guide. Four empty desks and some file cabinets were arrayed behind him. The room was perfectly neat, not a stray paperclip in sight. All of the furniture and table lamps were beautiful antique reproductions. Extremely wealthy town equals nice digs for the civil servants.

The young cop immediately put his book down and stood, almost at attention. "Yes Sir, may I be of assistance, Sir?"

"I wonder if Corporal Lutz is around today. I used to live here, and I thought I'd say hello while I'm visiting."

"Yes Sir, I remember you Mister MacKenzie. I used to work over at the golf course in the summers. William Sanchez... Billy."

Ten years will change a high-school kid into a grown man. I looked more closely at him, then stuck out my right hand. "Billy, of course. You worked with the Greens-keeper. How are you?"

"Just fine, Sir. I started on the force here three months ago, waited two years to get in. Your friend Corporal Lutz left just when I got the job. He's in the Army Reserves, got called up. I hear he's somewhere in the Middle East now, but he's okay as far as we know."

"I hope he stays that way."

"Is there something else I can do for you, Sir?"

"Yeah, stop calling me Sir, you're making me feel old. It's Mac. I don't think so, Billy, but I'll let you know if there is."

“I’ll walk out with you”, he said, as I opened the door to leave. As we walked toward my car, Billy noticed the two cops in the Monterey cruiser watching us. “Wonder what those guys are doing here?”

“Beats me. They followed me all the way from the Monterey Plaza. I didn’t break any laws.”

Billy grinned at me. He was going to have a little fun. “Well let’s find out, c’mon with me.” I followed him as he went to the cruiser and leaned down to the driver’s window. “Can I help you fellas?”

The driver looked straight ahead at his windshield. “No, we don’t need no help.”

“You’re a little outa your jurisdiction, aren’t you? You lost?”

“We ain’t lost.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

The cop in the passenger seat piped up, “We’re just doing some shopping.”

“Well then you are lost for sure. This isn’t a store, it’s the Carmel PD”. He straightened up and pointed south, “The shopping district is over that way, on Ocean Avenue, the same road you came in on. Guess you two have never been to Carmel before.” Neither cop replied; he had embarrassed them. Billy took a step back and stood beside me. Hands on hips, and with a big smile, he spoke a little louder than necessary, “You two officers have a real good shopping trip. And don’t forget to put money in the meter, we’re almost as good at writing tickets as you are.”

The cops had no choice. They backed up and drove away. We watched as they disappeared from sight. "I hate those pricks", Billy said. "When I was a kid, every time I went downtown, I got a parking ticket. They think they run the whole peninsula." He turned to face me, "I don't know what those two were up to, but they weren't following you on their own. They probably had orders from Chief Gonzalez." He reached into his shirt pocket, and handed me his card. "I remember when your wife died and you moved away, Mac. Everyone was sorry to see you go. It's good to have you back. If I can do anything for you, my cell number's on there."

We shook hands. "Thank you, Billy, I'll remember that". He watched as I drove away.

I turned west on Ocean, drove down the steep hill, and parked at the bottom near the beach. 'So Gonzalez is Monterey's Police Chief now', I thought as I walked to the rehab hospital, 'it didn't take him long to find out I'm here. Ten years later, he still has a grudge'.

In the hospital lobby, I asked the receptionist for Doctor Taylor. She remembered me. "It's nice to see you walking so well, Mister MacKenzie. I'm afraid Doctor Taylor isn't here. Would you like to speak with someone else?"

"No, thank you. Does Taylor still work here?"

"Oh yes, he's our Chief of Medicine. But he spends two days a week doing surgery up at San Francisco General. He will be here tomorrow, may I give him a message?"

"No. I'll stop back later in the week. Thanks."

I got in the car and drove back to Monterey. Their Police Department is in a grey brick ranch house on a quiet suburban residential street. A grey brick monument on the lawn says Monterey Police Department. I parked across the road, walked over and went into the small lobby. There was an opaque sliding glass window like those in doctor's offices; I knocked on it. I waited about a minute and was about to knock again, when the glass slid open.

A husky young woman with short blond hair looked surprised to see someone in the waiting area. Apparently, they didn't get many visitors. "Can I help you?", she asked brusquely.

I decided to try the folksy approach. I read the nameplate pinned to her uniform shirt. "Boy, I sure hope so, Sergeant Shreckengost, 'cause I'm kinda shootin' in the dark." I gave her a Lost Boy look.

"It's Officer, not Sergeant." Her expression softened as she anticipated a tourist's question. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, it's kind of a sad story, really. About ten years ago, my wife died in a car accident here. Well, now I have a good friend who's a doctor, and he's doing a study on auto accident injuries, and when I told him about my wife, he asked if I could get him a copy of her autopsy report."

Her face tightened again. "We can't just hand out copies of our reports."

"Well, I'm next-of-kin, and I sure would appreciate if you could help my doctor friend out with his project."

"I'm sorry, his project isn't our concern."

The folksy approach wasn't working. "It is public record, Officer. You can't withhold it. Freedom of Information Act and all that."

I was right, and she knew it. "Even if I could find a ten year old file, which I doubt, I don't have the authority to give it to you. You'll probably have to fill out some forms, then the city attorney will consider them." She handed me a notepad and pen. "Write your name, address, and telephone number. Someone will call you to pick up the forms." I wrote my name and hotel information and gave the pad back to her. She looked at it, then up at me, a glint of recognition in her eyes. "Okay Mister MacKenzie, I'm sure you will hear from us in the near future."

I thanked her, went across the street to my car, and sat there thinking. I had hoped to catch an unwary office clerk off guard, and have a copy of the autopsy report handed to me without question. Officer Shreckengost had been neither naive nor lazy. Now I would have to do it officially. They would have to release the information, but I had no doubt that once Gonzalez saw who was requesting it, it would be delayed indefinitely. There had to be another way.

I decided to go back to the hotel and have a beer on the deck while I thought about my next move. As I drove away from the police department, my two escorts in their cruiser appeared in my rear-view mirror. I drove well below the speed limit, just to bug them. They followed me to the hotel, and parked across the street as I gave the Mustang to the valet. I gave them a big smile and wave as I went through the lobby doors.

Just for fun, I decided to give them a treat. In the lobby bar, I told a pretty black waitress that two friends of mine were waiting for me in their squad car out front, and would she take them a couple of snacks while they waited?

“ ‘Beverly Hills Cop’, huh?”, she smiled broadly. “I guess that makes you Eddie Murphy.”

“He was Axel Foley. You’re very sharp.” I dropped a fifty-dollar bill onto her tray. “Take them a couple of sodas, will you? And tell them Mac says he’ll be awhile.”

The fifty went into her low-cut bra. “I think I can find them a few donuts, too,” she grinned, “okay?”

I shook my head, laughing, “Oh, that will be priceless. Thanks.”

A little while later, as I was drinking a beer and watching kayakers navigate past harbor seals, the bar-maid found me. “I told Ronnie, the parking valet, what I was doing. He has a digital camera.” She leaned over, displaying some spectacular cleavage. “See?” I was distracted. “Not *there*, Honey. Here on the screen on the camera.” There were two photos: first the cops accepting the refreshments from her, the next of just the cops in the car, happily munching donuts and drinking Pepsi. I laughed out loud. “Want me to get Ronnie to print these?”

“Absolutely. Here.” I tried to give her another twenty.

“Keep that, Mac. You gave me and Ronnie a good story to tell. I felt like I was in a movie. Ronnie will leave your prints at the front desk. Want us to send anonymous copies to the police department?”

“Oh yeah. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” She leaned toward me again, giving me another visual treat. “I get off at nine, if you’re around.” Not awaiting an answer, she sauntered away.

I had a cheeseburger at the outdoor restaurant, then decided to go to my room and try to call Eddie. On my way to the elevator, the front desk clerk called me over and gave me an envelope with the pictures, and a telephone message.

The phone message was from Officer Shreckengost. It read simply: 'There is no record of an autopsy. Sorry I couldn't help.' I stood there and stared at the note. Could that be true?

Up in my room, I dialed SFPD and asked for Inspector Yee. When I told the secretary my name, she told me he wasn't yet back from his trip. I left my hotel number for him.

Jet lag took over my body, and I laid on the bed to rest my eyes for a few minutes. I awakened four hours later, at dusk. I had planned to inspect the cliff where Su Li's car had gone over, and I wanted to do that on the dark road, just as she had seen it on the night she died. I still didn't believe she had driven recklessly and fast enough to go through the earthen blockade.

The valet brought the black car around, and without my police escort, I drove north on Highway 1 as darkness fell. Fifteen minutes later, I slowed as I came to the spot. It was slightly downhill going north, which meant she had been going uphill. She also would have had to make a very sudden right turn to get into the small dirt parking lot. I continued north until I could turn around and go back toward her "accident" scene. I drove the Mustang over the speed limit, tires screeching at every curve. Going uphill as I came to the lot, I tried to steer the car onto the dirt, sliding sideways and almost spinning into the cliff wall on the opposite side of the road.

I turned north again, turned around and went south at exactly the speed limit. Again, the car couldn't make the turn into the parking lot. "If a sports car can't do it", I thought, "then her big Mercedes certainly couldn't." I once again went north, turned around, and when I came to the spot, I had to slow to under twenty miles per hour to turn in. That wouldn't have been enough speed to smash through the barrier. I backed the Mustang's rear tires up to the edge of the highway pavement, and pointed it at the ocean. Only if I floored it, would it probably go through an earthen dam and over the cliff. Now, for the first time, I was positive that Su Li's death had not been an accident.

