

Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes,
working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we
don't need.

—*FIGHT CLUB* MOVIE, SCREENPLAY BY JIM UHLS,
DIRECTED BY DAVID FINCHER,
NOVEL BY CHUCK PALAHNIUK

ALSO BY STEPHEN J. CANNELL

Three Shirt Deal

White Sister

Cold Hit

Vertical Coffin

Runaway Heart

Hollywood Tough

The Viking Funeral

The Tin Collectors

King Con

Riding the Snake

The Devil's Workshop

Final Victim

The Plan



AT FIRST SIGHT

A Novel of Obsession



STEPHEN J. CANNELL

 Vanguard Press
A Member of the Perseus Books Group

This book is a work of fiction. The characters are not actual persons, living or dead. Any resemblance of such individuals or the events described herein is purely coincidental.

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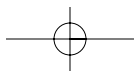
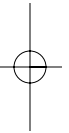
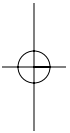
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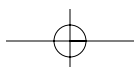
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*This one is for my “Hollywood son,”
Mario Van Peebles, friend, workmate, and inspiration.*





A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I HAD AN ACTING JOB ON A STEVEN Seagal movie that was shooting in Berlin. Long hours of waiting in dressing rooms during other shoots had taught me that it is always a good idea to have some fresh reading material from authors I admire on hand. Since I was scheduled to be on the film for a month, and since Germany in November can be very wet and bleak, I had a suitcase full of my favorite novelists.

Among them was a book written by Andrew Klavan entitled *Man and Wife*. I thoroughly enjoyed that novel. I thought it a very unique tale told from a fresh perspective. I have always felt that Andrew took big chances with his books, pulling them off beautifully. I began to wonder if I shouldn't be trying to push a little harder and take more chances myself. I love writing my Shane Scully mysteries, so this feeling wasn't because of any loss of excitement with those books; it was more about trying to pull off something totally different. I resolved that when I got back to L.A. I would find time among my other assignments to write my "unique" novel. I already knew

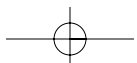
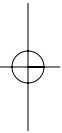
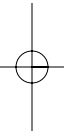
what the book should be about because I'd had the initial idea for *At First Sight* three years before. Whenever I tried to explain my vision to those involved with my career, they would beg me not to write it. But then nobody but me could really see what was inside my head. I decided to avoid more discussion and just write it on spec.

The novel poured out. I had a rough draft in around two months. So here it is. The book nobody wanted me to write.

I hope you like it.

If you don't, send your letters to Andrew Klavan. Even though we've never discussed it, Drew's work inspired this effort.

CHICK



CHAPTER



LET'S START WITH THE ESSENTIALS.

My name is Chick Best. Chick is short for Charles. I'm five-foot ten-inches tall and I weigh one-hundred-eighty-five pounds . . . okay, if you want to be picky, one-ninety-four—but I'm about to lose fifteen. I'm starting the Atkins Diet any day now. I'm fifty-five years old and I live in Los Angeles. My mother was named Celeste, my father was Chick Sr., so that means I was Chick Jr., until Dad checked off the ride on the Hollywood Freeway during my sophomore year in high school. He fell asleep and ran his silver Jag into a bridge abutment. People said he didn't deserve to die . . . but he was drunk, so who else can you blame? Rim shot. Cue the strings. I'll deal with that whole mess later.

That's the birth and genealogy stuff.

I guess I should also give you a quick, personal history. Just the headlines though—I promise not to drag it out. After Dad died, I

lived with my mother and my grandmother. They tried to see me through my wild years, through high school and junior college. For me, this period was pretty much a drug haze—my chocolate-chip period. Instant Zen, the Great White Light, a Sunshine Ticket to oblivion. My excuse is it was the seventies. If you didn't get high, you didn't get laid. I lost my student deferment from City College because I discovered drugs, got wasted, and got an incomplete in Western Civ. Missed the final. Uncle Sam was on me like puke on a wino. The chronology there was unremarkable, but classic: unlucky lottery number, induction, last acid trip, first train trip, Fort Ord, and then six months of pure, ass-kicking misery. I resurfaced half a year later as a buck private and ammo-humper for the good ol' USA with a one-way ticket to Vietnam.

But I never saw combat. In fact, I didn't even see Vietnam. I became a REMF, which in the military stands for Rear Echelon Mother-fucker. Here's the quick story on that. My dad had been a talent agent before he kamikazied out on the Hollywood Freeway. He booked comedians you never heard of into clubs you'd never go to. Dad's old partner had a connection to Bob Hope's USO Tour. He pulled a few strings and fixed it so I could stay stateside. I ended up in the chairborne infantry booking USO shows for the armed forces—a post I defended valiantly, holding off talent managers and agents from my fifth-floor office on Wilshire Boulevard in L.A. My joke back then was—I find comics that kill, instead of Commies to kill.

After I got out of the service I spent a kick-ass year on Maui. Sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll. Of course, I've fired up my last blunt. I'm not

AT FIRST SIGHT

5

beaming up on thrusters or bang anymore either. My acid flashbacks are finally history. I'm clean as the Board of Health and am now absolutely against drugs, which I've said at least two thousand times to my sixteen-year-old daughter, Melissa, who listens to these lectures with amused indifference, which is the same expression she wears at traffic court.

In the past two years Melissa has discovered more drugs than Dow Chemical. Every time I do my "Life Is a Choice" speech, she starts rolling her eyes like I'm the biggest excuse for bad behavior since Sigmund Freud.

I should probably add that I'm having a huge problem with Melissa right now. Of course it didn't help that my wife, Evelyn, let it drop last Christmas that I was busted and did six months for dealing Pakalolo in Hawaii after Nam. I'll get back to all this later, but for now, suffice it to say, that after I got out of the Hawaiian prison, I came back to the mainland and started my business career, mostly retail. I got married in 1990 to Evelyn, my current and only wife, and we had our first and only child, Melissa, a year later. For the past twelve years, I've been running my own Internet company in L.A.

That's the quick history . . . short and sweet, like I promised. There's more, but for now, let's move on.

This story begins in January. My wife, my daughter, and I arrived at the Four Seasons on Maui to vacation during the week between Christmas and New Year's. I love that hotel. We go every December. Everybody knows my name there. You walk around and it's, "Hello, Mr. Best," or, "Nice to have you back, Mr. Best." Makes you feel important.

The only thing I don't like about the Four Seasons at New Year's is it's a magnet for A-type personalities. You see them out on the beach doing mortal combat over sun chairs.

They have these cabanas at the pool. Strange as it may seem, there's a sort of pecking order that comes with who gets which one. There are three or four that are on the high ground and command a view of both the beach and the main pool. These have become sought-after sunspots. People scheme and fight for these locations. Personally, I could give less of a shit about being in a cabana. But with my wife, Evelyn, it's a life-or-death situation. She's got to have one. If I fail to secure her favorite, it's some kind of cosmic confirmation of my worthlessness as a provider.

