

SUMMER OF '86

This all happened in the 1980s, back when it made financial sense to rob a bank, but long after I knew there was no getting away with it.

I'd been out for about six weeks, sleeping in my childhood bedroom in Walnut Creek, trying to figure out what the next fifty years of my life might look like with a felony conviction and penitentiary time on my record, when my twin sister, Sarah, called. At the time, she was living with a guy calling himself Hank Niculescu, who operated a bike rental and repair shop right on the beach in Pajaro, which was convenient for everyone involved until Hank disappeared.

"Come down for a couple weeks," Sarah said, "and I'll pay you to watch the bike shop. Then when Hank gets back, you can either stay or go or heist a casino, whatever your next move is."

"I don't know anything about bikes," I said.

"You think Hank does? He's got a guy who fixes them. You just need to be out front, smiling, and collecting money. It's not orthopedic surgery, Mitch."

"So then why do you need me?"

"I just thought you'd be about sick of Mom by now," she said.

I looked out the kitchen window. Mom was in the front yard, planting azaleas around the birch tree. They'd be dead by June. July at the latest. Nothing she ever planted around that tree ever lived. But she kept trying, year after year. It kept her busy. She'd had her own troubles over the years, so keeping busy was paramount. Mom spent twenty years as a public defender, but she lost her license after she got nicked for running a Ponzi scheme with the ladies who lunch—which was fine. She made better money working more as an “advisor” than as a lawyer. I found her a steady clientele.

“We’ve been going to a different restaurant every night,” I said, “getting to know each other again. She’s developed a special predilection for steak houses that used to be train cars.”

“What a dream,” Sarah said, “you’re dating Mom.”

“Any idea where Hank ran off to?”

“Somewhere he didn’t have any enemies would be my guess.”

“You seem all torn up.”

“Every day he’s gone,” she said, “I hate myself a little less.”

Sarah sold real estate for an operation that built condos in Pajaro Dunes, which meant she got in on the ground floor and had a sweet three bedroom on Pelican Point, looking right into Monterey Bay. Pajaro was nice, but it wasn’t Santa Cruz or Capitola, at least not yet, so Sarah had a side thing going buying depressed properties, which is how she got to know Hank, since she also owned the beachfront stand and repair shop Hank worked out of, which is why she needed me. If she wanted to keep collecting rent, what with summer coming, Hank being gone was not optimal for business. She didn’t feel right trying to hire someone for her boyfriend’s business, but I was family.

In the morning, I'd wake up, go for a jog on the beach, take a swim, and then make my way to the shop, all before 8:30 a.m. Hank's guy, Porter, would be there around 9:00 a.m., usually with coffee for both of us, and we'd open up. Porter would tune up the rental bikes, get them all lined up out front in a precise rainbow—if you fucked with the indigo bike and put it on the wrong side of violet, you were risking your life—and then would spend the rest of the day out back, working on bikes the locals brought in for repairs in his immaculate shop, which was basically a garage attached to the stand. The stand had been a hundred different things over the years—a sno-cone shop, a floatie rental, a time-share info booth—but after Sarah bought it, she fixed up the garage, and now it was all real nice. I ran the cash register, read the *Chronicle* or whatever paperback I found on the beach, and tried to be pleasant to the tourists.

Which is how it was one afternoon, a few months into my stay, when I was at the counter, reading *The Thorn Birds*, and a detective named Garrison walked up, introduced himself, then asked, “That a good book?”

“I didn't know there were so many sheep in Australia,” I said.

Detective Garrison looked past me, into the shop, where Porter was working on a beach cruiser, caught his eye, then came back to me. “My wife read it when it came out,” he said, “then read it again when the miniseries came on. I've never done that before. Read a book twice. You?”

“In prison, I read everything twice. It was either that or start in on the dictionary.”

“What were you in for?”

“Bank robbery,” I said. “But you know that.”

Garrison smiled. “How much you make off with again?”

“I did all right.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Garrison said.

“But that’s what I’m telling you.”

Garrison took a notepad from his pocket, flipped through it. “So you’re the girlfriend’s twin brother, that right? Mitch Lenney, three-to-seven, out in under four?”

“Yep,” I said.

“Lucky you,” he said, “have your sister’s boyfriend go missing, and you slide right into a nice job with an ocean view.”

“It’s always been like that for me,” I said. “Everything lines up just right for my success.”

“Your sister,” he said, “owns this building, but she’s not legally responsible for this shop. She and Hank, they’re not married.”

“You also the bike shop police?”

“My point,” he said, “is that Hank comes back and thinks the till is short, you’re looking at another fall, your sister isn’t.”

“I’m not worried about that,” I said. “The criminal life is not something that interests me. I’m about staring at the Pacific and reading fine literature now.”

“Hank’s ex-wife and kids are looking for him. Or for his child support and alimony, anyway. You could see if they want to take over.”