I pulled forward to the new steel guardrail, got out of the car, and looked down the moonlit cliff at the dark waves crashing loudly against the rocks below. Suddenly I felt piercing pain as something hit my left kidney, then a hard thud to the back of my head. I must have lost consciousness, because the next thing I felt was cold water, then I was fighting the undertow to swim to the rocky shore. I managed to get there and pulled myself up onto a flat boulder above the teeming water. I laid there for quite some time, passing in and out of consciousness, wet, cold, and in considerable pain. I was awakened for good by a seal nudging me, then it's whiskers tickling my face. Apparently, I was on her perch. I tried to get up on hands and knees. I was dizzy, everything was spinning, my head throbbed and I hurt all over. I couldn't remember how the hell I had gotten there. The seal sat next to me quietly observing, as if humans washed up on her rock every night.

Eventually I managed to sit up. "Well, Ollie, here's another fine mess you've gotten us into", I said to my companion. She didn't laugh. I guessed seals never saw Laurel and Hardy films.

The moon had risen higher while I napped on the rock, and now I could see that a narrow pathway had been cut through the scrub-brush into the cliff-face by storm water runoff. I would have to go back into the water and swim to it. Bidding my sleek friend farewell, I timed the waves and slipped into a calm interval. The seal followed behind, watching the crazy human. I swam a few yards, then treaded water as I timed the waves again. I caught a high one and let it carry me over the rocks and up to the trail in the cliff wall. Clambering up above the water line, I rested for a minute, then began clawing my way up through the dirt and loose rock. It took me the better part of an hour to make it to the top. I fought through the thick vegetation up there, got to the guardrail, and flopped myself over it. So exhausted I couldn't move, I lay sprawled on my back on the dirt looking up at the sky, dizzily trying to make the stars hold their places. Once I got them to stay relatively still, I looked over at the parking lot. Then I propped up on my elbows and looked again. The fucking Mustang was gone. Shit. It was a long way back to Monterey on foot. I rolled over and stood, steadying myself against the steel rail. Watching the waves break on the rocks below, I realized that whoever had thrown me down there had accidentally timed my landing to the precise moment when the water was deepest, and at the one small space where there were no boulders. Amazing luck for me; really bad luck for them when I found out who it was. I still had my watch, my wallet and two thousand dollars cash were still in my jeans pockets; so obviously their motive wasn't robbery. Somebody was sure going to be surprised to see me. My money was on Gonzalez, or whoever had murdered Su Li, or both. I'd start with the cop.

I started walking south, hoping to hitch a ride, not worried about encountering my attackers - there had to be two in order to take my car - they would be certain I was dead. It was freezing in my wet clothes; I had forgotten how

bone-chilling damp and cold the northern California coast gets at night. And desolate. Traffic here at night was infrequent. Covered in mud and dust, hands bloody from climbing through rocks, I doubted anyone would stop for me. As I trudged along, wondering how many hours it would take me to get to a pay phone, I realized how lucky I was my shoes had stayed on. If I was in Vegas right now, I'd literally bet the farm.

During the first hour, only three cars passed. Not one even slowed. I didn't blame them, I wouldn't stop for me either. I heard the fourth one coming from far away, Mexican music from it's radio loudly echoing off the cliff walls. It was an old pickup truck that used to be red, now faded to terracotta; and it slowed as it approached me. I stuck out my thumb. They stopped. There were three guys crowded into the front seat, obviously farm laborers, their faces dark and lined from the sun.

"Hey Amigo," the driver yelled over the music, "you fall off your tractor?" They all laughed like that was the best joke they'd ever heard.

"I'm a dirt farmer. I like to get close to my work."

He explained my reply in Spanish to his two buddies. They all laughed even harder. "You want a ride, dirt farmer? Where you going?"

"Yeah. To the nearest pay phone."

The truck started moving. "Hop in back, Chico!", he yelled, and we drove off, the three guys in the cab all singing along with the music at the top of their lungs.

Twenty minutes later, the truck rumbled to a stop at an intersection with a dirt road that went east toward the

mountain farmlands. "This as far as we go, Muchacho", the driver yelled through the open cab window. "Down the hill, there's a lil' cantina. They got a pay phone out back. You got change?"

I hopped painfully out of the truck bed and walked around to his window. "Yeah, I have some quarters. When you get home, look in your toolbox back there. I left you something." I had stuffed three fifties in the box.

"You don't have to give us nothin', Man."

"And you didn't have to stop to pick me up. Muchas gracias."

"De nada. Buena suerte!", he yelled as he roared off.

A ten minute walk down to the bottom of the hill, I found the cantina. It was an old weathered grey one story building, combination grocery and bar. There were three dirty pickups parked in the dirt and gravel lot out front. I went directly around back and found the pay phone. Digging my wallet from my back pocket, I found Billy Sanchez' wet card. I dropped two quarters and dialed his cell phone.

He answered on the fourth ring. "Officer Sanchez."

"Billy, it's Conor MacKenzie."

"Hey Mac, how's it going?"

"Not so good, Billy. I've had some car trouble up north. I'm stranded in the middle of nowhere, and I don't want to deal with the Monterey cops. I hate to ask, but do you think you could send someone to give me a ride? I'll make it worth their while."

“I’m off duty, Mac. I’ll come get you. Do you know where you are?”

I gave him the name of the general store, told him I would wait out back, and asked him not to tell anyone.

Half an hour later, his squad car rolled behind the cantina, and I got into the passenger seat. He looked at my appearance, and said “Jesus, Mac, looks like you had a pretty bad accident. Where’s your car?”

“The car’s gone. It was no accident. Can you turn on the heater, please?”

I filled him in on what had happened, and asked him not to report it. Since technically, what had happened was out of his jurisdiction, he agreed. But he insisted that I couldn’t go back and stay in the hotel; if I did, whoever had tossed me off the cliff would know I was alive. His plan was to go to the hotel, show his badge, and have them give him all my belongings. I would lie down in the car so no one would see me. If anyone was watching for me, when a cop took my stuff, they would be reassured I was dead.

It went according to his plan. He said both the desk clerk and the bellhop who had let him into my room were very curious. He gave them a receipt for my things, and told them he wasn’t supposed to talk about it, but off-the-record, Mister MacKenzie was missing. After that, he was sure that anyone interested would get the news.

Billy said I should stay the night at his place. On the way there, he called in an APB for my rental Mustang, reporting it stolen. At his apartment in the valley east of Carmel, I showered, bandaged my wounds, and changed into dry clothes. We sat at the kitchen table, having sandwiches and beer while I iced my head and we discussed what to do next.

“In the morning, I’ll call Chief Gonzalez in Monterey, and tell him someone tried to kill you. It’s his jurisdiction, he can initiate an investigation.”

“We can’t do that, Billy. I’m sure the bastard was involved. Either he knocked me out himself, or he knows who did.”

Sanchez was surprised. “Look, Mac, I don’t like the guy. Hardly anyone does. But as far as I know, he’s on the up and up.”

“He thinks I killed my ex-wife. He threatened me back then. He knows I’m here now. And I believe her parents paid him to take care of me.”

“Then if he was involved, he thinks you’re dead.”

“Exactly. And if he’s surprised to see me in the morning, I’ll know I was right. Will you take me over to Doctor Taylor’s house before you go to work? I need transportation; I’ll borrow my old car for awhile.”

I crashed on his sofa, exhausted. When I was awakened at six-thirty the next morning, evidence of my adventures the previous night had shown up on my body. I was stiff and sore and covered with bruises. A very hot shower loosened me up a little. Billy took me to get lots of hot coffee and breakfast, then we drove out to the Taylor place.

Taylor was coming out the front door as the police car parked in his driveway. Billy and I stepped out. “Mac? What the hell...?”

“Hey Sport, howya doing?” We shook hands. “Meet Billy Sanchez.”

“We know each other; hello Bill. Mac, when did you get in? Why didn’t you call? And what’s with the police escort?”

The police officer interrupted, “Gentlemen, I have to get to work. Nice to see you Doctor Taylor. Mac, let me know what you find out this morning.” As he turned in the driveway, he called out the window, “Mac! Be careful!”

“What did he mean by that?”, Taylor asked.

“Taylor, I need a car. Do you still have the Porsche?”

“Of course. It’s in the garage. Take it.”

While we got the car, I told him why I was back in California, leaving out the part about going over the cliff; if I had told him, he might have insisted upon going with me. I explained the cuts on my hands were from clearing hurricane debris.

The old car was in excellent condition, and started right up. Taylor invited me to stay with them. I told him I didn’t know where I would be, but I would get the Porsche back to him as soon as I could. Then I was on the road north for a surprise visit with Chief Gonzalez.

In Monterey, I drove past the police station, turned around and parked on the same side about fifty yards up the hill, where I could watch the whole building. I wanted to catch Gonzalez in the parking lot; if I went into the lobby and asked for him, he would have time to compose himself. I needed to see his eyes the instant he recognized me.

He came out the back door at noon, heading out to lunch. Fatter than the last time I saw him, and his thick hair gone pale grey, it took me a second to recognize him. By the time he had waddled to his car, I had drifted the Porsche into the parking lot. I coasted right next to him as he unlocked the door, and rolled down my window.

The insistent whirring-machinery sound of the turbocharged racing engine and loud thrumming of the exhaust got his attention, and he turned to look. Dressed in a police uniform dandied up enough to suit a South American dictator, he puffed himself up to his full five-foot-five height. “Heard you were here, MacKenzie. Hoped you were on vacation. But I figured, one way or another, you would eventually find some way to bug me. What’s it been, twelve years?”

I was the one who was surprised. Not only was he not shocked to see me, he had been expecting me. “More like ten”, I answered.

He leaned his backside against his unmarked police car; it visibly moved from the weight. “Not long enough. I almost made it to retirement. What the fuck you want this time?”

I got out of my car. “Some stuff has come up recently. It may pertain to my ex-wife’s death. I’d like to look at her file again. I think you guy’s might have missed something.”

He was completely calm. This was not what I had expected. “Listen MacKenzie, you were cleared. She had a bad accident - that’s that. If you have some new evidence, you need to turn it over to me and I’ll have my people look into it. We can’t have you running around out here playing

detective. I just won't allow it, and this time you can't go over my head."

"There is no actual evidence. Just my instinct. The investigation is closed, so the file is public record. I will have a lawyer petition for it if I have to."