I used to be able to score the right location for a hundred bucks up-front. A little palm grease and a pool boy would set me up for the week. But that was five years ago. Things have changed. Hollywood discovered the hotel. With all the Beverly Hills A-List power players, actors, agents, and directors, you have to grab a flat sword and shed blood to get one of these silly little sun tents. Now on arrival I'm paying five hundred to the pool guy, and that only buys me a place at the starting line for one week. If I can get down there early enough, and edge the competition, it's ours. Great. Except one of us has to get up at four in the morning to beat the rush and secure it.

I've tried to tell Evelyn that it's nuts to make Melissa get up that early and sit in the cabana till we get there, and it's become World War III with the kid every time we ask, but Evelyn loves her power

AT FIRST SIGHT

7

cabana. She preens and struts when we get one. You can see all this in her body language.

As long as we're on my wife's body, let me take a moment to describe it. Evelyn's got a killer shape. I'm not kidding here. It's a Gold's Gym trophy exhibit. Tight ass, cut abs, sculpted delts. We invested thirty Gs last year in some silicone. The results are staggering. From the neck down, my wife looks like Ms. Fitness USA, but in the past decade, her face has become pinched and angry. It almost seems as if her eyes have grown a few millimeters closer together each year. Her mouth is always curved down at the edges, angry and mean like a killer bass about to hit a water bug. Evelyn's face has become a constant mask of disapproval. For a while I wondered if it might be "roid rage." I thought her trainer might be slipping her some gym juice to get all those impressive body cuts. But now, I think she's just naturally pissed off and unhappy.

Why should she be pissed, you might ask? She has everything: a house in Beverly Hills on Elm, in the really exclusive six-hundred block. She has a no-limit Amex Black Card, a Mercedes, a power cabana. She has *moi*. I don't get it either. Okay, she says she's mad because I've changed, and I guess to some extent I have.

The past few years haven't been pretty for me. As I mentioned, I run an Internet company, and if you'll permit a little egotism, it's quite a bit more than just some online flea market. I'm a dot-com wizard. At least that's what *Wired* magazine called me in an article on start-up phenoms that they wrote a few years ago.

My company's called bestmarket.com. A play on my name. What it is is an Internet sales site for CDs and DVDs. Order online and your friendly FedEx man will deliver the movie or music CD of your choice within twenty-four hours. I started this company in 1996 and for the first four or five years had the DVD-CD Internet field pretty much to myself. I was going strong when Amazon, Netflix, and about half a dozen other better-financed companies jumped on my idea. With all the competition, I've been getting pretty badly shredded for the past several years. My bankers have all grown dorsal fins.

The week before we left for Hawaii, I was hanging by a thread. Couldn't borrow any money, couldn't stock enough inventory. I subcontract my product from major studios and record companies. I used to get all my merchandise on consignment deals, but because of my money problems, the entertainment companies I was interfacing with all thought I was on the verge of going broke. They started refusing to let me sell their stuff on consignment, forcing me to buy the product, stock it, then mark it up for my service. Because of the current banking environment, the business was quickly strapped for cash, and soon we didn't have enough of what our online buyers wanted in stock. We ran a survey and found that if our customers couldn't get the titles they requested once or twice, even our preferred shoppers stopped hitting the website. That's my sad story.

So I was bleeding from the ears when we got to Hawaii, but my wife didn't give me a moment's rest. She's become the Queen of American Express. I'm afraid if I ever go to their national headquar-

AT FIRST SIGHT

9

ters in Fort Lauderdale, there'll be a marble statue of Evelyn out front, abs and delts flexed, Amex Black Card at port arms.

Anyway, that was our happy little family the day we hit the Four Seasons, December 26th, the day this all started.

I had just begun breakfast with Evelyn the morning after we arrived. We were in the open restaurant on the second level of the hotel. The palms swayed in a gentle breeze. Turquoise water glistened, the smell of tropical flowers wafted. You get the idea—Paradise. My wife was wearing a skimpy top with a see-through sarong tied around her butt-floss thong, giving the hotel guests and staff a great look at her buns of steel. Her abs were rippling, advertising hours of physical dedication. As we ate, Evelyn was analyzing the other female guests, criticizing their flabby waistlines.

“Lookit that cow. She should never wear a two-piece. Doesn't she own a mirror?”

I was nodding and trying to stay out of the line of fire. Evelyn's always on me about my body. Okay, I'll admit, I've picked up a pound or two, but I'm killing myself at bestmarket.com, and I'm still losing ground. I eat and drink a little more than I used to—so shoot me.

“You really oughta get into that weight room, Chick. I can have Mickey D set you up with a routine. He could fax it over here and we could get the guy in there to help you through it.”

I was back in the squirrel cage running for my life. Mickey D was Mickey DePolina, Evelyn's personal trainer. I loathe Mickey D. Here's the story on that guy: He shows up at our house every day at 5:30 P.M.

He used to be Mr. Burbank or Mr. Bell Gardens, I can't remember which—trapezius muscles that slope down his neck like a cobra's hood, abs and shoulders that won't quit, but with the IQ and vocabulary of a tractor salesman.

After he arrives, the two of them wide-arm their way down to the private gym I have in the basement and go at it. I use this term cautiously, because I think he's screwing her. It started while I was out of town doing the road show, trying to raise money to take bestmarket.com public. No proof. I don't have Polaroids or anything, just a guess. So far, I haven't said anything, but if you want the honest truth, I'm close to the end of my rope with this marriage. It was okay when the business was strong. I could hide out down at the office. People were kissing my ass. But now, with the company in shambles and money running low, I'm completely out of ass-kissers and feeling a whole lot less charitable. Why should I put up with this? But for some reason, I do. I keep my mouth shut. I soldier on.

After breakfast I decided to go down to the cabana and relieve my scowling daughter so she could go upstairs and do her morning line of blow. Just kidding.

I found her lying on the chair listening to her music. Another term I use cautiously. She's into some kind of alternative techno-synth that sounds to me like a guy squirming on a vinyl chair making balloon animals. But she's deep into this music, and to further piss me off, has started punching holes in her body. She has ten pierces. Her dedication to her new alternative lifestyle knows no limits. Over

the past eighteen months it has become almost impossible to get my daughter through an airport metal detector.

Melissa felt my shadow and looked up, her face wrinkling as if she just smelled something foul.

“Already?” she said. Sarcasm.

“Sorry. Your mother overslept.”

“Jesus. I hate Hawaii. I hate this fucking hotel, I hate these phony people, I hate coming down here at 4 fucking A.M. every morning.” Melissa, expressing herself. “What’s wrong with a regular pool chair, for God’s sake? What makes this dumb-ass tent so almighty fucking precious?”