“How much does he owe?”

“About a grand a month for three months,” Garrison said, “and then a grand a month for another fifteen years.”

I opened the cash register, counted out what we had. I pushed the stack of cash toward Garrison. “That’s about five bills,” I said. “I’ll get more tomorrow, if you want to come back.”

He pushed the stack back. “I’m not your bagman,” Garrison said.

“It’s for the kids,” I said. Thing is, I meant it. The idea that Hank had stiffed his kids was not some shit I was into. Not that Sarah had ever mentioned Hank having kids either. Which was a problem.

Garrison scribbled something in his notepad, ripped the page out, handed it to me. “Write a check,” he said, “mail it to that address.” I said I would. “Weird thing,” he said, “wasn’t even the ex or the kids who reported Hank missing initially.”

“Divorce can be like that,” I said.

“Wasn’t your sister either,” he said.

“If you love someone, set them free,” I said. “That’s what we were taught as children. But if you see our dad, tell him Mom would like the station wagon back.”

“When did you meet Hank?” Garrison said.

“Never did,” I said.

“Last anyone saw him,” Garrison said, “was the end of January. The twenty-seventh he wrote a check for a gallon of Pedialyte at the Alpha Beta. Where were you then?”

“I was living up the coast with a Nazi named Mark Tucker,” I said. “We had a little place together in a housing development called Bastille by the Bay.”

“Everything is a joke to you?”

“No,” I said. “I’m just over here trying to sort out my life. And interacting with cops is not high on my list of things to do. It’s not personal.”

“That’s good,” Garrison said. “I don’t know how I’d sleep if I thought it was about me.”

This made me laugh. I kind of liked that fake-ass, tough-guy cop humor, perhaps because I knew a fair number of cops. You grow up in the suburbs, you end up growing up with a bunch of guys named Travis or Trevor or Trent who wind up wearing the badge.

“You should get out of town,” Garrison said. “This is not a good place for you.”

“Yeah? Where to?”

“Somewhere your sister and your mom aren’t,” he said.

“You’ve done some research.”

“Your whole family,” he said, “is suspicious. This is your one best shot with me.”

We stared at each other for a long moment, until I said, “We could just start pissing.”

“I wouldn’t go whipping anything out, if I were you,” Garrison said. “That’s how a guy like you ends up with one in the chest.”

Porter came up to the counter, shook Garrison’s hand. “Any luck finding Hank?” Porter asked.

“None yet.”

“You will keep looking?”

“No law against an adult leaving town.”

“I am suspicion,” Porter said.

Porter had an accent that was hard to place. Vaguely Eastern European, the English language hung in his mouth in unusual ways, so that you couldn’t tell if he’d lived here twenty years or fifteen minutes. I couldn’t tell if it was real or a bit.

“Hank’s been leaving town in the middle of the night most of his life. If he’d bothered to keep up with his child support, I doubt I’d even be involved.”

“I only know him as my boss and friendship,” Porter said.

“Something breaks, I’ll let you know,” Garrison said.

Porter thanked Garrison, then went back to his bikes.

“Piece of advice, Mr. Bank Robber?” Garrison said. “Keep good ledgers, hate for you to have to move back in with your Nazi buddy.” He picked up *The Thorn Birds*, flipped to page 406. “This is where it heats up.”

“Couldn’t have them thinking I had anything to do with it,” Porter said. It was after seven, and we were eating broiled steaks at the Del Monte Café, waiting on Sarah. She was already twenty minutes late. “So I place the missing call. Me and Hank, we’ve been friends a long juncture.” Porter paused. “Well. Not friends. I mean. We have been knowing each other a long time. It would make sense I was concern.”

“Where’d you meet?”

“You see these warehouses? My family? We owned half of them. Croatians made this area.” The Del Monte was on Walker Street in Watsonville—Porter lived in an apartment just above it—across the street from blocks of vacant produce packing plants. If you could get a time machine and roll back to the early 1900s, when the Del Monte opened, the streets would be packed with workers coming off their shifts, gaslights illuminating the freshly lain Southern Pacific tracks. Now, the sun had been down for thirty minutes, and the Del Monte was the only building still lit on the block, the cooks and servers the only humans moving for miles. “We owned all the fruit packing. Then Smucker’s and Nestlé, those cocksuckers, they start undercutting us, then the farms, they become corporate, then the railroads pave over their spurs and move their lines.”

“Things change,” I said.

“Thank you for your understanding cliché,” he said. Porter was a little drunk, so I didn’t reach across the table and smack him. Also, he had a good six inches and a hundred pounds on

me and looked like the kind of guy who got into fights for fun, not anger, which was, frankly, the last kind of guy you wanted to fuck around with. I was also in a place in my life where I was avoiding violence as a rule. It wouldn't last. "I tell you this not from some desire that you should know my woes. You ask me where I met Hank. I'm telling you. I fell into a depression, which led to habits." He cut the rim of fat from the remnants of his steak, dropped it into the empty husk of his baked potato, poured a couple shakes of A.1. into the potato skin, too, then picked it all up and ate it like a taco.