I thought that would bring out his temper, especially if he was hiding something. He sighed audibly, and stood straight. The car leveled itself. "Be here at two. But you can't take it out of the building, you will have to read it here. And an officer will be watching you." He turned, opened his car door, and sat heavily. "Now let me get my lunch, if you haven't already ruined it." He started his car and drove off.

I watched him go around the corner, then left the parking lot myself. Two hour's wait; I might as well get some food too. I drove to a diner in the northern suburbs away from the tourist areas. Anyone looking for me wouldn't be watching that part of town. Although Gonzalez had not reacted as expected, I still didn't trust him. As I ate a hot meatloaf sandwich, I thought I should call Kathleen Lynch as promised, but decided against it. If she heard about my moonlight swim, she would certainly be on a plane out here; and I didn't want that.

At two o'clock, I tapped on the glass in the police station lobby, and Officer Shreckengost slid the window open. "I'm MacKenzie. Chief Gonzalez is expecting me."

"Yes, he told me to take care of you. Go over there to the door, I'll let you in." She opened the door, then closed it behind me. "You can use that desk over there", she pointed to an empty desk in the middle of the squad room. "The file the Chief told me to give you is there. There is paper and a pen. I will be right here at my desk if you need anything else."

She watched as I pulled out the chair and sat, then went back to her work. There were two folders, one about the accident scene, the other with the investigator's notes. I had seen the accident report before, so the graphic detail wasn't shocking this time. It said Su Li had been thrown from the Mercedes as it went down the cliff. All the car doors had burst open. That didn't seem right. Her seatbelt was unlatched. I had always doubted that. Her purse was found in the car, contents intact. The crash scene investigator estimated the car had been going forty to fifty miles per hour when it broke through the earthen barrier. From my own tests yesterday, I now knew that was not possible. I copied that statement.

I had not seen the investigator's notes when I had been shown the file years ago. That wasn't surprising, since at that time it was still an active investigation which included me. There were handwritten notes from interviews with the accident scene investigator, tow-truck driver, a call to the San Francisco Mercedes dealership ("The seatbelt, if properly buckled, could not release during a collision."), me ("Ex-husband un-cooperative."), and my two alibi's (Jim and the gate guard). It concluded with an official form filled out in detail and signed by Gonzalez and Smith, ruling Su Li's death an accident, and closing the case.

They had failed to do the simple driving test I had done at the scene, and thus had missed the obvious - it could not be an accident if the car couldn't physically make that turn.

I looked for the autopsy report. There was none, so I motioned to Shreckengost.

"Yes?", she said.

"The autopsy report isn't here. May I see it?"

She picked up the folder and paged through it. "Apparently, no autopsy was conducted."

"Is that normal in a case of a single car cliff side fatality?"

"No. There is always an autopsy. To determine alcohol toxicity, heart attack, whatever." She looked down at the folder in her hand. "Let me ask the Chief, I'll be right back."

She returned with Gonzalez, nodded to me and went back to her desk.

He dropped the folder onto the desk in front of me. "This is all we have, MacKenzie. I don't know where the autopsy report went, but I'm not keeping it from you. Monterey doesn't do them. We send bodies to the Medical Examiner's in San Francisco. Maybe they never sent us a copy."

"You never saw an autopsy report?"

"I didn't need to. The only suspect," this said with a hard stare at me, "for anything other than an accident, had an airtight alibi."

"It wasn't an accident."

"Oh? Are you confessing something?"

"No. Read the scene report. Go out and try to make that turn at forty." I stood and walked to the door. As I closed it behind me, I turned and said to Gonzalez, "You were so full of hate for me, you did a half-assed investigation. That was no accident."

- TWENTY FOUR -

I got into the Porsche. Gonzalez hadn't covered anything up; the only thing he was guilty of was being a lousy cop and an asshole. And maybe a bit anti-Gringo.

In my mind, that left only one disturbing possibility for Su Li's murder. I started the car and headed for San Francisco.

After three hours of fighting through rush hour traffic, I checked into the Saint Francis on Union Square. As soon as I got into the room, I phoned the Homicide Division. Eddie was back from vacation, and at his desk.

"Mac! They told me you had been here looking for me. But you didn't leave a number, I didn't know where to find you."

"I went down to Monterey."

"To Taylor's?"

"In a 'round-about way, yeah. When do you get off duty?"

"In about an hour. I'll pick you up and we'll get dinner. Where are you staying?"

"The Saint Francis. I'm registered as Mac O'Connor."

“Oh, you’ve moved up in the world. Why the disguise? Never mind, I’ll be out front at seven, you can tell me then.”

That gave me time to send my dirty cliff-diving clothes to the hotel laundry, and soak my bruised body in the Jacuzzi tub in the bathroom. Promptly at seven, as the doorman at the entrance bade me a good evening, Eddie arrived in a police-issue plain black Chevrolet.

He jumped out and gave me a buddy hug and a slap on the back. “Man, it is great to see you! You look better than you did ten years ago, all tan and buff. Hop in, we’ll go to the Grubstake for a burger and shake.”

I got in and he drove off. Ed wore a dark grey double-breasted suit, white shirt, black tie, and black Gucci loafers. Perfect hair. Typically fastidious for him. “So where’s the motocross jacket and Trans-Am?”, I asked.

“I’m Homicide now. No more Gang-and-Vice flash. We do serious work.”

“In five-hundred dollar suits and Gucci loafers.”

“Eight-hundred, actually”, he smiled at my jibe. “You have some explaining to do. Ten years of silence, I don’t know where you have gone, then out of the blue I get a strange fax from you, from a Florida area code.”

At the top of Van Ness, he made a right turn on Pine Street and parked in a tow-away zone half way down the steep hill. He placed a Police sign on the dashboard, and we walked to the diner at the bottom of the street. The Grubstake is an actual railroad dining car. About seventy years ago the original owner had it pushed into a narrow

space between buildings, and it has been there almost unchanged since. It's famous for Bogart's character in the movie "Dark Passage" stopping there, for being open twenty-two hours a day, and for good hearty food. We climbed the steps to it's screen door, and Ed went to a table where he could watch the street - his habit hadn't changed.

"All right, Tan Guy, what is your story?"

I told Eddie the outline of my past ten years, that my father had died, that I had found a home and a new life in Boca Raton. And that I made a living as an Interior Designer... which was BS, but I didn't want to go into the whole money thing. He laughed at the Designer business - ("Did you just wake up gay one day? Are you on my team now?") - and I assured him that I had a steady girlfriend... or used to.

When it came to explaining the fax I had sent him, and why I was suddenly back in California, I went into full detail, from the morning I found the head on the beach, up to that afternoon at the Monterey police station. He asked professional questions all through. To my surprise, he agreed with not informing the Monterey police about my seaside attack the previous night. Sanchez had reported the rental car as stolen, and there were no witnesses to corroborate my story. It appeared as though I was mugged simply to get the Mustang. Ed didn't believe that any more than I did.

"So what do you think has happened?", Yee asked.

I leaned toward him across the table, speaking low so I wouldn't be overheard. "I think... no, I *know*, that Su Li was murdered. I think she had a twin sister, which your translation of the tattoo confirms. I think the twin had discovered what had really happened to her sister, and that she had somehow found me and was coming to tell me about

it, and got herself killed. I think the murderer isn't sure if the sister talked to me or not, and that display on the beach was a warning to keep it to myself if she had. I think I am *very* pissed off that someone killed my wife and got away with it. I know I am going to find out who did it, and give Su Li vengeance. Someone is going to die, Eddie. And if it's me, I'm not dying alone."

"I have never seen you angry, Mac," he moved away from me a bit, "and I am sure glad I am not the target of it." Looking around to be sure no one could overhear us, he leaned closer again, speaking quietly, but slowly. "You can't just come out here and start killing people. And you are incredibly fortunate you didn't die yourself, last night." Pounding a fist lightly on the table for emphasis, he said, "For God's sake, Mac, I am a cop. It is my job to prevent things like that!"

"You're a Homicide Inspector, not Preventer. It's your job to figure out what happened afterward. I'm telling you what is going to happen, as your friend. You can either help, or stay out of my way. I'll understand if you don't want to be involved because of your job. But you won't stop me Eddie, this is too personal."

He sat back, sighed heavily, and loosened his tie, as if a little sloppiness would change who he was. "Alright. How do you intend to find this person?"

"Whoever it is must be connected to her family in some way. And they had enough money to grease palms and make things disappear after they killed Su Li. Maybe they are extorting the old man, and the murders are reminders that they are serious. Certainly her parents wanted me out of the picture back then; they didn't want me stirring things up. Last night proved that. Somebody is afraid of me, for what

I know or might find out. Either way, they couldn't afford to have me screwing up their deal. Now they think I am dead and the problem is solved. That's my advantage; I'll just blunder around until I surprise the right person and they have to deal with me again. I'm the bait."

"That sounds plausible. What do you want me to do?"

"Use your Chinatown connections. See if there is any gossip about the Chin family, or his business affairs. Find out if I'm right about the extortion. Also, you can talk to the Medical Examiner on an official basis, since you are in the Homicide division. Who did the autopsy? Why didn't a copy get to the Monterey cops - or did it? Let's try to at least get it on record as a murder."

"What will you be doing?"

"I'm going to be the pain-in-the-ass Son-in-Law. I want to find out if they are surprised I am alive. I'll shake the family up and see what falls out."

"I can only watch your back when I am off duty. And if I catch a case, I will be tied up. You better be careful." He leaned close and whispered, "Conor, you want a gun?"

"Huh-uh, I've never fired one. I might hurt myself." I pointed under the table. "There is a very sharp dive-knife in a sheath strapped to my calf right now. That's unexpected. And silent. Now let's get some of their famous pie." Ed had apple. I had banana cream. While we ate, he told me about his Hawaiian vacation with his new roommate, and his personal and professional life. We agreed to meet for lunch the next day, to compare notes.