“Your mother likes it . . . and stop swearing.”

I should add that Melissa has purple hair. It looks simply hideous. She’s got her mother’s killer body, but with fewer cuts because Mickey D hasn’t been able to convince her to start lifting yet. She’s round-faced but mean-looking. Her eyes never smile.

She swung off the chaise longue and gathered up her things.

She looked angry enough to break a window. She’s not above something like that, either. When she was ten, the first year we came here, she became enraged because we sent her to her room. She locked the door and threw golf balls at the guests from our seventh-floor balcony. They called us into the manager’s office and told us if we didn’t control her, we’d have to leave the hotel. Humiliating.

“Where are you going?” My version of parental concern.

“Gonna call Big Mac,” she snarled.

A word here about Big Mac. His name is Bud McKenna. He's about six-five, two-sixty, and is the current president of the Devil's Disciples, a Southern California motorcycle gang. This guy is her boyfriend in L.A., and he is way the hell too old for Melissa. He's in his mid-twenties and scares the hell out of me. I think Melissa picked him because she knew I would hate him on sight and wouldn't be able to do a thing about it. He's violent and unpredictable and has tattoos that threaten your life, like B2K, which means "born to kill," or D4H, which is "death for hire." The guy's a homicidal nutcase—an animal.

I believe that, like most of these bikers, he's in the crystal meth business. I can't prove it, but he is always taking her for rides on his Harley up Angeles Crest Highway. It's been in the papers that the sheriff was trying to catch a bunch of crystal cookers brewing blue meth and chicken powder in their double-wides parked up in the mountains. It didn't take Stephen Hawking to see the connection. I'd been watching Melissa, trying to spot any personality changes, which might occur if she switches from pot and coke to crystal meth. But since she only has two moods anyway—pissed-off and about-to-be-furious, it's hard to tell. Being the father of a sixteen-year-old is no damn fun.

Melissa turned a few heads as she did her purple-haired stripper walk around the pool and disappeared into the lobby.

After she was gone, I lay down on the cabana pool chair and tried to shake off my daily bout with lethargy. Over the past year lethargy has become a regular part of my mornings, right along with acid reflux and deep depression.

AT FIRST SIGHT

13

I looked out across the pool, and that's when I saw *her*. That's when this whole thing started. Her vibe shot across the expanse of pool decking and grass and grabbed me so hard that my body shook. I let out a lungful of air and made a gushing sigh. My stomach flopped and my fingers and toes started curling. It was that powerful, that visceral.

I know . . . I know. I can hear what you're thinking. You're thinking, bullshit. But unless you've actually experienced it, you couldn't possibly understand what I'm talking about.

When I saw her, even from twenty or thirty yards away—when I felt that metaphysical projection lodge in my heart like one of Cupid's arrows—I knew I would never be the same.

In that second, with that brief glance, my whole life changed at first sight.

CHAPTER



PART OF ME STILL REJECTS THIS AS IMPOSSIBLE. BUT the proof of these feelings is right here, in these words I'm writing. Because, as you will see if you keep reading, the downstream events which followed this seminal moment ruined everything.

To begin with, she was beautiful. Not a gym-trained beauty, like my wife, but soft and subtle. There was something warm and forgiving in the vibe she sent me. She wasn't wearing a dental-floss thong, like Evelyn always did. This was a modest two-piece swimsuit. But her flawless skin and sun-kissed complexion were sexier to me, by far, than anything Evelyn had accomplished with hours of grunt work under Mickey D's supervision, pounding out reps in our basement.

She was just coming out of the pool, shiny black hair wet and pasted back against her head, her natural beauty radiant, without benefit of makeup or jewelry. Long legs . . . slender arms, and a

mouth that . . . well, it defied description. Okay . . . I'll use my feeble skills and try. Happiness lurked in both corners. Full lips, but no collagen, no artificial enhancements, just slightly pouty but without a trace of petulance. How's that? Her eyes were blue . . . not just the blue of azure skies or clear crystal lakes, but the intense blue that speaks intellectual honesty and purity of soul—that kind of blue.

I can already hear you laughing, because you're right—how could I know of her intellectual honesty? I hadn't even said one word to her yet. But trust me here, some things defy the norm. Some things are transcendental. I just knew.

I sat in my wife's power cabana while she was in the gym pumping up, getting ready for her first grand entrance—her first cartilage-popping pool strut—and watched this remarkable creature. I fantasized what it would be like to possess such a beauty. But you must understand that it wasn't lust alone that fueled these thoughts. Okay, there was some lust, I'll admit; but what I was experiencing was . . . well, it was also deeply spiritual. There was a communion of souls here, a connection deeper than anything I had ever felt before, and, I remind you again, this was with somebody I had yet to speak to. But I knew when I did speak to her she would be everything I'd hoped for, and more. Don't ask me how I knew this. I can't tell you. I just knew.

For at least two hours, I sat and watched, trying not to be obvious about it. She caught me once, and I looked away, my ears turning red. My face felt thick, as if it belonged to someone else. I got up, walked to the pool concession, holding my stomach in like a fucking

idiot, and bought a pair of large sunglasses. I went back the long way around to my power cabana. I put the glasses on a little crooked, so I could pretend to read my book, but I was really just looking at her.

Then I had a very uncharacteristic moment—a very un-Chick-like thought. I wondered if she knew that only very important people got issued these high-ground cabanas. No kidding, that's what I thought. I was that fucked up.

About ten o'clock, disaster struck.

A man came down from the hotel and sat in the pool chair next to her. Husband? Boyfriend? I didn't know. She wasn't wearing a wedding ring. I'd already checked that. But he had one, so he was married. But who was he? Her secret lover? No. She wouldn't date another woman's husband. She was too well-adjusted, too pure. I already knew this about her. I know, I know, this sounds like a verse in a Barry Manilow song or the flap copy on a Danielle Steel novel. Silly. But I knew. I could feel it.

I watched in dismay and anger as they held hands and kissed. They swam in the pool together; they laughed at each other's jokes. I forced myself to stop looking at her for a minute and take inventory of this asshole who had joined her.

The problem here was the guy was gorgeous, younger and much better looking than me . . . fit, but not gym-fit. He had an athlete's build, teeth square and straight as a row of tombstones—shiny and white as a porcelain toilet—curly copper hair and a strong hero's jaw. I hated him. I wanted to vomit.

Then Evelyn saved me from further tragic comparison as she plopped down next to me. I'd missed her grand entrance, but she didn't mention it because she was already angry about the cabana.

"This isn't the one," she growled. "The best cabana is that one over there." She pointed with a muscular arm at another tent that maybe, if you had a calibrated altimeter and a topographical survey map, you could prove was a foot or two higher than the one we were in. I'm not kidding. These are the things Evelyn worries about.

"Honey, Melissa couldn't . . ."