"If you're still hungry," I said, "order some dessert."

"I'm not hungry," he said. "I eat when I am anxiety." He finished chewing. "I grow drugs."

"What kind?" I said.

"Marijuana," he said, like he was talking about apples. "But lately? I am growing poppies very successfully, learning how to extract opium and making heroin, much trial and error, but much success."

"Out in the open?"

"I look like a fool?" Porter asked. He tapped the window again. "Produce warehouses have strong ventilation and plumbing and no windows. And if there is problem? State flower of California is the poppy. Easy to explain." Porter leaned across the table. "Even the failure has been successful enough to be lucrative for people who are addicted, though admission is that there have been some bumps in the streets. When Hank was disappearing, I had the sense that heat would be turned on me at some point, so I say, well, get ahead of this problem before they begin to look at me. And so, I made that call. I am not sorry."

“Did you wait until the bank robber took over the bike shop, or did you alert the authorities right away?”

Porter said, “I may have taken the liberty of time to make my decision.”

Fucking hell.

“I met Hank in rehab. I was his sponsorship.”

“Guess that didn’t take,” I said.

“I have not touched drugs in ten years,” Porter said.

“You’re drunk,” I said, “and you’re cultivating illegal substances.”

“Different commitments,” he said.

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” I said.

“And yet you are the person who goes to prison, and I am freedom.”

Sarah slid in beside me. The waitress came over, and Sarah ordered a steak and a Tom Collins, and then I asked for another steak, for our pal Porter, since he was eyeing my gristle. When the waitress left, Sarah said, “Porter tell you about his warehouse of shitty heroin yet?”

“Yeah, he mentioned it.”

“Great,” Sarah said. “Did he tell you how it killed Hank yet?”

“No,” I said, “he left that part out.”

Porter shuffled in his seat. “We are telling your brother our secrets? There is no approval process?”

“Sarah,” I said, “what have you done?”

“I fucked up,” she said, and then pointed at Porter, “by helping *that* fuckup.”

I should have left right then. Garrison was right.

Later that night, Sarah was busy working on some contracts, so I sat outside on her little patio, smoked a cigar, ate from a bag of marshmallows, listened to a couple have sex on the beach, and thought about what Porter and Sarah ended up telling me: Hank was Porter's main heroin and opium focus group, which worked fine until he OD'd after Porter shot him up with his latest batch. He couldn't exactly call 911, so he called Sarah instead, and the two of them decided the best course of action, which was to get rid of Hank's body and then pretend he ran off. Sarah thought she'd report him missing after I got into town, her thinking being if the cops did come to look into things, they'd find me, get suspicious, find out I had an ironclad alibi, and that would be that.

That my sister had planned to use me as a red herring didn't make me happy, but truth was? I admired the hustle. But then Porter beat her to the punch. Which made her look suspicious to the cops, particularly since she had no idea Hank had an ex-wife and children.

Which I did not admire.

Around midnight, Sarah opened the slider and came out, a drink in her hand, just in time to catch the couple from the beach walking back to their car. They waved at me as they went by.

"Friends of yours?" Sarah asked.

"I think I just heard them planting their family tree."

"Do you remember back when there were, like, six serial killers working out here?"

"Of course," I said. This had been in the late '60s and early '70s, when we were just kids, and Mom still had the beach house in Capitola. "Why?"

"Those two would have been on the news in the morning," she said, "missing their heads or something. Mom thought maybe that's what became of Dad."

"That he got killed?"

“No, that he was one of those maniacs running around hacking people to death. Ed Kemper or something.”

“He’d have been caught by now.”

“Yeah,” Sarah said. “But I do wonder where he is, if he thinks about us, all that shit.” We’d had this conversation a thousand times, so I stayed quiet, particularly in light of the night’s news. Plus, she knew my opinion: if Dad wanted to be in our lives, he would be. Also? I thought maybe Mom had buried him under the birch tree. “And hence, all of my romantic notions explained.” She raised her glass out toward the ocean in a toast. “To Hank, the love of my life.”

“How did you not know he had an ex-wife and kids?”

“He never mentioned them,” she said.

“You never did that thing where you go over all your old, significant relationships?”

“Hank didn’t like to hear about my past,” Sarah said, “so I kept out of his.”

“Why don’t you just tell the police what happened and let Porter deal with his own shit?”

“I could.” Sarah nodded. “I could. And I thought of that.”

“But?”

“I helped him get rid of the body, so that’s a problem.”

“Porter wouldn’t dime you on that,” I said. Well, he might. But I knew enough guys inside that I’d solve that problem, quick, before any trial.

“The other complication is that we own the warehouses.”

“You and Porter?”

“No,” Sarah said.