When my friend left me at the hotel, I didn't burden him with knowledge of my plans for that evening. If something went wrong, he could honestly tell his boss that he didn't know what I was up to.

The sun that had shone so brightly earlier in the day had disappeared, replaced now by encroaching fog and bone-chilling cold. With my intended activities for the coming night in mind, I pulled on dark jeans, a black turtleneck sweater, my black Nikes, and a black windbreaker. I left my room at the Saint Francis, went across Bush Street, climbed the steps up into the park, and sat on a damp bench to wait for night to fall upon the city.

Surrounded by opulent stores like Tiffany's, Saks, Gucci, and Neiman Marcus, Union Square Park is a very small island of green floating in a canyon of brick, stone, and concrete. It was deserted at dusk, except for me and a half dozen homeless men. They were already bedded down for the night, laying on cardboard placed over the small patches of grass, covering themselves with five or six blankets and sheets of plastic retrieved from construction sites. Conspicuous spending and destitution existing side by side, the little park is a microcosm of the disparity between those who *have*, and those who *don't*.

Su Li and I had come shopping here once... a lifetime ago. After wandering through the stores and buying a few things for our house in Carmel, we rested in the park. Holding hands as always, we sat in the sun and watched laughing little girls play hopscotch. We put our arms around each other, she laid her head against my chest, and for the first time, we talked about having a family. That simple day had been one of the best of my life. The difference between that day and this one, could not have been greater.

As darkness gathered momentum, I pulled my collar tighter against the chill. The stores were closing now, and late shoppers hurried by with their new possessions, hoping

not to be accosted by the resident beggars and thieves. I was left alone as if on a deserted island - somehow they all knew to stay away.

Street lamps began to come on, their light luminescent in the heavy fog which was pouring between the high-rise buildings. A perfect night for me to pay an unexpected visit to Su Li's parents. I put my memories away, left the park, crossed Post Street, and walked up the hill on Grant into Chinatown. Hundreds of neon signs hanging above storefronts lit crowded sidewalks and traffic filled streets. I went along with the masses, as good as invisible; just another blue-eyed blond among all the German and Scandinavian tourists. The crowds and bright lights dwindled with each block, as I left Chinatown behind and walked up the steep grade to Nob Hill.

It was fully dark by the time I arrived at the Chin house. The top and bottom floors were dark, but the windows of the second and third glowed. "Good", I thought, "they're home but not expecting company." The white limestone blocks of the building's facade were separated by deep, wide grooves of mortar, perfect for climbing. I went to the side courtyard, out of sight, and scaled the wall, then worked my way across and dropped onto the second floor balcony. The french doors were curtained with sheer fabric; lit from within, I could see clearly into the living room. I crouched and waited. Mrs. Chin went into the room, sat on a sofa and used the remote control to turn on the television. Shortly thereafter, a stocky grey-haired Asian gentleman clad in a red silk sweatsuit, joined her. He took the remote from the coffee table and turned the volume up quite high, then sat in a lounge chair. I assumed that he was Su Li's father.

I waited for a few minutes, giving them time to get absorbed in their program, then slowly tried the handle of one of the doors. As expected, it was locked. I would have to use my knife to pry open the latch, which of course would

set off the alarm system. Whatever I said first would have to convince them to turn it off. As I pondered what that would be, Mrs. Chin rose from her sofa, walked to the middle set of doors, and opened them about a foot. My cliff-diving luck was continuing. The man shouted in Chinese at her over the din of the TV, and she shouted back at him as she sat. I imagined the exchange was typical man versus woman versus thermostat: 'Why did you open those, it's cold in here already.' 'Well I'm hot, so get used to it.'

At that moment, I stepped through the doors and closed them behind me. Then I calmly walked to the television and turned it off. I stood next to it facing them, watching for their reactions to seeing me alive. They both stared blankly at me, as if the television had suddenly converted to 3-D and I was a part of the new program. It took a few seconds for them to realize I was real.

The old man spoke first, but not to me. He yelled at his wife in heavily accented English, "Now see what you have done? I tlel you evely time: Not open the dol! Now you got us lobbed and kliled!" He started to get out of his chair. I held up my hand to halt him and he stayed seated. "Who are you? What do you want? We have no money here!"

The woman spoke calmly with a British accent, just as she had the only other time we had met, when I surprised her in this very room. "This is Mister MacKenzie, Dear", she said to her husband. "He has not come for money, he has quite enough of his own. Mister MacKenzie was our dear departed Su Li's husband, until she came to her senses and returned home to us. Well, Mister MacKenzie," she admonished, "I should think that after all this time, even you would have realized it polite to call beforehand for an appointment, and make a proper entrance. Your manners are quite appalling, it seems our daughter was unable to influence them. Perhaps that is why she divorced you."

"I had no daughter!'", Chin blustered. "No daughter of mine would betray her lace and marry a white man!"

"Now Husband", she said, and reached to pat his arm, "our Su Li made a mistake. But she came back, did she not?"

"She never apologized to her father", he mumbled. "She never even tried. She was not my daughter anymore." He would not even look at me.

"And so you observe the consequence of your actions and those of my daughter, Mister MacKenzie", she said. "Our family has never been the same. Now please, unless you have come to do us harm, sit down like a gentleman and tell us what has brought you here tonight. You are causing us to miss our favorite program."

This was amazing. I had broken into their house, and not only had I not yet had an opportunity to speak one word, I had been given lectures on my lack of manners, and family politics. Su Li's father had not had the faintest idea who I was, and from all appearances, still didn't. The mother's chief concerns seemed to be teaching me proper etiquette, and her TV show. They were of course surprised at my entrance. But unless they were both professional actors, they had no idea of the drama that was playing out around me and their daughter... *daughters*. I crossed the living room and took a chair near the woman. As I sat, the maid came in, carrying a tray with tea service and petit-fours. She froze in mid-stride when she saw me.

"Come in, Marta. Put that on the table. As you can see, we have an unexpected guest. Would you like tea, Mister MacKenzie? This is quite a soothing blend." The maid awaited my answer.

I finally got a word in, and it was about tea. “No, thank you”, I said.

“That will be all then, Marta. You may retire for the evening.” The maid gave me a strange look, and left the room. If there had been any code spoken for “call the police”, I hadn’t noticed. I figured I would know for sure in less than five minutes. Mrs. Chin poured two cups of tea and handed one to her still brooding husband. “I am sorry for the interruption”, she said, as she took a sip. “I believe you were about to explain your presence.”

My exasperation had been tempered by the humourous feeling that I had been taking part in one of those terribly polite and annoyingly vague BBC sitcoms. I half expected the Vicar to arrive with scandalous news that the scones at the Surrey Faire had been discovered to have been made in Germany, this accompanied by a laugh-track. I leaned forward in my chair, “Mrs. Chin, did Su Li have a twin sister?”

“Why of course she does. Did she not tell you of Jan Li?”

“She never spoke about her family at all. I didn’t question that, it was her decision and I respected it.”

“I must say, I am surprised. They are very close.”

“And they were identical?”

“Identical?” She laughed. “That word is barely adequate. They are so alike even I cannot tell them apart.” She continued to use the present tense, as if Su Li were alive.

“Do you know where Jan Li is right now?” I watched her face carefully, for her reaction to this question.

She didn't miss a beat. “She is traveling abroad. Why do you ask?”

“I have reason to believe she may be in danger.” I was watching the old man's face. His expression never changed; he continued to ignore me, staring at the blank television screen.

The mother, however, lost her composure for just the briefest second, her teacup clattering as she placed it on its saucer. Then the calm mask immediately reappeared. “Why would you say such a terrible thing? You do not even know her. Has she contacted you?”

That brief look had been fear, not anger or threat. She knew something, of that I was sure. But she didn't know that a second daughter was dead. And I wasn't going to tell her. At least not now.

My gut instinct was that neither of these people were responsible or aware of the attempt on my life, or the murder of their remaining twin girl. But someone connected with them was, and when they mentioned my visit to that person, I would see him coming for me. At least I hoped I would.

For now, there was nothing more to do here. “No, she hasn't contacted me”, I answered. In the literal sense, this was true. “I just have a feeling you should try to get in touch with her.” I stood. “Next time, I will come to the front door, I promise.”

“You can see yourself out.”, she said formally. The old man continued to ignore me. I turned and took a step to leave. “Mister MacKenzie!”

“Yes?”

“Before you go, would you mind reopening one of the veranda doors just a bit? It is quite warm.”

“Of course.” I opened a door, then as I left the room, the television loudly came back to life. They were watching a British BBC comedy.

Marta awaited me in the foyer at the bottom of the stairs. “You should know, Sir, and they will never tell you.” Tears were forming in her eyes. “She loved you very much. She wanted to go home to you. The father, he forbid her.”

I had waited for years to hear those words. Putting a hand on her shoulder, I said, “Thank you Marta. That means a lot to me. Thank you.”

She opened the door for me, and as I stepped out, she asked, “Mister MacKenzie?”

“Yes Marta?”

“Is Miss Jan Li alright?”

I hesitated. “I can’t tell you that, Marta. I’m sorry.” I felt her watching me all the way down the hill, until I walked out of her sight.

I stopped at a dark and dingy old bar on Market Street, and had a couple of beers. A television so old its colors were greenish droned the late news. Two unshaven men in worn out plaid shirts and scruffy jeans were trying to shoot pool, both of them so drunk they kept forgetting whose turn it was, minutes passing as they stood leaning on their cues staring blankly at the table. The bartender, a Mexican

built like a fireplug, brought my beers without a word and moved to the other end of the bar to watch the news. At a table in a dark corner, a large well groomed middle-aged black man wore a conservative grey three piece suit and a big gold Rolex. Across from him, a very young Asian girl sat nervously clutching her purse in her lap. She had not unbuttoned her black wool overcoat. A bottle he was not sharing was on the table. In between shots of whisky he spoke to her in low tones, his face without expression, hers showing barely controlled fright. And I sat there facing the door in my black burglar's outfit, waiting for someone to come after me. I nursed the beers for nearly an hour; no one entered the bar after I did. Dropping a five buck tip on the bar, I left. No one paid any attention. I crossed Market and walked the one block up to the Saint Francis. Disappointed that no one had followed me, I went up to my room and fell asleep in my clothes with the TV on.