"Don't gimme any more Melissa b.s. That girl just sleeps and eats. You ask her to do one damn thing, it's worse than a root canal. She wants to be paid for sitting down here. Ridiculous. After all we do for her we're supposed to pay her for helping us out? She knows which cabana I want. This is just her bitchy way of getting back at me. How many times have I discussed it?"

It went on like that for almost ten minutes. I had learned years ago not to fight with Evelyn because she is an emotional terrorist. You take her on, she escalates the battle way past ground you're prepared to defend. She's capable of throwing an ashtray or a drink in public. I hate public confrontations. Public anger conveys weakness. My father raised me to show no weakness—no vulnerability. Good advice until you get sloshed and pile your fucking Jag into a bridge abutment. In case you're some kind of amateur psychologist, I'll cop to it now. I've got some major abandonment issues over Dad's death, but we'll get to that later.

"Y'know, I've been thinking . . ." I said. "Maybe I will ask Mickey D to fax over a workout routine." Me, searching for a safer topic.

That shut her up. “Really? You’ll start weight training?”

“Yeah, I think I should tighten up this stomach a little, work on the old pecs, whatever . . .”

“No kidding?” I really had Evelyn’s attention now. She stared at me hard, studying me, using the look she wore when picking out diamonds. “You’re serious? You’re not kidding?”

“As serious as Robert Schuller interviewing Pat Robertson on the *Hour of Power*,” I quipped halfheartedly.

So I spent the afternoon in the gym with Mickey D’s workout regimen and a twenty-year-old kid named Brian. Sit-ups, flies, dead lifts—two hours of torture. Two hours spent getting the old bod tuned up and ready for what would come next.

You see, I already knew I had to meet her.

CHAPTER



THE NEXT DAY STARTED OUT DISASTROUSLY. TO BEGIN with, I'd overdone it in the workout center. My body felt like I had gone ten rounds with Mike Tyson, taking every shot to the solar plexus. Getting out of bed was like peeling a stuck bandage off a dry scab.

The hot shower didn't even begin to hit it. I was in agony. I canceled Brian—told him I'd be back tomorrow. Then I waved off breakfast with Evelyn and went down to face Melissa.

She was asleep in the right cabana, the higher one. It sat on the top of a landscaped berm, which was fashioned like a huge pork chop and wrapped around one end of the pool. The berm was wide at the end where we were, but it stretched back toward the hotel along a narrowing ridge. Before waking Melissa, I looked at the loser tent we had occupied the day before. No doubt about it, this was high

ground—a lofty Olympian peak. I surveyed our old digs, where a fat woman and a man with the worst toupee in Hawaii lay, thinking they had scored the best location. But they were losers—hotel indigents. We had the primo spot. I had climbed one or two perilous feet to reach this glittering social peak. Evelyn and I had finally become pool-area royalty. Valhalla.

Melissa opened her eyes and looked at me. “Happy?” More sarcasm.

“Delirious,” I said.

She grabbed her stuff and got up. That was it for this morning’s discourse. Melissa was out of patience. She had a meager supply. But who can blame her? It was nuts getting up at 4 A.M. just to snag one of these dumb things.

I watched her rolling, sexy walk; watched the lechers by the pool sneaking looks at my barely pubescent daughter. As far as I was concerned, they were all candidates for the Mann Act.

I waited until Melissa was gone. Then I sat and scanned the area, looking for my goddess, holding my breath, so that when I spotted her I wouldn’t lose it, gasping and sighing like a busted windbag, making the same hopeless gushing sound I’d made when I spotted her yesterday.

And that was the second disaster.

She wasn’t there.

I left my stuff in the chair, then got up and walked all over the grounds. I asked one of the pool boys if the ladies’ room was empty: a

tough question for a mid-fifties guy to ask, but I cleaned up the moment by adding that I was looking for my wife.

He smiled and said, "Yes, Mr. Best, it's empty."

I looked around. I waited. Then fear overtook me. What if my goddess and Mr. Tidy Bowl had left? What if their vacation was over? What if I'd never see her again?

When I got back to the tent, my stuff had been moved and there was a thirty-five-year-old, wide-shouldered asshole wearing a CSI: Miami baseball cap occupying my cabana. His skinny, big-breasted squeeze was sprawled in the pool chair beside him.

"This is my spot," I told the guy. He was big—huge actually. I'm beginning to suspect that a lot of guests at this hotel must be on steroids. Maybe Brian gives shots. This guy had shredded arms and a rippling six-pack. I haven't got the time to work up a set of abs like that. I've got a business to run. His face was crafty but pockmarked. He and Evelyn would look perfect together on a Gold's Gym poster—"The Anabolic Workout." He glared at me with mean, dangerous eyes.

"It isn't your cabana," he said. "It's mine."

"My stuff was in it. I had my book, my sunglasses . . . my radio. It was all on the towel right here."

The guy smiled a lazy, sweet smile. "I think you're mistaken."

"My daughter got up at 4 A.M. to secure this cabana. I just came down."

"Nobody was here when I sat down. I think that's your stuff over there." He pointed to my things piled on a nearby table, while his

wife, or secretary, or whoever the lounging cupcake in the string bikini was, just stared, holding her hand up to shade her eyes, squinting at me like I was dirt that blew in under the door.

“Look, this is my cabana,” I said, turning up the volume, putting a little more bass into the mix.

“Don’t make this into something you can’t deal with,” the muscle-head in my pool chair said softly.

“Are you threatening me? Is this a threat? Are you suggesting violence?” I was outraged.

“Get the fuck away from me,” the man said, softly. Only now, he sat up. Shit, a monster!

So, there you have the gist of it. Me, standing there with a body that already felt like the home stretch at Hollywood Park, him looking like Bluto in a TV-show ball cap. Normally I don’t back down, but this morning, with everything else, I just decided to let him have the cabana . . . but not before giving this bastard a good parting shot.

“You haven’t heard the last of this,” I whimpered. Shit. More and more, I was beginning to act and sound like a total pussy.

Next I had to take on Evelyn. I caught her as she came out of the hotel and tried to convince her that we should go into Lahaina and shop, but she wanted sun. Then I said, “Let’s rent a catamaran.” Anything to keep her from seeing I’d lost her power position by the pool.

But no, she wanted the cabana. Then, shrewdness born from years of pool-chair infighting crossed her narrow features. “Who’s guarding our place?” she wisely asked.

“Uh, well . . . I lost the cabana,” I finally admitted.

I won’t go into a play-by-play of what happened next, but let me say here that it wasn’t pretty, and it did absolutely nothing for my self-esteem.

We ended up playing golf. Evelyn was pissed, but her anger gave her an extra twenty yards off the tee. She beat me easily.