“You and Hank?”

“No,” Sarah said. “We. You and me.”

“Jesus fuck, Sarah,” I said. “I own the warehouses?”

“You told me to get rid of the money. I got rid of the money.”

“I didn’t mean,” I said, “enter into a criminal conspiracy with the money, Sarah.”

She waved me off. “They were basically abandoned, so our LLC grabbed them up for next to nothing,” she said. “End of summer, we’ll own them outright. Porter’s been a very good tenant. It’s not a crime to rent a warehouse to someone who then uses them for criminal behavior.”

“Unless,” I said, “you abet the criminal behavior.”

“They could put me on the rack, and I’d never admit to knowing,” she said.

“You think Porter feels the same way?”

“I could make him feel the same way,” she said.

“That would be a great way to show the cops you’re in mourning.”

I offered her the bag of marshmallows. She reached in, took out three, popped them in her mouth one after the other.

“Do we have any graham crackers?” she asked.

“I’ll look,” I said. I went inside and started opening cabinets, finally locating a box of Golden Grahams on the top shelf of the pantry, standing upright on a yellow lazy Susan. When I took them down, I found what Sarah surely wanted me to find: a loaded .357. I brought both back out to the patio, set them down on the little beveled glass table. “Here you go.”

Sarah glanced at the gun, then opened up the box of crackers, took out two, grabbed up another handful of marshmallows, put them all in her mouth at once.

“You ever shot a gun before?” I asked.

“Not at a person,” she said once she’d swallowed down her concoction.

“Keep it that way,” I said.

“It’s Hank’s,” she said. I looked it over. It still had the serial number on it. Which was a surprise. “He told me if anything happened to him, to get rid of it.”

“And yet here it is.”

“I don’t think he meant if, like, Porter and I got rid of his body after he OD’d on Porter’s skunk scag.”

“You need to tell me now if Hank’s the East Area Rapist or something.”

“No,” she said. “Of course not. He’d never hurt a woman.”

“Just the other half of humanity?”

“He’s an honest man now,” she said. “I mean, before he died, he was beginning to be more honest.”

“This is not good,” I said.

“Little brother,” Sarah said, “I cannot lie to you.”

“Except for all the times you have.”

“Cannot does not mean will not,” Sarah said. “Benefit of being in the world four minutes longer than you. Earned wisdom.” She finished her drink, then threw her tumbler toward the crashing waves, the glass landing with a thunk about fifteen yards away. “In my mind, that was going to be more dramatic.” She squeezed beside me on the chaise lounge, put her head on my shoulder—it was how we looked in Mom’s first sonogram—and tried to cry. “I don’t miss Hank,” Sarah said. “He was an ass, okay? Hank was an ass. But he loved me, and I miss having someone who loves me. Is that pathetic, Mitch?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Well, it’s true.” Sarah sniffled. “How come you didn’t ask where we put Hank’s body?”

“Because if I know,” I said, “I’m liable to tell the police ten, fifteen years from now when I get wrapped up in some new, worse fuckup and need a way out. You don’t want that.” Sarah agreed, she did not want that. “And this way, I won’t fail a polygraph either.”

“If what Garrison told you is true,” Sarah said, “all Hank’s ex and kids need is some money? And then it’s no problem anymore.”

“Hank owes a grand a month for another fifteen years,” I said. “You have that kinda cash?”

“Not on hand, no,” Sarah said. “Could you get your hands on that much money?”

“I’d be shoulder deep in dye packs,” I said, “plus, I’m not robbing a bank to keep Porter out of prison.” Still, I couldn’t have those kids on my conscience. I wedged myself out of the chaise lounge, tucked the gun in my waistband, and hopped over the low patio wall and headed toward the water.

“Where are you going?”

“To think about how I can get you out of this dumb shit you’re in,” I said, “and how to make sure those kids of Hank’s aren’t irrevocably fucked up. So please, don’t fire or fuck Porter before I get back.”

Hank’s ex, Mary, lived in a bungalow across the street from the Saltwater Sands Hotel in Aptos, along with her two kids, a daughter named Kyle and a son named Hank Jr., who went by Deuce, because that’s the kind of people they were. She worked for the hotel, painting portraits and landscapes for tourists, so when I stopped by with a check, the babysitter told me where I could find her.

Mary was stationed on a bluff above the beach, with a perfect view of the Cement Ship—the wreck of the SS *Palo Alto*—which hadn't moved in about sixty years and was now more art installation than maritime accident. She had a corona of six easels before her, each with an unfinished portrait on the canvas. The weird thing was that the background for each was already done—the Cement Ship at the golden hour—with a hole in the middle, where the finished human would go. She moved from canvas to canvas, filling in details: a nose here, an eye there, a wisp of hair. Back and forth. Not exactly da Vinci, but everyone has a process.