In the morning I went out for waffles, giving anyone interested ample opportunity to tail me. I walked a good bit of the seedier part of the city. As far as I could tell, no one cared that I was there.

At noon, as prearranged I met Ed Yee at a tea and noodle place in Chinatown. He had spent his morning digging for information in the Chinese community. They would tell him things I hadn't a prayer of finding out. We sat in a booth off to ourselves. No one wanted to be close to the blond guy in the leather jacket and his Chinese friend in the tailored suit. A woman brought our noodles and tea, and left us alone.

"How was your night?", Eddie asked casually. "Did you get some rest?"

"Yeah. It was quiet", I lied. "Just watched some TV."

“With Mr. and Mrs. Chin.” He spoke through a mouthful of noodles. “That must have been a cozy family evening.”

“How...?”

“I was following you. I couldn’t let you put yourself out there as a target, and not cover your back. My division has enough cases, thank you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, first, if you knew I was around, you wouldn’t have gone to the Chin mansion, and you needed to do that. And second,” he mumbled through a full mouth, then swallowed, “second, you would have acted differently and given me away.”

“Oh.”

“What did you learn from the parents?”

“That I have poor manners. They were surprised to see me, but not surprised I am alive. I think the old lady knows more than she let on. She was visibly shaken when I said Jan Li may be in danger, but I got no information from her.”

“I’m impressed with your cat-burglar skills with a bum leg. Is that your business these days?”, he joked. “No one followed you, by the way. And you did a good job of giving room to drop you, if there had been anyone. I let you go off by yourself this morning because I needed to canvas Chinatown, and even in a city this big, things don’t happen in daylight. Not very often.”

“You are pretty damn sneaky yourself, Buddy. I never saw you.”

“Yes, I’m good. A pro is much better. You’ll never see him coming.”

“I found that out two nights ago. Now, what did you find out this morning?”

“Nothing that will help us. The old man builds and owns a lot of real estate; here and back in Taiwan. He is very rich and a tough boss, but seems to be a completely legitimate, law abiding businessman. Actually, it appears he is generous and well liked. The son, apparently he’s a wacko and not so law abiding; but it is relatively minor ‘rich-kid-in-trouble’ stuff.”

“No one knows much about the daughters. They were packed off to a boarding school back east at an early age. Su Li finished graduate school and went to work for her father, as you know. The other one, the one you apparently discovered on the beach...”

“Jan Li”, I interrupted. “Her name was Jan Li.”

“...that one never lived here at all. She finished school and went off on her own, only came to visit her mother when her father was away. As for whoever murdered the twins and tried to make you disappear, there are no rumors at all. Which leads me to believe that whoever is responsible is not from the Asian community.”

“Then who? And why?”

“I don’t know. But we’re not going to find the reason in Chinatown.”

“I don’t know what to do next”, I said, dejected.

Eddie stood, dropping some cash on the table. “I do”, he said. “We are in my department now. I want to find out what happened to Su Li’s autopsy report. Monterey may have closed that case, but she was a San Francisco resident and was autopsied here. If I can substantiate a murder, no matter how old, I can open a case and publicly investigate it. Then whoever has been trying to keep this quiet may surface. Let’s go see the Medical Examiner.”

Yee’s police car was illegally parked in front of the restaurant. We drove to the morgue at the south end of the city. As a homicide inspector, he was a familiar face, everyone there said or nodded hello. He knocked on the M.E.’s glass door and we walked into the office.

The Chief Medical Examiner, a Dr. Morell, was eating a late lunch from a brown paper bag. “Edward”, he greeted warmly, “This is an unexpected pleasure. I don’t believe we have a patient of yours at present, do we? Please, clear off those chairs and make yourselves comfortable. Oh just put the books on the floor. Is this a new partner?”

“Doc, meet Conor MacKenzie. He’s an old friend, not a cop.”

We shook hands then Eddie and I moved stacks of books from the chairs and sat. “Well then, what brings you to my bailiwick? Showing Conor the finer parts of the city?”

“No, he used to live here. I came to offer to buy you a real lunch. With live people.”

“Oh you did? You missed your chance today”, he smiled. “And what, pray tell, do I have to do to earn a meal among the living?”

“About ten years ago, Conor’s wife died in her car, down on the Peninsula. Monterey PD ruled it accidental and cleared the book. It has been eating at Mac for a long time. Recently, he has been given reason to look into it. We want to see the autopsy report... Monterey says there isn’t one.” The doctor continued eating his lunch, but listened intently. “I don’t believe them”, Yee said. “Would lunch at Tadich Grill make it worth your while to dig through old files?”

“A ten year old case? Not even ours? Sounds more like a dinner to me!”

“You got it”, I said.

The M.E. pushed back from his desk and stood, wiping mustard from his lips with a paper napkin. “You boys will have to stay and help. Ten years is a lot of boxes to move.”

Eddie opened the door. “At your service”, he said.

We followed the doctor to a stairway door, then down to the basement and along a corridor to a door marked “Records - Morgue Personnel Only”. Morell took out his keys and unlocked the door. Inside the room were row upon row of metal shelves stacked with cardboard file storage boxes. At the end of each aisle, more boxes were stacked. Each was marked with a year and alphabet letter.

“Let’s see, that would be “M” for MacKenzie, correct?” He walked past rows of shelves. “Good. This should be it. Row “M”. We followed as he looked up and down at boxes.

“Yes, I think the carton we want should be here”, he pointed in the air. “Top shelf, probably behind that front stack.”

“I’ll get the ladder”, Ed said, familiar with the place. He dragged a ten foot ladder alongside, then climbed to the top and peered over the boxes. “Yes, you are right, it’s here.” He moved the front box. “Mac, can you come part way up and take this? Careful, it’s heavy. For God’s sake don’t spill it.” I took the carton from him and we stepped down.

“Bring that down the hall, there’s a table in the next room”, the doctor said. We followed him in and I dropped the box on the table. The M.E. immediately opened it, and fingered through folders with the deceased’s name in large black letters on white tabs. “Mabano... Macante... ah, here we are, MacKenzie, S.” He extracted a thin folder, opened it and read to himself. “Oh yes, I remember this one. Your wife was an extraordinarily beautiful woman”, he looked at me with an expression of admiration mixed with sympathy. “Much, much too young to be murdered.”

“*Murdered?!?*”, both Ed and I exclaimed, surprised to hear him say it.

“Yes. No doubt about it. They sent her here as an auto accident victim. I thought that odd.” Again, he looked my way. “I hope I’m not shocking you Mister MacKenzie. I assumed you already knew.”

“No I didn’t, not for sure. Not until now.”

“What else can you tell us, Doc?”, Eddie asked.

“It’s all here, I wrote a full report. I remember quite well because her wound was so unusual.”

“In what way?”, the Inspector asked.

“Excuse me, for being graphic. Her head was separated entirely from her body. I have never seen a wound like that, except in medical books. It was done very cleanly and with one stroke. She didn’t suffer, Conor. I wrote here that in my opinion it had been done with a very sharp sword. She was killed first, then put into the car and pushed off a cliff. The crash was an attempt to disguise the murder. But it was too obvious.”

“Then why didn’t you send this to the Monterey police?”, I asked, anger mounting.

“But of course I did!”, he answered. He showed us the clerk’s notations. “It was sent to them the next day.” He thumbed through more pages. “I thought so. This is a receipt for her body. The Monterey police sent this release even before we did the autopsy,” he showed us another page, “and as requested, our people turned her over to a funeral home. That isn’t a familiar name to me, though I don’t pretend to know all the undertakers in Chinatown.”

“Wouldn’t you have followed up on this case, wouldn’t it seem odd for the Monterey police to release a murder victim?”, I asked.

“No, we wouldn’t do anything more. Inspector Yee will tell you that our job ends there; we aren’t detectives. When we are done, it becomes a police matter.” Ed nodded in affirmation. “Another thing - and Edward you will recall this - at that point in time, a serial-killer was terrorizing this city. My staff and I were overburdened with examinations and lab tests and evidence requests. SFPD Homicide Division literally took over this place.”

“I remember”, Eddie verified. “Mac, I think you were preoccupied with your own troubles.”

“Honestly, I did not know until now that no murder investigation was carried out,” the ME said. “I am sorry, Conor. Is there anything I can do?”

“Get me a copy of everything in that file”, Ed said, “I’ll take it from here.”

In the file room, I passed the large carton up to Eddie, who replaced it. Back upstairs, Morell gave the autopsy file to a secretary, with instructions to make copies for Inspector Yee. We thanked the Medical Examiner, who returned to his office, and we waited for the copies.

I accepted the file folder from her, slid two hundred-dollar bills inside, and gave it to Eddie. “What’s that for?”, he asked.

“Buy him a really great dinner”, I answered.

“Did you hit the lottery over there in Florida?”

“Something like that. Let’s go get a beer.”

We left Eddie’s car at the Saint Francis and walked over to Kuleto’s. The lounge was nearly empty just before happy hour. Ed, on duty, ordered a Diet Pepsi. I, on duty in my own way, had a Grolsch.

“Well Inspector, we’ve come full circle back to my original theory. Someone, for some reason unknown, paid a Monterey cop to kill Su Li.”

“That’s how it looks. The plan was to frame you for her murder. Then, when that wouldn’t take, they just swept it all under the carpet and made it go away. Voila! It was an accident. All we have to figure out now is who and why. How do we do that, it was so long ago?”

“Listen, it took more than one person to cover this up. Obviously, I made them nervous already. I think if I keep pushing things around down in Monterey, keep asking questions, and put out the word that I’ll pay a lot for answers, someone who was involved in the cover-up is going to surface. Either to collect the cash, or try to get himself immunity in exchange for turning in the real killer. So I’m going back down there, as soon as rush hour is over.”