The only great thing that happened on the golf course occurred when we got back to the caddy shack to turn in our shoes, rented cart, and golf clubs. Actually, it was more than just great—it was miraculous. Because, you see, she was standing there—my dream woman and the curly-haired, athletic asshole with the perfect teeth. They were also returning their rented equipment.

“Great course,” I said to her as she was passing to leave.

“What?” she said, turning. *God, up close she was even more breathtaking.*

“Great golf course,” I repeated.

“Yes, it is.” She turned and left with the handsome man.

Our initial contact—our first conversation. Okay, okay . . . I know . . . not much, I agree. But at least we had exchanged words. I would give you some kind of glowing description of her tonal quality if I could, but to be perfectly frank, I was so shaken, and she had said so little, I didn’t even remember what her voice sounded like. I was that gone . . . that out of it . . . that completely in love.

CHAPTER

**I CAME UP WITH MY PLAN — DEVIIOUS, BUT CLEVER.**

It was pretty obvious to me that I would never get anywhere just sidling up to her with some dumb opening line about the weather, or how great the hotel was. My approach demanded subtlety.

I may not be a dot-com wizard anymore, but I still remember how to secure an important account.

Rule number one in the sales manual: If you can't get to the client, get to the client's spouse.

I made my move.

The next morning he was standing at the bar getting drinks, his brown, muscled shoulders massive . . . his coppery hair in sun-lightened ringlets. He smelled of aftershave. Minty. I choked down my envy and moved up next to him.

"That's a great course, that Blue Course," I said. Before you ask, let me explain. There are three world-class golf courses at the Four

Seasons Resort: the Blue, Gold, and Emerald. We'd all been on the Blue Course yesterday afternoon.

"Yeah, sure is," he said, then turned to the bartender. "Give me an extra cherry in the Mai Tai. My wife loves maraschinos."

My heart clutched. *His wife* . . . This unworthy asshole was actually married to her. I was immediately in free fall. My vision blurred and dizziness descended, covering me like emotional Saran Wrap.

I can just hear you saying, "Give it a rest, Chick. Back up. What on earth do you think you're doing?" And you're right, of course. It was insane. But I had already lost control. I was already on the road to self-destruction.

"The Blue Course is a little easy, though," I continued through my psychic pain. "I'm thinking of trying the Gold tomorrow." The Gold Course was acknowledged as the toughest of the three.

He turned and smiled at me. The guy had a killer smile—perfect ivory—a fucking box of Chicklets. "I played the Gold two days ago," he said. "The Gold's the best course, but the fairways are narrow. My wife shanks every other shot, so she prefers the Blue. Otherwise I'd spend all my time in the brush looking for her ball."

"That was her you were playing with yesterday?" I asked, desperately hoping that they weren't married . . . that my goddess was just a friend. His wife's sister . . . anything.

"Yeah, that was her," he said, crushing that slim hope like a bug on a windshield. "She's just learning. I'm trying to give her lessons but I think tomorrow we'll sign her up with a pro."

So it was true. They were hitched. I remember my body feeling numb with this confirmation, my mind pinwheeling with

disappointment and distress. But I held on, dangling from a psychic rope stretched over an emotional cavern of deep despair.

“My wife is a great golfer,” I finally managed. “She played on her college golf team. I can’t come close to beating her.”

“Sounds like we’re at opposite ends of the wife-golf-conundrum,” he smiled. “Well, gotta get these back before they melt.”

“I’m Chick,” I blurted.

“Chandler,” he said, holding out a pinky finger for me to shake. The rest of his fingers were engaged in holding the two drinks: the Mai Tai for my goddess, and some sort of white foamy calorie-busting gunk for him—a Piña Colada or something.

So we shook pinkies and off he went. I followed him until I could see that they were sunning down by the beach. Then I went back to the power cabana. We had retaken Pork Chop Hill. We were back on top. I’d been contemplating setting up better fortifications. A machine-gun nest and some razor wire. But now I didn’t care and just flopped down next to Evelyn.

“I wish we could go topless here,” Evelyn said unexpectedly. She has protruding nipples that look like pencil erasers. She knows they drive men wild, and she loves to show them. She’s always pestering me to go to nude beaches, an activity that doesn’t suit my new executive spread. Of course, if she took off her top at this hotel, the staff would swoop down on her and run her off the grounds in a towel trolley. But still, the idea of stripping down to her thong appealed to her, and she was still thinking about it as I brooded in my chair. How she got this way is still a mystery to me. When we first got married,

she didn't act like this. Of course, that was before Mickey D and the *Buns of Steel* cassette. But still . . .

"We should go to the beach," I said.

"I'm not going to the fucking beach. The beach is Skid Row. All those morons who get stuck in the hotel's back rooms use the beach. We're in the best cabana. We're fine where we are."

"I'd like to do some body surfing." I think I was whining. I hope I wasn't, but lately I've been turning into such a wuss, it's hard for me to tell. I hate myself for some of this stuff, but let's not go into that now . . . let's get past it.

"I don't see why we can't try the beach just once."

"I don't want to be seen down there. Besides, it's all sandy. I don't want to ruin my tan. The sand sticks to my suntan oil. I hate the fucking beach."

So for the moment, I was trapped in our power cabana, frustrated as the towel boy in a room full of virgins.

"I think I'll go give it a shot anyway," I finally said ten minutes later.

"Do what you want." She seemed disinterested in whatever I was going to do because she was checking out another woman with a pretty good body. Competition. This woman had abs almost as good as hers. "That bitch is on steroids. She's way too muscular. Looks like shit," Evelyn said, as I stood and looked down at my own wife's super-enhanced pecs and abs, all oiled and rippling.

Sometimes, I just don't get it. Sometimes, I'm completely at a loss about what's going on in her head. More and more, I find myself thinking about divorce.

The beach was beautiful. A light breeze rippled the water. Up by the pool the air was as still as Texas hair. I had one of the beach boys get me a chair and I dragged it to a spot where I could watch my goddess and Chandler, who I knew had to be using some kind of lightener to get that color on his copper curls.

Then one of those fortuitous things occurred that you pray for but in real life almost never seem to happen. It started when Chandler went up to get the two of them another drink, and my goddess decided to go swimming. She was out past the rocks, snorkeling, so I decided to go in and get as close as I could. I was treading water, my abs and shoulders still stiff from my workout with Brian, and then, when I was about ten to fifteen yards away from her, somebody on the beach yelled, "Shark!"

Okay, I've been coming to this hotel for years and have never seen a shark fin in the water, not once. Some dolphins two years ago, gray whales occasionally, but not one damn shark. But, somebody on the shore yelled it, and everybody in the water went totally nuts, including my goddess.

"Oh, no! Where?" I heard her shriek.

Normally if I heard somebody yell "Shark" I'd be climbing over little kids to get out of the water. But this was an opportunity sent by God. This was destiny. So I made my way closer to her. "It's okay," I panted.