“It's not like on TV,” she said eventually.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Not every artist has to be tortured,” she said. “Not every painting needs to be an expression of pain and suffering. Sometimes, the beauty is in the work itself, the actual labor. The conveying of the person.”

“How do you remember what they looked like?”

“I can close my eyes and see them as easily as I see you.”

“That's quite a skill,” I said.

“It pays a third of the rent,” she said. She looked at the envelope in my hand. “You here to serve me a summons or something?”

I handed her the envelope. “It's what Hank owes you.”

Mary sat down in her paint-stained director's chair, opened the envelope, took the check out, held it up to the sun. “Looks legit,” she said. “And who are you?”

“Mitch Lenney. I'm running Hank's bike shop while he's gone,” I said. “My sister, Sarah's been involved with him for a while now.”

“Your sister couldn't show up herself?”

“Sarah was concerned there might be some animosity,” I said. What she’d said, specifically, was she didn’t want to end up pulling some bitch’s hair over a dead man.

“Sarah Lenney?”

“Yeah.”

“She leaves calendars with her face on them in my mailbox all the time,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said, “she’s a real estate agent.”

“Is that a good job? Selling things you don’t own?”

“She likes it.”

“Maybe I’ll try that when I’ve lost all hope,” Mary said. “When’s Hank coming back?”

“That, I don’t know,” I said. I explained to her about how Garrison had come to see us, which is when Sarah found out Hank had children to support and an ex-wife who needed her cut, too. Mary listened carefully, then said, “So Hank doesn’t know you’re paying me?”

“No.”

“She seen him?”

“Not in months.”

Mary stuffed the check into her bra. “His kids could use a phone call if he happens to pop his head up,” she said. “They haven’t heard his voice in a long time.”

“Since when?”

“Christmas,” she said. It was May. “Be an asshole to me, fine. But don’t ruin your kids’ lives. No matter what stupidity he got up to, he always has sent his money. Even, I guess, once he started shacking up with your sister. No offense intended.” She paused. “Well, no. Some offense intended, but it’s misdirected, I understand, since it’s not like it’s her fault Hank neglected to mention his fucking ex-wife and kids.”

“My sister thinks maybe he relapsed,” I said.

“He would need to be clean to relapse,” Mary said. She shook her head. “When he was using at his worst, he still was a pretty good father to Kyle. I mean, as good as he could be. He’s never really gotten to know Deuce too well. But still, he’s always provided. That’s why I feel worried about this.”

“Well,” I said, “we’re keeping the shop open. So, you’re taken care of, you can let your attorney know.”

“For how long?”

“I guess forever,” I said.

This made Mary laugh. “Nothing lasts forever,” she said, “and nothing survives the fall and winter on the beach. That’s why Hank got into all that other shit.”

“What other shit?”

“Oh come on,” she said. “He’s been in and out of jail half his life.” She got up, started back on her canvases. I watched her for a few more minutes as she worked. It was kind of mesmerizing. She stepped back, looked at her work. One of her portraits was of a woman with long, black hair that fell over her shoulders and who looked like the singer Crystal Gayle, if Crystal Gayle had broken her nose and jaw.

“Was that lady in a car accident or something?” I asked.

She pulled Crystal Gayle off the easel. “Guess I’ll start that one over.” She ripped the canvas into pieces, dumped them in the trash. “It’s not just about the money,” she said. “His kids hardly remember him at this point.”

“How old are they?” I asked.

“Three and five,” she said.

My own father was already out of the picture by the time I was six. That turned out great.

“I could call them,” I said.

Mary stopped painting. “What?”

“If they don’t remember Hank,” I said, “what could it hurt?”

“For you to pretend you’re their father?”

“I like kids,” I said.

“Do you know how deeply fucked up that idea is?”

“I have some sense,” I said.

“You don’t even know me,” she said. “Why would you do this?”

“You seem like you could use a friend.”

“I’m not looking to hook up, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she said. “I mean, you’re nice and you’re handsome, but this is too weird to be functional even for me, okay?”

“Not what I was looking for,” I said, though Mary did have her appeal, if you were into women who dressed like Stevie Nicks and sort of looked like her, too. Which I was.

“Do you have a pen?” she asked. I did. She gave me her number. “Call around seven. Just ask them about school or their friends or whatever. Don’t mention the cat. I accidentally ran her over, and now I’m trying to find one that looks reasonably similar,” Mary said. “My whole life is a wreck.”

For the next two months, every other night at seven, I called Deuce and Kyle and shot the shit. I usually called from a payphone in front of the Safeway, or the one inside the Beachcomber, or just from the shop, because Sarah could not bear to hear me pretending to be Hank. Even when Mary wasn’t home, Kyle would answer the phone, and we’d just pick up

where we left off. Deuce, being three, didn't have much going on, but Kyle was a little chatterbox, and I enjoyed hearing her thoughts on life.

Did I tell them to have sweet dreams and gold stars?

I did.