“Mac, I can’t go tonight. Wait until I can come along to watch your back.” What he didn’t say was, he knew if I found the killer without him, I wouldn’t call any police; I would take my own revenge.

“That’s alright, Eddie. I’ll go straight to Taylor’s and spend the night. We’ll call Officer Sanchez tonight and let him know I’m there, and ask him to have his guys cruise by and check on the house. Then in the morning, I’ll go over and let him know I’m going to be nosing around, and why, in a general way. He’ll cover me if I need him.”

“Speaking of covering you, my roommate Jack got a call for me last night from a Sergeant Lynch in Boca Raton. It seems you failed to call her and she’s worried about you. Don’t tell me your girlfriend is a cop?”

“She’s the Homicide detective who got the case of the head on the beach. She is a good friend. I’ve told her everything; even more than I told you. If anything should

happen to me, I want you to call her and tell her what we found out. I promised her I would.”

“It sounds to me like she is more than a friend”, he joked.

I just shrugged.

“Uh-huh. I know that look. You are either sleeping with her, or you want to. Jack said she has a sexy voice. What’s she look like?”

I grinned. “My friend, this woman would turn even you into a heterosexual. Let’s get some dinner here, then I’ll start driving south.”

- TWENTY FIVE -

We had a good meal at Kuleto's, then went our separate ways. I checked out of the hotel, got the Porsche and worked my way through the end of rush hour traffic until I got on Route 1 along the Pacific. Once I got past the little coastal town of Pescadero, the sun had set, and I was alone on the dark road. I stopped in Santa Cruz and bought gas, from here on there was nothing on the road until Monterey. In no particular rush, I let the car loaf along the winding road in fourth gear.

As I neared the place where Su Li was killed, I felt compelled to pull off the road. I guessed I would never be able to pass this spot without stopping. As I sat absorbed in thought, the turn-off was illuminated as another car drove up. I got out of my car. This was probably just sightseers, but I wasn't interested in another surprise swim. The black Lincoln sedan rolled past me and came to rest at the other end of the parking lot. I leaned against the Porsche and watched. The motor stopped and nothing happened for at least a minute. I had decided this was lovers parking for some back-seat wrestling, when the driver opened his door and got out. It was the big stranger who had come into my golf shop that evening long ago - the "Cancellation" man. The puzzle of my cliff dive began to clear up. Without acknowledging me, he walked around the car and opened the back door.

A well dressed stockily built young Chinese man stepped out of the Lincoln, glaring at me. He took off his suit coat and his tie, and handed them to the other man, who

nonchalantly tossed them onto the back seat. I took a couple of steps toward them. This wasn't going to be pretty, but this time I wasn't going to be the only one who got hurt.

The Chinaman came closer, close enough that by moonlight I could see the hatred and fury on his face. "White man", he yelled, and spat at my feet. "You defiled my sister. Together you both ruined my family's honor. She paid for her sin. We warned you, we told you to stay away. But you would not. Now, you too must be punished."

And there it was... so much death and misery from one madman's bigotry.

I glanced at the Stranger. He gave me an "I told you so" shrug of his shoulders, and leaned with his back against the Lincoln, to watch.

I shouldn't have looked away from young Chin. As soon as I did, I was kicked in the head, and sent sprawling to the dirt and gravel. He ran toward me and kicked at my head again, missing as I rolled away and got to my feet. I was going to kill this animal, even if it killed me too. He thought I would back away; instead I rushed at him. Another kick glanced off my shoulder. I got close and grabbed his head with both hands, smashing my forehead against his nose as hard as I could. Blood spurted and got in both our eyes. I butted him again. He grunted, pushed me away, then kicked me hard in the ribs. I felt piercing pain in my chest, ignored it and went in close again, swinging with both fists, hitting his face hard, one-two-three-four times. He slipped away, then came at me with karate kick-after-kick to my head and body. He needed some distance between us to kick. I managed to make him miss, then lunged at him, grabbing his ear with my left hand and getting a good grip on his throat with my right. I squeezed as tightly as I could, choking off his air. All the while, he chopped at my head and kidneys until I had to let

go, tearing his ear halfway off as I did. We fell away from each other. Chin was bleeding profusely, his face a crumpled mess. I hurt all over. I was dizzy and I was seeing double. But I was the better conditioned; all my exercise was paying off, I wasn't even winded. He was so tired he could barely stand.

I charged him again, intending to tackle him to the ground and choke him to death. He round-house kicked, catching my old injured thigh, stopping me. In a flash, he kicked again at the same leg, smashing my knee. I stumbled backward, and fell hard against an outcropping of rocks, landing face first. My jaw was obviously broken, as was my nose. Broken ribs pressed against my lungs. I labored to breathe, tasting blood with every gasp. The pain in my leg was familiar, I knew the repairs to my old football injury had been ruined and I probably wouldn't be able to stand and continue to fight. I felt for the knife strapped to my calf. It wasn't there...I had taken it off while driving.

"What's the use?", I thought, "Even if I get past the Chinaman, the big guy in the suit will kill me." At that moment, lying battered and exhausted, every loss, every defeat, every disappointment I had suffered in my life appeared to me again. In my mind, everything I had ever really wanted had ended in failure: My football career - the only aspiration I'd ever had - was lost at the brink of success. Everyone I had ever loved was gone. Since childhood, I had lurched from crisis to crisis. I had no reason to fight Life any longer.

With these thoughts came a voice from inside me: "Let it go, life's been unfair. Let it be over... let him end it for you now. You've tried... now you can finally rest".

But this man, this bag of human insanity, had murdered his own sister, just when she was returning to me.

Just as I had been about to have happiness, just as my life was about to recover its meaning - he had snatched her away from me. Left me aimless, empty, and haunted. Taken her innocent life, because of me.

He had committed the two worst trespasses against me anyone could have: He had taken life from someone I loved. And he had left me alone... again.

I had been denying my shame for ten long years. I had walked away, buried my head in the sand and let Su Li's death go, when in my mind I knew there were questions, and in my heart I knew she deserved them to be answered.

Now the shame surfaced and mingled with the repressed anger at a lifetime of losing what was important to me. I had come back to California to finish something - Dad had told me so long ago to finish what you have started before you go - and for once, I would. I owed it to my weary soul. Much more so, I owed it to my dear Su Li; her deep love for me had cost her her life. Qiang Chin had to die first, even if the hired assassin would get me afterward.

The Chinese man stood at the edge of the cliff now, his back to the dark sea below, purposely profiling his imposing size against the night sky. As I had lain dazed on the rocks, he had gone to the car, and now a long gleaming sword was at his side. He leaned heavily on it to steady himself. In the bright moonlight, I could see that I had given as good a beating as I had taken. His face was completely covered in blood, it poured down over his eyes and soaked the small beard on his chin; it kept flowing as he tried unsuccessfully to wipe it away with his free hand. He struggled to inhale, each breath rattled aloud in his throat... I had broken his windpipe.

He took a deep breath, and over the loud pounding of the surf below, he bellowed: "This is where my sister had to die to atone. Now it is your time. Come on White Devil. Come and pay your debt like a man."

I tried, but I could not sit up, my broken ribs pressed into my chest. I rolled over, and pushed up onto my hands and knees, my back to him. Searing pain went through my head and my vision blurred. I wasn't sure if I could stand on my shattered leg. As I pushed up to stand, my hand fell upon an old familiar shape, a stone roughly the size and form of a small football. Instinctively, I gripped it as I stood and turned to face the executioner. At once my vision cleared. Thousands of days of passing drills with my father had found their ultimate purpose: it was fourth and forever. My eyes focused on the target, my weight balanced on my good leg. I cocked my arm, stone beside my right ear, and then released thirty years of pent-up rage along with that rock.

It was the truest, most powerful pass I had ever thrown. The rock flew like a spear for fifteen yards, hit Qiang in the sternum with a loud crack, and tumbled to the ground. The sword fell from his hand as he grasped his chest. The force of the throw knocked him backward, gasping for a breath. He fought to regain his balance, but his injuries had taken their toll, and he lost the battle. In what seemed like slow motion, he staggered, his arms shot out - hands grasping for something that wasn't there - and with a bloody wide-eyed look of disbelief in this ending, he disappeared silently over the edge.

My injured left leg had buckled after the throw, and I watched from the dirt. I stared at the empty sky at the cliff's edge - he didn't reappear.

Then I remembered I wasn't alone. Tensing my body for another onslaught, I looked for the dapper hired killer. Surely he would finish his assignment... probably with a bullet. I didn't mind that too much now, I had accomplished what I had come to do. He was still casually leaning, arms crossed, with his back against the Lincoln. But now with an incongruous smile on his face.

"Are you happy because this is going to be so easy, or have you finally found something humorous?", I muttered.

He nodded slowly, his smile widening. "Now I remember you. No wonder you looked so familiar the first time we met. You were the Quarterback from Nowhere who made the Forty-Niners. Shocked everyone in preseason - then got hurt. I always wondered what happened to you."

"You saw me back then?"

"Sure. I'm a big Forty-Niners fan. Season ticket for years. But I remembered 'Scotty' - not 'Conor' - MacKenzie. You were great, why didn't you come back?"

I could hardly hold up my head, and my jaw hurt when I talked. "Oh, the leg's all held together with steel and screws. They were afraid I would set off the metal detectors at the airports - make the team plane late all the time."

"Too bad, you had a rocket arm. You still do; that rock must have weighed ten pounds. Never seen a more perfect throw."

He uncrossed his arms, pushed off the car, and slowly walked to the cliff's edge and picked up the sword. I tried to get to my feet, but my leg was too far gone. I groped around for another rock, not taking my eyes off him.

“Whoa Scotty, hold up. That won’t be necessary, and I can’t catch.”

“Don’t you have to try to cancel me?”

“I do not ‘try’. But no, not now.”