"Shark," she said in desperation, her eyeballs white with fear. "Somebody yelled 'Shark.'" She started to swim to shore, but was panicking, beating the water with her arms and legs . . . thrashing, getting nowhere fast.

Time for Chick Cousteau, the old shark expert, to take over. By the way, just so there is no misunderstanding here, I know next to nothing about sharks. “Don’t thrash. You’ll look like a wounded seal. Slow, even strokes.” I’d heard that on the Discovery Channel and those three sentences maxed out my knowledge of water predators.

“I’m . . . I’m scared to death of . . . ”

“It’s okay. You go first. I’ll stay back. I’ll watch out for him.” What bullshit.

Of course, if I’d seen the damn thing, I probably would have coronaried and there would be no need for him to kill me, because I’d already be dead, floating in the surf—bloated shark chow. But I was deep into it now, doing my “Wild Kingdom” thing. I took up rear guard, swimming behind her.

“He’s not here. I’m right behind you. It’s okay,” I shouted, trying to reassure her with hollow encouragements.

She was still panicked but was finally drawing closer to shore. “It’s okay, you’re safe. Nothing’s behind us,” I said bravely, thinking that at any moment, a Tiger or a Great White was going to tear off my leg, or worse still, my whole reproductive package.

And then we were onshore, dragging ourselves out of the surf and back to safety. All along the strand, terrified swimmers were now standing on the beach, shading their eyes, looking for a shark fin. Nobody could see one—but let’s not get stuck on whether or not there was a shark. It’s not important. As far as she was concerned, I had saved her.

Big decision now: Should I hang around, accept her praise, make a pest of myself as I tried to weasel my way into her life, looking like

just another horny asshole, or should I treat this magnificent water rescue as if it were just a minor part of my heroic existence? Option number two was obviously my best choice.

“God, I was so panicked,” she said. “You risked your life to save me. How can I thank you?”

“No problem,” I replied in my deepest voice. “Glad I was around to help out.” Then I turned away and strode purposefully toward my beach chair. This was no easy feat in the deep sand, because Brian had trashed my abs. They were killing me and I was out of breath, attempting to hold in my aching gut while rolling my shoulders—the old jock walk from high school. I trudged my heroic, shark-fighter ass up the beach, sprawled on my lounge chair, closed my eyes, and waited.

Ten minutes passed.

“Hey, thanks.” Chandler loomed over me. I looked up. He was holding out his whole hand this time. “Paige told me what you did . . .”

Paige . . . my goddess was named Paige. There was perfection in those five letters. I had saved somebody named Paige from a desperate shark attack, an atrocious mauling in the jaws of death.

It turned out later that nobody had actually seen a shark. The guy on the beach who had yelled admitted that he’d only *thought* he’d seen one. But, nonetheless, there *could* have been one, and I did offer myself as a human sacrifice to protect her, so come on, fair’s fair.

“Will you join us? Can we buy you a drink?” Chandler asked.

“Yeah, sure, why not?” Forced casualness. But as I walked over to their sun chairs, my heart was pounding like a blown engine with a bad cam.

“I’m Chandler Ellis. I think I mentioned, this is my wife, Paige.”

Paige Ellis. Her name was music. I shook her hand . . . It was cool and soft, delicate and perfect as a bird’s wing.

Then it got very tricky.

My job was to try and focus on Chandler, not Paige. No mean accomplishment. I couldn’t gawk at this guy’s lovely wife as every fiber of my being longed to. Instead, I acted polite but indifferent as she retold the story of my water rescue, my heroic act of sacrifice. I did a relatively effective “Aw shucks”—even had a beach full of sand to dig my big toe into. As she told the story, she embellished it slightly. “Chick could have been killed,” she gushed. “He swam directly behind me so the shark couldn’t get to me.”

“I don’t think there was really a shark, Paige,” I demurred, modestly.

“But we don’t know that, silly,” she persisted, laughing, showing even, perfect teeth. “At the time, we both thought it was there.”

“I agree,” Chandler said. “To do that for a complete stranger—to risk yourself like that—was pretty damn heroic.”

Of course I didn’t tell him I was hopelessly in love with his wife. Instead, I engaged him in conversation, almost completely ignoring Paige, who sat with her gorgeous legs tucked under her, listening and sipping a second Mai Tai—two cherries, of course.

Chandler Ellis was named Chandler because he was the nephew of the late Otis Chandler. Otis was a big deal in L.A. The Chandler family owned the *Los Angeles Times* before they sold it to the Tribune for about a gazillion dollars. Chandler’s aunt had founded the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, the main theater in L.A. The Ellises were

all involved in managing the family fortune, except, that is, for Chandler.

Chandler had left the corporation behind to live in Charlotte, North Carolina, on a fat trust fund. He had a master's degree in special ed and taught learning disabled children. The more I heard about this guy, the more I hated him. Among his growing list of uncommon assets: He was charming, handsome, filthy rich, and, now it appears, loaded with the milk of human kindness. The next thing was probably going to be an organ donation to a dying orphan. Some things are so saccharine they defy the palate. Chandler Ellis had me in glucose overload.

But I choked all this down. I learned that Paige was a marathon runner and had competed in Boston last year. She was also a developing artist—landscapes and still lifes. But for now, that was just a sideline until her paintings started selling. In the meantime, like Chandler, she also taught school. Kindergarten. Drawing with finger-paints, cut-out pictures from construction paper . . . the whole plastic-flower-frog-terrarium-hamster-cage curriculum.

Paige and Chandler were both devoted to teaching and to each other. They had only been married a year and were desperately in love. That much was obvious to anybody who looked, and I was most certainly looking. She held his hand when he talked and looked at him with something close to hero worship, even though, I remind you, I was the one who had dangled my balls for a shark's meal.

He explained to me how the learning disabled children he taught could lead normal lives if he could just give them the tools they

AT FIRST SIGHT

33

needed to survive. He said we had to support them and nourish their inner concept of well-being. Precious shit like that.

Then we finally got around to the old dot-com wizard. Selling Bruckheimer movies and Britney Spears CDs over the Internet seemed like pretty shallow fare by comparison.

I worried my way through the afternoon, hoping Evelyn wouldn't become curious and wander down in her thong to see what had happened to me. But she was obviously way too involved in the Ab Wars up by the pool.

Chandler and I set up a golf game together for the next day—just him and me.

“I'm glad to finally get to play with somebody who can keep the ball on the fairway,” he joked, grinning lovingly at his wife.

“Oh, Chandler, stop it, I'm not that bad,” she said, slapping him playfully on the arm as she held his hand.

This was some steep mountain I was about to climb.

CHAPTER



DURING OUR GOLF GAME, I LEARNED THAT CHANDLER Ellis had been the walk-on quarterback for the Georgetown University football team in the late nineties. He'd set a passing record for Division I-AA colleges, which was still standing. Just one more on a growing list of things I despised about him.