Did I start to drive by their place at night sometimes, just to make sure everything was safe and sound if I knew Mary was out?

I did.

Did I tell them I loved them?

I did.

It got to be that I stopped worrying anything bad was going to happen with this whole deal. The bike shop was making money, Porter's other business was making money, Sarah was selling condos like mad, June turned to July to August, and the beach was full almost every day, the smell of Pronto Pups and suntan lotion and saltwater breezes, enough to make me think I'd finally figured out how to live with all this shit behind me.

Then Detective Garrison showed up again.

I'd just hung up with Kyle—she'd gone to a birthday party that morning—and little Deuce—he was starting to get into Matchbox cars—and was sitting at the bar at the Beachcomber, having a beer, trying to will the A's not to lose to the Mariners—when Garrison copped the stool beside me, ordered a beer for himself, and quietly watched the game.

“What do you make of Canseco?” I asked. The game was delayed, a summer storm rolling down the coast, lightning sparking just long enough to scatter the players into the dugouts.

“Future of the game,” Garrison said. “Power, speed, pretty good arm, big personality. Just what it needs.”

“He’s got a twin too,” I said.

“No shit?” Garrison said. “I’m more of a Giants guy.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s funny. He’s terrible. Ozzie. Still in A-ball. Can’t get out.”

“There’s something here about nature and nurture,” Garrison said, “but I’m not smart enough to figure it out.”

The bartender came by and dropped off a bowl of peanuts then, so I ordered a shot of Jack and got one for Garrison, too, since I wasn’t sure where this was all going, and ordered a round for the two guys I made as Garrison’s backup sitting over by the jukebox.

After we took down our drinks, Garrison said, “Turns out Hank has parents.”

“Here I thought he was a test-tube baby,” I said.

“Nice people,” Garrison said. “Live up in Napa. They were surprised to hear how involved he’s been in the kids’ lives lately, particularly in light of the missing person’s report they put out too. Turns out, they don’t know him as Hank Niculescu, because that’s not the name they gave him, so they reported him missing as Henry Nichols, which is his actual name. Low priority, fella has a criminal record and five different names, different police departments are actively ignoring the case, so it takes a while for anything to come of it, until Mr. and Mrs. Nichols get the grandkids for July fourth and hear all about dad’s exploits working for the FBI.”

“You never embellished a story for a kid?”

“Maybe my own,” Garrison said.

“These kids,” I said, “just need something that makes their dad seem cool.”

“And you picked federal law enforcement?”

“Kids don’t remember shit. So I said something dumb one time, big deal. And I gotta tell you, Kyle said Grandma called her fat, which ruined the whole holiday.”

“Between us,” Garrison said, “Grandma is running about a quart low these days. Grandpa, on the other hand, stormed the beach at Normandy and is ready to storm the beach at Pajaro to put one between your eyes.”

“Is it against the law to talk to a child on the phone?”

“You’re a felon, Mitch,” Garrison said, “pretending to be their father.”

“Their father is a felon,” I said.

He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket, came out with a couple photographs, set them on the bar. “That you parked out front of their house?”

It was. He knew it was. You could see my face pretty easily, since I had a flashlight so I could read, in one photo, *Raise the Titanic*, in the other, *Shogun*. Both were fucking terrible.

“Mary’s been spending a lot of nights out,” I said. “Someone needs to take some responsibility with these kids. And anyway, what’s the crime? I’m not getting any benefit from it. I’m just helping Mary out. She agreed to it. Practically suggested it.”

“That’s the thing,” Garrison said. “I had to ask that same question. What benefit is my friend the bank robber getting from sharing a delusion with those children? So now I gotta tap the phone, I gotta trace calls, I gotta spend a good amount of time examining who you are, how much money you stole from that bank in Walnut Creek, and where that money went.”

“Straight to my debts,” I said.

“Yeah,” Garrison said, “I saw that. Nothing flashy. No cars. No houses.”

“I didn’t rob Fort Knox,” I said. “I robbed the Crocker next door to Gemco. And I apologize for not getting a letter from the Wah Ching gang saying they were in receipt of my final payment for gambling debts. But as you can see, I’m alive, so the money was received.”

“You got five grand from that Crocker,” Garrison said. “The Wah Ching wasn’t putting out hits for five grand. So my guess is that the Crocker wasn’t your first job. It was just the one that got you put away.”

“And so you think I did thirty-eight months just to get out to harass children? Please. Ask Mary. She’ll tell you.”

“I did,” Garrison said. “She was real surprised to learn about your criminal record. She’d like you to stop calling her children, as of about twenty minutes ago.”

“Fine,” I said.

“And she’d like you to stop bringing over the support money,” Garrison said.

“Fine,” I said.

“And this parking shit,” Garrison said, “Mitch, you ever heard of stalking? You could be in county right now for that.”

“That what those backup guys are for? You taking me to county?”