“Not that I’m objecting, but why not?” I thought he would say it was because he was a fan.

“It seems I no longer have a client. And I didn’t know until tonight that this creep killed his own sister. I do have standards, after all. I was beginning to tire of his anti-Caucasian prejudice anyway.” He flipped the sword into the air and over the cliff; its polished blade flashed end over end and it was gone. “That will make an interesting conundrum for the local cops. It would be fun to read their solution, if they can’t sweep it under the carpet. A clumsy Hari-Kari, maybe.”

“No, that’s Japanese.”

“Whatever.”

“What now?”

“Well, I think we are done here; unless you feel the need to stick around. I’ll drop you off at a hospital and be on my way.”

He walked over to the Porsche, opened the passenger door and reclined the seat all the way down. Then he came over and picked me up like I weighed nothing, placed me on the seat with surprising gentleness, and closed the door.

“Damn, I always liked these cars, but I barely fit”, he said as he wedged himself into the driver’s seat, “and the ignition’s on the wrong side, too.”

I handed him the keys. “Do you always wear those gloves?”, I asked.

“It makes my life a little less complicated, housekeeping-wise.”

I looked over at the Lincoln. “What about the other car?”

“It’s no longer my responsibility. And he had to get himself here to jump, didn’t he?” He backed the Porsche out onto the pavement, left the motor running, and climbed out. “Just a little tidying up, then we’ll go.” He went to the Lincoln, got his topcoat out, and, backing toward my car, used the coat to sweep all the footprints and the Porsche’s tire tracks from the dirt parking lot.

As we drove north, the last thing I remember asking him was, “You played ball too, didn’t you? Linebacker?”

“College.”

“Not the Pros?”

“I tore both rotator cuffs, senior year. Back then, you didn’t come back from that operation.”

“Too bad. I know how it feels.”

“Well, we both found another line of work, didn’t we?”

Then I must have passed out.

I woke up in the emergency room parking lot at San Francisco General. I was awakened by two nurses and an orderly loudly debating how to extricate me from the car without damaging me further: "Just make sure you don't paralyze the guy... stabilize his neck first. Hey Mister! Wake up! C'mon, wake up for us. Where are you hurt?"

"Leg, ribs, jaw, nose. Hit my head, too", I murmured.

"Can you move your fingers and toes?"

"Think so", and I demonstrated.

"Okay, let's go. Get him onto a gurney and into the ER."

Then I passed out again. When I awakened, I was in a dimly lit hospital room. My leg was immobilized, my ribs were taped, there were bandages all over my face. It hurt to breathe, I ached all over. But I was alive.

A nurse was watching me, and when my eyes opened, she fetched a doctor. He peeled back my eyelids and shined a light into my eyes, waving it back and forth.

"Good afternoon Mister MacKenzie, welcome to San Francisco General. Glad to have you awake and with us", he said cheerily. "Perhaps you will tell us how all this damage happened; you have kept us all in suspense for over four days while you slept." He picked up my chart and sat in a chair next to the bed. "Well, let me bring you up to date. Your worst injury is to your left leg. The old steel plates were broken right out of your femur and it separated, but cleanly.

Doctor Taylor put in a new titanium rod and reattached everything, it's good and solid. Fortunately, your old knee repairs held up quite well. You may need an artificial joint someday, but for now, with some intensive rehabilitation, your leg will heal as good as new. You have two broken ribs on the left, and one on the right; very painful, but not as serious as it feels. Your jaw was dislocated, we've wired it back into place; you will feel that for some time also. Your left cheekbone and your nose were broken, they will heal nicely. All those things caused a lot of bruising, so when you see yourself, don't be alarmed. You hit your head on something, cut your scalp, and received a pretty serious concussion. But that isn't why you've been asleep. We have kept you heavily sedated to save you some suffering from the cumulative pain of all this plus the leg operation. We'll gradually taper off the sedatives as you begin to heal. But for now, you will want the morphine. Any questions?"

All I could say - moan, really - was "How long?"

"Oh, I think you will be weary of us in about two weeks. Mostly, Doctor Taylor wants your leg to get a good start. Now, I have two questions: One, who is 'Susie'? You have been muttering '*It's okay now Susie*', over and over for the past three days. Do we need to contact her? And two, what happened to you? You were left in our parking lot like an abandoned newborn; we are all quite curious."

It hurt to try to move my jaw to talk, I mumbled between clenched teeth, "Susie is someone I used to know. And I fell down some steps."

"What steps?"

"Lombard Street". The famous city street so crooked and steep that tourists have to descend by adjacent steps.

He laughed, "Alright, Mister MacKenzie, that's a good one. 'Lombard Street' indeed. But an Inspector Yee has been here several times each day, and a Detective Sergeant Lynch has telephoned for you. They may want another answer. And Doctor Taylor has another question: He wonders, as do we all, how you got his car here while lying unconscious in the passenger seat."

That evening, Eddie came to visit. I was too full of pain and painkillers to have much to say, he did all the talking. "It's about time you woke up. See, I told you to wait for me, look what happens when you don't listen", he said brightly. Then his demeanor turned serious. "Four days ago, some tourists reported an abandoned Lincoln parked in the lot where Su Li passed away. When the Monterey PD investigated, they found a body on the rocks below. It was identified as one Qiang Chin. He was Su Li's brother; it was his car. They also found a sword down there with him. I got Gonzalez to send it here to our crime lab. They found traces of blood on the blade and obtained some DNA, which I sent to your friend Detective Lynch. Her crime lab matched it to the head you found in Boca Raton, which, since they were twins, matches Su Li also. So we are able to close both cases on both coasts, without any publicity."

"Mac, it is obvious some people on the Peninsula were paid to look the other way when your wife died. Someone had to have coordinated all that. Gonzalez claims he knows nothing about it, but he has suddenly taken early retirement. We had to tell the parents about their son's death, and what he did to his own sisters, they had that right. They, the three police departments, and obviously you, are the only ones who know what happened to their children."

"None of us can figure out how Chin wound up at the bottom of that cliff with his sword. Nor do we have any idea how you got so badly injured, then drove yourself to this hospital from the passenger seat."

He cleared his throat. "There is no evidence that the two events are related. So, they officially have already ruled Chin's death a suicide. And *you*, well officially you tripped and fell down Lombard Street, then that Porsche drove itself here." He gave me a knowing smile. "But I suppose we will never really be certain what happened to either of you, will we?"

I closed my eyes and gave no reaction to his question, as if I had not heard it.

"Remind me never to piss you off," he said, and left.

- TWENTY SIX -

I spent two weeks in the hospital, then transferred to Eddie and Jack's apartment in the Marina District to be near the rehabilitation clinic until I could recover enough to walk on my own. With my jaw wired, I was on a soft food diet. Between losing weight from that, and the scars healing on my face and scalp, I looked pretty frightful. Once I started to limp around, I had the gait and appearance of a small version of Frankenstein's monster. My hosts took to kidding me it was too bad it wasn't Halloween.

A month later, Ed came home one afternoon, and told me he had received a call at work from Mrs. Chin. She didn't know where I was and wished to speak with me in person. When Ed told her I was recovering from injuries, she asked him if he would bring me to her home when I was able.

The next day I telephoned the Chin residence, and asked Marta to let Mrs. Chin know I would be there that afternoon. Eddie insisted upon driving me to Nob Hill; he wanted to watch my back, just in case this was some trick.

He pulled the black Chevy to the curb in front of the mansion. "Want me to go in with you?", he asked.

"No Ed, I'll be fine. I'm sure they will know you're here."

"Okay, I'll be right here if you need me."

I got out of his car, limping with a cane, this time to go in by the front door. Marta opened it before I rang. "The Missus is expecting you, Mister MacKenzie. She is on the second floor, would you like to use the elevator?"

"No, thanks Marta, I'll walk up. And please, call me Conor."

I slowly climbed the steep staircase, and found Mrs. Chin in her usual chair in the livingroom. In her proper British accent, she said, "Please come in Mister MacKenzie, and make yourself comfortable. May I help you?"

"I'm fine, thank you." I limped into the room, took the chair across from her, as I had done two months before, and balanced my cane against it. "What did you want to see me about?"

"Mr. Chin is not here, as you can see. He has gone to our home in Hong Kong, to escape the shame and embarrassment of our son's deeds." Marta entered with a tray of tea and scones, placing it on the table between us. "Thank you Marta. Tea, Mister MacKenzie?"

"Yes, thank you."

She poured two cups, setting one in front of me, with a scone on a side plate. I watched in silence. She sipped from her cup, then delicately placed it back on its saucer. This was all very polite, but I could sense that the woman was enduring a great sadness. "I am glad that you accepted my invitation, there are things I want to say to you, and some important information that has been kept from you for too long." Another sip of tea, she was gathering her thoughts. "My husband is an idiot, Mister MacKenzie, but he is not a bad man. He loved our daughters, in his own way."

“Our family heritage goes back well before the Ming dynasty, and Mr. Chin brought up our son to believe that we must keep our family genes purely Chinese. But my husband is neither a madman nor a killer, and surely had he known what his son was going to do, he would have stopped him. Now, all of our children are gone, and he is devastated with grief, and feels quite the fool for what his beliefs have wrought. He has asked that I convey to you his most sincere apology. And I offer you mine, as well, although we are both aware that this will never make up for your personal pain and the loss of your wife.” I took a drink of tea, not reacting to her words.

She sighed deeply, then continued. “I also asked you here to tell you that Su Li, my beautiful girl, loved you deeply. Many times while she was with you, she telephoned me and asked if her father would meet you, but he would not. I could not even convince him to speak with her.”

My heart felt Su Li’s love across all the years; I brushed the beginning of tears from my eyes.

She paused to pour us both more tea. “But these are not the only reasons I have asked you to come to visit me. I wanted to tell you why she left you so suddenly and without giving you any explanation. She believed she was doing that for your safety. Since their childhood, Su Li had always been afraid of her brother. We all knew Qiang had mental problems, but it seems that she was the only one of us who understood how truly insane and dangerous her brother was. She left you because she had learned a secret, a secret that she knew might get you killed if you found out.”