Naturally, he creamed me at golf.

But one good thing came of it. He suggested we get the girls together and all go out to dinner. By "the girls," he meant Evelyn, Melissa, and Paige.

No fucking way Melissa was gonna get included. The last thing I needed was my angry sixteen-year-old sitting there, reflecting light from studs punched through every corner of her face. Melissa would go out of her way to humiliate us. She would use abusive language, or

talk about Big Mac, tell everybody what a great lay he is. Believe me, I've been sucked into these things before. She's impossible.

She wouldn't want to go anyway. She was much happier sitting in the room, talking to McKenna on the hotel phone, eating up my shriveling bank reserves at four dollars a minute on a trans-Pac line.

Besides, it was going to be hard enough just to get Evelyn to agree. Evelyn had a very select group of friends, and they all came with rich older husbands and Gold's Gym memberships.

But I had a plan to make it happen. We had just come up from the pool when I told her about my golf game with Chandler and his invitation for us to all go to dinner.

"Why the fuck would I want to go out with them?" she said, starting this discussion with enough attitude to open at the Apollo Theater.

"It's okay with me," I said. "I didn't want to go, either."

That slowed her down. If I didn't want to go, then maybe she ought to. That was the dynamic our marriage had taken.

"Who are these people again?" she asked.

We were in our suite on the eighth floor of the hotel. The eighth floor is the Club Floor. You need a special key to get up there in the elevator. Evelyn loved that, loved having that special key. It validated her.

The Club Floor cost a few hundred extra a day. *Did I mention I was on the verge of a fucking bankruptcy?* Naturally, with bankers circling me like hungry coyotes, money should be of no consequence. Our top-floor room was one of the best at the Four Seasons, up front, overlooking the ocean. Great views, great size, great sitting room

where Melissa bitched and moaned because she had to sleep on the pull-out sofa. I'd been told by my wife that the room was a bargain at twenty-seven hundred a night. Can you believe this?

Anyway, after I mentioned the dinner invitation, Evelyn started pacing and thinking. She was naked, just out of the shower. Her slick, still damp, sun-reddened body the picture of glowing health. My body still felt like it had gone through a meat tenderizer.

"Chandler and Paige Ellis . . ." she said reflectively. "They're not part of *the* Ellis family, are they? The Chandlers and Ellises? That bunch?"

I should pause here to tell you that Evelyn studied the society pages like a cloistered monk reading scripture.

I knew that the Ellis name probably wouldn't fly past unnoticed. "Ellises? Who are the Ellises?" Me, acting dumb.

"Who are the Ellises? Well, if they're the same Ellises, they're the other half of the Otis Chandler family, the cousins. If this guy's first name is Chandler, it's probably the same family." She was pacing around, then spun suddenly, walked out onto the balcony, and looked down at the grounds, chewing on her cuticle, thinking.

I probably don't need to remind you that she was absolutely buck-ass naked and was now in full view of everyone down by the pool. Seconds later, I heard somebody whistle and some guy started shouting at her.

Finally, after giving them a good show, she turned and walked slowly back into the room.

"I'm going to check with Lea in the Club Lounge and see if she knows who they are."

Well, of course they were *the* Ellises and so Evelyn went from hating the idea of going out to dinner with them to hating her entire hernia-busting closet full of clothes, which I'd lugged in and out of two airports all the way from L.A. She said she needed new gear for the dinner, so, armed with the Amex Black Card, she was off to the Wailea Center, where I probably don't have to tell you, the designer shops are a tad pricey.

That night, the four of us, sans Melissa, had dinner at Correlli's, an Italian restaurant up the coast from the hotel. The restaurant opened onto a beautiful beach. A light wind flickered candles in hurricane lamps. There were pictures of thirties-style gangsters on the walls, along with shots of every cheese-ball celebrity who had ever wandered in there by mistake.

Of course, because of their social clout, there was a picture of Chandler and Paige from last year—the honeymoon shot. The maitre d', a guy who looked like his name should have been Guido but turned out to be Max, asked them both to sign it. They did, and he rehung it in a place of prominence, up front.

Then a strange thing happened. My wife and the Ellises seemed to hit it off. I'm always surprised when this occurs because, in my mind, Evelyn's flaws so outweigh her good points that I tend to focus exclusively on them.

But on a good day, when she's trying to be nice, Evelyn can be quite charming, and like I said, from the neck down, you can't find a more toney-looking woman. This evening, in preparation for our dinner with the Ellises, she had dressed way down. Gone was the

push-up water bra, the Lycra pantsuit, and crop-top, navel-baring ensemble. Her show-stopping cleavage was modestly out of view. In its place, new duds: a tasteful, silk Perry Ellis blouse; tailored Dior slacks; jeweled Manolo Blahnik sandals. Grand total: \$1,793, plus tax. But at least the outfit wasn't one of her tit-baring, all-hanging-out-and-in-your-face specials like the ones she usually wears.

Evelyn and Paige chatted about Paige's art and the children she and Chandler were planning to eventually have. It came out that Paige's wedding and engagement rings were being resized because they had almost come off in the water two days ago, clearing up that mystery.

"It's amazing. She takes off her rings and all of a sudden, every unattached Romeo on the beach thinks it's his cue to turn into a complete ass," Chandler said, shaking his head.

"Unbelievable," I agreed, sheepishly.

Evelyn and I both told lies about Melissa . . . said she was planning on college in two years. But after looking at her last two report cards, the only way I could see her getting into a university was if the Devil's Disciples opened a pharmaceutical college to teach better chemistry to that bunch of stringy-haired crystal cookers who kept blowing up their mobile homes in the Angeles Crest mountains.

Chandler and I talked about L.D. kids, something I had to struggle to stay focused on. I was still trying to keep from gawking at Paige.

Of course she recounted the story of my heroic shark rescue. "You never told me about that," Evelyn smiled, acting amused and pleased, when I knew she was pissed to the core that I'd kept it from her.

“It was nothing, really.” As this ridiculous cliché popped out of my mouth, Evelyn rolled her eyes, a look that said I was gonna catch hell over this later.

A little further into the evening, I hit them with my next clever plan. I’d been working on it all afternoon.

“You know what might be kinda fun?” I said, softly, dangling it like fresh bait over a still pond.

“What?” they all asked, thinking I had a great idea for where to go for a nightcap. But my idea was far more complex than that, more devious and infinitely subtler. “I was thinking it might be fun to get a few of Paige’s paintings and see if we could sell them on bestmarket.com, maybe raise her artistic visibility with an Internet marketing campaign.”

“Really?” Paige said, leaning forward. “I’m not sure I’m ready.”

“Honey, I’ve been saying for years you should have your own art show,” Chandler chimed in. “If we could afford it, I’d pay for it myself.”