Garrison took a deep breath, then chuckled in a way that didn’t seem to indicate he was in the least bit amused. “No,” Garrison said, finally, “I’m not. Because inexplicably? I believe you. You’re too smart to be in something this dumb.” He stood up then, finished off his beer. Waved at his backup. They got up, left. “Hank’s probably dead,” Garrison said once they were gone, just like that, a simple statement. “He’s never gone more than sixty days, under any of his aliases, without having some police contact, so unless he’s in a coma or chained up somewhere, he’s dead.”

“What kind of shit was he involved with?”

“You really don’t know?”

“Sarah’s a straight edge,” I said. “She thought he was just a beach bum.”

Garrison ordered another shot. Took it down. “All right listen. Cop to robber? He’s a suspect in a dirtbag-on-dirtbag shooting up near Tahoe. He was going by Nick Hankston up there,” Garrison said. “A grow house got robbed. Assailant shot the proprietor in both knees and ran off with a bunch of cash.”

“Surprised anyone bothered to call the cops,” I said.

“Local cops think it was the shooter who called, worried the guy would bleed out and he’d be on the hook for a murder. Neighbors ID’d Hank’s Ford truck, but half of the damn county was in and out of the place buying weed, driving beat-up Ford trucks. He admitted he’d been up there, but then so did everyone else. Cops didn’t have enough to hold him.”

“Not even on his fake identity?”

“He called himself that,” Garrison said, “but all his paper was legit. You can call yourself whatever you want these days.”

“Lucky,” I said. “The guy die?”

“Nope,” Garrison said. “But he’s got the mush brains from loss of blood. He’s useless. Couldn’t or wouldn’t ID Hank, couldn’t tell if he stole ten bucks or a million.” He picked up the photos of me out front of Mary’s, tore them in half, dumped them in an ashtray. “So, I know you didn’t kill him. But I suspect, if it’s someone local, you know who did. My advice to you, Mitch? Get a lawyer, come to the station, give a statement. Those kids are young enough that they’ll think they had a pretty great relationship with their father for a few months, so don’t beat yourself up. Twenty years from now, they’ll work it out in therapy.”

“Therapy won’t fix everything,” I said. “Trust me.”

“Hank’s parents are going to court. They’ll be taking possession of the bike shop soon as a judge gives them the okay. My guess is a week. Maybe less. Steer clear. This isn’t your problem.”

“Season’s about over anyway,” I said.

Garrison looked up at the TV for a moment. Dave Kingman was up to bat for the A’s. The rain delay apparently up. “You know what I never liked about baseball?”

“What’s that?”

“You never know,” he said, “how long it’s going to take for someone to lose.”

By the time I broke into Porter’s apartment the next day, the coast was being hammered, sheets of summer rain coming down from Fort Bragg to San Simeon, along with gale-force winds and lightning. It had been a few years since the last El Niño, so no one was panicking about landslides just yet, but Californians are terrible with rain; they lose all sense of time and space and reason, so the streets were empty.

I called Porter that morning and told him they were red-flagging the beach (which was true), that even the surfers were coming in (which wasn’t true, those dudes were bigger lunatics than the motherfuckers I met in Quentin), so he could have a day off. And then I made a bag of PB and Js and camped out down the block from the Del Monte, waiting for Porter to make his move. It wasn’t until two that afternoon that I saw him exit the building pushing a bike, no umbrella, just a garbage bag over his clothes, and take off across the street toward his warehouse.

I went around the back of the building, which housed the café on the bottom floor and then four tiny apartments up above. I found the power meter behind a thick hedge, cracked it

open with a screwdriver, popped the meter's face off, broke off the plastic receptors, and screwed it all back together. Two minutes, in and out, the whole building was dark. PG&E would need to come out to fix it. Which they weren't about to do in the rain. I picked Porter's lock in about thirty seconds—it was nothing more than a push button, the door, the lock, the whole building, more antique than safe house—and let myself in.

Porter had decorated his shitty one bedroom with a couch, a tiny TV, one well-tended house plant, fifteen bikes, and then five garbage bags and three suitcases packed with most of his earthly belongings: a stack of jeans, half a dozen denim work shirts, a black blazer, way too many Eagles records, and plastic bags of heroin. If it were the consistently good kind of heroin, it would probably have a street value of a couple hundred thousand dollars. Maybe half a million.

But it wasn't. It was bags of heart attacks and strokes and living like a vegetable.

Still, whatever Porter had planned with the rest of his life, making a quick getaway was clearly a part of it, and he may as well have had uncut diamonds with him. He also had about five grand in cash, which I went ahead and took.

I did fifty push-ups and then called Porter's warehouse. He answered on the seventeenth ring. Which was good. It gave me time to do a couple jumping jacks.

"Where have you been?" I said.

"Right here," he said. "You said we were closed."

"I've been calling your place all day!"

"Okay, okay," Porter said. "Catch your breathing. What is problem?"