“Su Li and I had no secrets, we never kept anything from each other”, I said, positive I was right.

“This one thing, she did keep from you, for truly unselfish reasons. My daughter had found out that she was pregnant with your child. As soon as she was sure, she left you to save you from the harm that later befell her.”

I was stunned. Now I knew why she had left without talking to me. My poor, sweet, misguided wife... if only she had told me, she would be alive. We could have moved, changed our names, stayed together. I stammered, "How did she? What did she...?"

"She had the child in Hong Kong. After a time, when it seemed that her brother had accepted this, she returned here. Then she decided it was safe, and she yearned to return to you. She had the baby with her. As we now know, sadly, my son intercepted her on her way to Carmel."

I almost could not speak. "The police never reported a second body. Did the baby... did my child die also?"

"No. Even in his insanity, Qiang could not bring himself to murder a child then, thank God. He brought the baby back here to me, and I arranged to have it sent far away, to be raised safely away from this craziness. I never told my husband or son where. They were not aware that Su's sister and I regularly sent money and clothing to the orphanage. Jan Li hoped to someday take the child herself, so we prevented any adoption. But we had realized that it would never be safe for Jan Li or the child, and so we hired a detective agency to find you. Then we decided that she should go tell you about this, to give you the chance to decide if you wanted it, before we allowed an adoption." The old woman gripped her tea cup tightly as she spoke, "I suppose my son followed her, and continued with his lunacy. May I ask, where was Jan Li's body found?"

"Her body hasn't been found, as far as I know. Just her... well her... it was placed on the beach in front of my house in Florida."

Mrs. Chin wiped a tear from her cheek. "Ah, then she almost completed her mission.

"But, where is the baby... what is it?"

"She is not a baby any longer. You have a beautiful ten year old daughter. She is safe in a small town in Delaware. My son did not find her, our secret died with Jan Li. Now, it is *your* time, Conor. I spoke with the Home today. You must go to see her, and decide if you want to be her father."

I was happy and excited, "Of course I want her, she is part of Su Li! I'll go tomorrow! Where is she?"

"The address is here on this paper. I will telephone ahead for you, to tell them it is alright for her father to take her."

I stood, anxious to leave. Taking Mrs. Chin's hand, I said, "Thank you, I know you didn't have to tell me. This has all been very hard for you, too. I hope you can find some peace now."

"One small favor, if you will indulge an old woman?"

"If I can."

"Please, will you occasionally send me photographs of my Granddaughter? Her name is Su Zi. I have never seen her since she was a baby."

"Of course I will. And one more thing, Mrs. Chin: Jan Li did complete her mission, after all."

I fairly ran down the stairs, as much as my leg would allow. The maid was waiting in the foyer, at the door. "Goodbye, Marta!" I gave her a hug. "I'm a Dad!"

"I know! Buena suerte, Mister Conor. Bless you and your child. Vaya con Dios."

Eddie was waiting beside the car, with no idea what had just occurred. "So, that's finally it then?"

"There is one more, very important thing to do. I need to pack some things and get to the airport right away."

"What?! What happened? Where are you going? Can you travel on that leg?"

"Just drive, Man, I'll tell you on the way. Oh, and stop at a cigar store."

He looked at me as if I had gone crazy. I told him as we got into the car, and we drove off with Eddie laughing with glee, and me whooping at the top of my lungs like a guy who had just made the biggest touchdown of his life.

- TWENTY SEVEN -

Although they had spoken on the telephone, Kathleen had not seen Mac for two months, and when first she saw him, she was shocked. His appearance had changed considerably in that short time. There was a long scar still healing at the top of his forehead at the scalp, and a smaller one along his nose. His jaw had a bit of an odd tilt to one side. He had lost his deep Florida tan, his sun-bleached hair had darkened, and he was gaunt from weight loss. Assisted by a cane, he walked with a pronounced limp. But, for all the physical changes in him, one other change was the most obvious to Kathleen: His deep blue eyes shone bright with a spirit that had not been there in all the time she had known him.

Jan Li's body was never found. At the Mayor's request, Sergeant Lynch represented the city of Boca Raton, and with the Mayor personally footing the bill, she brought Jan Li's head back to San Francisco. The parents had it cremated, and in a solemn ceremony for both women on a chill and drizzling day, Jan Li was buried next to her sister. Upon each headstone was carved:

孿情

As their tattoos had predicted since infancy, they were once again "Beloved Twin Sister, Never Apart".

The twin graves were at the top of a hillside cemetery overlooking San Francisco Bay, with its swirling dark foreboding waters below. Mac's newly discovered daughter looked up at her father and listened with rapt attention, as they ascended the hill hand in hand. Su Zi MacKenzie was a striking little girl, with her mother's delicate Asian beauty, porcelain skin, and long shining black hair. She had her father's athletic build and graceful way of moving, and no one could mistake where she had gotten her piercing blue eyes. Kathleen had never seen such a beautiful child.

Through light rain and low clouds, the Golden Gate bridge and the Marin foothills in the distance hid and revealed themselves. The funeral procession had been led by two San Francisco squad cars, carrying Inspector Yee's Homicide Department Lieutenant and Captain. A small group of mourners had gathered, and followed Mac and Su Zi up the hill: the Taylor's with their grown daughter Faith, who brought her new beau Officer Billy Sanchez from Carmel, Eddie Yee with his partner Jack, Mac's friend and former boss Jim and his wife, and the late woman's mother. Old Man Chin stood apart from the other mourners, silent, broken and in shame for what his intolerance had wrought.

As the ceremony began, Kathleen noticed a large man standing still as a statue with his black-gloved hands at his sides, at the foot of the hill next to a black Jaguar sedan. With dead grey eyes, military cut black hair, and perfectly attired in a black suit and trench coat, he had a quiet yet at the same time strangely commanding presence. She observed him intently watching Mac, until Mac saw him. Their eyes met for a moment, the stranger nodded with a small smile, and Mac nodded back in acknowledgment. She looked away for just a moment, and when she looked back down the hill, the man and the Jaguar were gone.

It was a short ceremony, with an unusual emotional mixture of sorrow for the twin's, and joy for Mac and his new found child. Afterward, Mac took Su Zi to her Grandmother, and then came to Sergeant Lynch. "Kathleen, I wonder if you would change your plans and take the plane back to Florida with me and Su Zi. I've arranged for you to wait in the VIP lounge at the airport, if you will."

"Of course", Kathleen answered.

"I've already purchased your ticket. Eddie will take you, and wait with you. We won't be long, I've taken care of everything else here. Before we leave, I want to introduce my daughter to her mother."

"Would it be okay if I hugged you now, in front of these people?", she asked. She didn't wait for a Yes.

Mac held her for a moment, whispered, "Thank you, Kathleen", then let her go. "I needed one of those. I'll see you at the airport."

With a full heart, and tears in her eyes, Kathleen walked to the waiting unmarked police car. As she got in, she looked up the hill and saw Mac holding an umbrella, sitting beside Su Li's grave with Su Zi in his lap, telling her about the mother she never knew.

- TWENTY EIGHT -

Four months had passed since I brought my new ten year old daughter - nicknamed "Suzi" as I knew her mother intended - home to Florida. Or, as she corrected, "I'm almost eleven, Daddy." And it was indeed, "home" now. Just as Marie Franke had said: "You won't find Home by looking for it. Home is not a place, it is in your heart".

My stamina was returning, I was working out in the gym and swimming every day. My bum leg was healed and I was beginning to run. The scars on my face had faded, my Florida tan was back, and I had gained back the weight I had lost while my jaw was wired. The traces of my physical wounds were almost gone. Inside, I was at last at peace... I slept like a baby. I had followed my father's advice from so long ago: "All we can do is always be honest, be good to those we care for, and try to finish whatever we've started before we go." I was happy for the first time in many years.

I was down on the beach, fishing for dinner. Laughter drifted down from above the dune. I looked up to see Su Zi and Kathleen, in their swimsuits as usual, flying a kite from the deck. Ms. Lynch had been spending most of her free time, and more than a few nights lately, with me and my daughter. The girls had bonded; I had even heard Su Zi let "Mommy" slip a few times, which brought a smile to Kathleen's face. I smiled myself as I watched them together.

And April? Well, I assumed she was in Paris. I had to admit she was never completely out of my thoughts, but we had not spoken since the stormy day she left here, six months ago. I had made a whole new life in that time.

I had a couple of yellowtail snapper in my bucket, and was casting for one more, when I heard Su Zi calling me from the top of the steps. "Daddy! Daddy! Come up here, hurry!"

"What is it, Suzi?", I yelled back.

"Telephone for you. Some lady says she must talk to you right now! Can't wait! She won't leave a message!"

I planted my rod in the sand, jogged over to the dune and hurried up the steps to the deck. Out of breath, I told my daughter, "This better not be a telemarketer, Suzi." I picked up the phone, "This is MacKenzie."

There was silence. Then, "*Daddy?* Geez Billy, I'm only gone six months and there's already someone calling you *Daddy?*"

I was nearly speechless. "April?"

"I wanted to call and tell you, before I get on the plane. I am leaving Paris today. Mac, it was a mistake to leave, I have missed you terribly. I love you, and being across the sea hasn't made that go away." She paused. I knew her well enough to know she was gathering courage. "Conor?"

"I'm here."

"Will you see me? Can we talk?"

What could I say? My not expecting her to come back hadn't changed the fact that I had feelings for her. And yet, since she'd left... well, now there was Suzi... and Kathleen. "I'll be here", I said, then hung up.

I looked up at Kathleen, watching me. She had given her heart to me and my daughter. And her eyes said the look on my face told her everything.

Most people spend their lives somewhere in between the life they have and the life they want. I had been living in the middle most of my life, because I hadn't known what I wanted. I knew now. I would never be alone again.

• The End •

From Warm to Deadly Sea ©