"Cops came and arrested Sarah. Kicked in the front door and pulled her out by the hair."

"She needs to keep her mouth closed," Porter said.

"I'm losing my mind over here, Porter," I said.

“Okay, okay,” he said again.

“Have you been talking to the cops?”

“No, never.”

“Because they said they already had you in custody. Are you already out?”

“No, no,” Porter said. “They lie. They are allowed to lie. It is constitution that cops are legal to lie. I am right here. I am not in custody. We are speaking. Come to the Del Monte. We have steak and figure this out. Come in one hour of time.”

I told him I would. Even though Sarah’s condo was only about fifteen minutes away, the fucker.

I hung up and watched out the window for Porter to ride up, which he did about ten minutes later. He picked up his bike and began to climb the stairs, so I stationed myself beside the front door, Hank’s gun wrapped in a pair of Porter’s jeans to muffle the sound, and when Porter walked in, I shot him in the side of the head. Porter was dead before he hit the ground, but I buried another bullet in the wall, just in case the cops needed a clean slug.

I put one more in his face for talking shit that day in the restaurant.

The day after Labor Day, Sarah and I dragged a cooler of beer and a couple chairs and towels out to the empty beach to work on our tans one last time. The bike stand had been closed since Hank’s parents took it over a month earlier, since they didn’t have anyone to work it, what with Porter dead. They were still paying rent—it had been a good summer, before everything went south—since their lease wasn’t up until December. Sarah wasn’t planning on renewing with them. We had our own idea. Artisan s’mores, available all year long. We’d be rich.

Around lunchtime, Detective Garrison came walking over the low dune behind us. He'd rolled up his slacks and had his dress shoes tied around his neck. Beach people are different, even the cops.

"There's Donnie and Marie," he said. I put down the paperback I was reading—*The Bourne Identity*—and opened the cooler, let Garrison pick a bottle of Anchor Steam. He looked around, like he was worried someone would spot him, but then he said, "It's actually a nice place when all the tourists leave, isn't it?"

"I sold twenty condos this summer," Sarah said. "Take in the view while you can."

"More people, more crime," Garrison said. "Good for my business." He took a long swallow of his beer. "I wanted you to know, before you saw it in the paper, we got a ballistic match on the gun used to kill your friend Mr. Porter. Turns out it was used in a shooting up near Tahoe last year that Hank was a suspect in." Garrison kept his eyes on me.

"So my Hank is still alive?" Sarah said. "Is that what you're saying?"

"Or his gun is," Garrison said. He finally glanced at Sarah. "His parents are choosing to believe he's still with us, so that's the premise I guess we're going with for now."

"What do you believe?" I asked.

"I believe you two are neck deep in some shit you're never, ever gonna get out of," he said. He pointed his bottle toward the bike stand, which was only about fifty yards away. "That nice garage you got? When did you renovate that?"

"January," Sarah said. "Hank did it himself. You can go pull the permits."

"I did," Garrison said. He picked up *The Bourne Identity* and flipped through the pages. "This realistic?" he asked.

"No," I said. "You might like it."

“Ludlum’s usually pretty tight. Lots of action and fighting. Not a lot of bullshit talking.”

“I’m having a hard time getting into it,” I said.

“You might try reading some classics,” Garrison said. “Maybe start with Edgar Allan Poe. ‘The Cask of Amontillado.’ That’s a good one. See where it takes you.” He pocketed *The Bourne Identity*, finished his beer, took another beer, but didn’t open it. “Porter, by the way? Grew up in San Jose.”

“No shit?”

“That accent was made up. His parents teach horticulture at San Jose City College. They’d like to get into his warehouse, see if there’s any plants to salvage. They had no idea he’d developed such a green thumb.” Garrison watched the crashing waves for a few seconds, then regarded us both, a strange look on his face. “Personally? I don’t really give a shit about Hank. This planet is better without him on it. Same with Porter, if I’m being honest. Neither of them is worth a squirt of piss in my view. But it’s not up to either of you to decide that. So if I were you? I’d keep a real close eye on that garage. Hate for there to be a robbery or fire or a busted plumbing line that required any kind of police or city action around it.” He cracked open the second beer, tossed the cap into the sand.

“You’ll be on the lookout to see if Hank uses that gun anywhere else, I trust?” I said.

“Oh, I’ll be watching real close,” Garrison said, “soon as I get back from vacation. Wife and I are taking a cruise around the world.”

“When do you clock out?” Sarah asked.

He looked at his watch. “Two beers ago.”

“Enjoy the book,” I said.

Garrison said, “I’ll bring it back to you up north next summer.”

“I think you’ll find me right here.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” he said. “Have a nice fall, you two.”

Garrison disappeared back up the dune. For a long time, both of us were quiet, busy trying to figure out what the fuck just happened, until Sarah said, “You smell that? Is something on fire?”

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