At first I was thinking, Who the fuck is he kidding? This guy’s family builds music centers, owns media companies, and he can’t rent a one-room studio for an art show? But it came out a few minutes later that he’d turned his entire trust fund over to an L.D. Foundation he had formed and now managed, for almost no salary, drawing off most of the funds for brain research. I’m telling you, there were times with this guy Chandler where my gag reflex was on overload.

“We could sell Paige’s art on the Internet,” I continued. “I get millions of hits a day. We could build a website, call it the Art Paige,

spelled like your name, scan a few of your paintings on there, and set up an online auction.”

“We could even say the money was going to go for Chandler’s L.D. Foundation,” Paige suggested, sparking immediately to my idea.

“Right. Maybe bestmarket.com could match anything we raised,” I enthused. Of course, if it was over a few thousand, we’d have to take out an IOU on my car to cover it.

I glanced over and caught a dark look passing across Evelyn’s face. She doesn’t like giving away any of my money. She’d rather spend it herself. I was going to have to be more careful, lest my clandestine motives unexpectedly porpoise into full view.

“Anyway, it might be kind of fun to see what happens,” I concluded.

“I could help Paige design the web page,” my wife unexpectedly offered, leaning forward and smiling. “I have my master’s degree in marketing from Stanford.”

She did, too, but it had never been worth much to us, because even though Evelyn had a master’s in marketing, she had a doctorate in shopping, so we were destined to lose fiscal ground annually.

“It’s worth a try,” I said.

“We don’t want to take advantage,” Chandler cautioned.

“He’s right. I mean, you’re so busy,” Paige added. “We don’t want to be a burden.”

“Nonsense,” I thundered extravagantly.

“It’ll be fun,” Evelyn shrieked and clapped.

“Well, okay . . . why not?” Paige said, and she reached out and took Evelyn’s hand.

Chandler took mine and I took Evelyn's. Of course, Chandler and Paige were already holding hands. They always held hands, so now we had a ring of clasped hands, all of us smiling.

"To new friendships," I said, and we all reached for our wineglasses.

"New friendships," they caroled.

Okay, okay, not exactly the Peace Conference at Malta, I admit, but not bad, all things considered. I had managed to go from a leering pool-cabana stalker to a "new friend," and it had taken me all of two and a half days. Better still, I had involved Evelyn in the plan so she wouldn't be a liability, and we could all interact as couples, which I have come to learn is the best way to do it. I've sold half a dozen accounts this way. When you include wives, it gets everybody's guard down.

We left Correlli's and all walked along the beach back to the hotel. The moon was full and the water lapped over our toes. We carried our shoes, with Paige and Chandler walking ahead of us, arm in arm. Evelyn and I held hands in a decent imitation of marital bliss, although, to be honest, her hand was no delicate bird's wing. It was hard as a blacksmith's anvil, cold and damp. She applied no pressure. I've held dead trout that communicated more emotion.

When we arrived at the Four Seasons, Evelyn and I said good night and left Chandler and Paige on the beach.

I was feeling pretty good about all of this until I looked back and saw them standing in the sand, lit by a three-quarter moon, kissing each other, locked in a passionate embrace.

That night in our bedroom, I did something I hadn't done in months. I made love to Evelyn, all the time pretending I was having

sex with Paige. My fevered imagination transformed Evelyn's muscled body into Paige's soft goddess proportions. I got so sexed up I had a diamond-cutter erection. You could have bludgeoned a baby seal to death with that hard-on. When she was close to climax, I thought I heard Evelyn grunt, "More, Mickey, more!" which sort of ruined it.

When it was over, we lay in an exhausted embrace.

"What got into you?" Evelyn asked. "Man, you were pneumatic."

"Did you just call me Mickey?" I asked, my voice flat with suspicion.

"Honestly, Chick, where do you come up with this shit?" Then she got out of bed to go to the bathroom and left me there. It pissed me off, but I didn't dwell on it, because I was more resolved than ever to get out of the marriage. One way or the other, I was determined to move on, to become Paige Ellis's lover.

How I was going to accomplish this still hadn't become clear. When it finally did, it took on a shape more devastating than I could have ever imagined.

CHAPTER

**THE REST OF THE WEEK WE ALL HUNG OUT TOGETHER.**

Evelyn and I shared our power cabana with the Ellises. There were four chairs in there anyway, and after Melissa secured it each morning she disappeared. She told me she'd rather be staked out over an anthill than sit with us. My daughter, exercising her uncommon gift for colorful metaphor.

Evelyn actually got Paige into the workout room and started her on a light aerobic routine, using knowledge gained over years of Mickey D's training and my money to fashion a new body for a woman who could already stop traffic wearing a trench coat.

I let it happen, though, because I didn't think in four days Evelyn would be able to turn Paige's softness into the kind of anatomical gristle that she had struggled so hard to achieve for herself.

Now, just so you won't think that I was going over the falls in a barrel here, let me tell you that I really, really tried to put the brakes on my emotions, to rein myself in.

I kept saying what I'm sure you're saying: This is crazy. The woman adores her husband. You're much older, half as good looking. Your father didn't build downtown neighborhoods from Hispanic slums into architecturally renowned music centers, or city newspapers into global media empires. Your dad built opening-act comedians playing rathole dives like the Comedy Cabana into cheesy middle acts at transvestite clubs like the Cross Walk in North Hollywood. While Chandler Ellis was winning football games at Andover prep and then Georgetown, you were fighting for rectal purity in the Hawaiian state prison or throwing up in a Cost Plus wastebasket at rehab.

On every scale, the Chick Bests of the world didn't measure up against the Chandler Ellises.

I said all these things to myself.

I even locked myself behind the frosted, etched glass door in our bathroom, sat on the shitter, and wrote all of it down on a piece of hotel stationery.

Then I did something even more proactive: I started looking for flaws in Paige Ellis. I collected them, diving deep for each one like a bum in a supermarket Dumpster. I even cataloged her few physical imperfections.

For instance, she had a kind of goofy laugh, something between a squeal and a giggle. Of course, on further introspection, I found it irresistible.

She had a birthmark on her left calf that was almost the size of a quarter. The more I looked at that birthmark, the more I loved it.

She had an odd habit of constantly jiggling her foot when she was seated. I asked her about it, putting on my most friendly “you can tell the doctor” expression. She explained that she had suffered from Attention Deficit Disorder as a child. It’s what first drew her to Chandler. They had that interest in common. She understood learning disabilities firsthand. She said that even though she had more or less grown out of it, she still found it difficult to sit completely still . . . hence the little foot jiggle. Adorable.

I found every one of these imperfections delightful.

After a week of constantly being with our new friends, Paige and Chandler, we had a farewell dinner at the hotel and promised to stay in touch. We all kissed each other goodbye. Our first kiss—only a cheek peck. But I swear, I almost fainted from ecstasy.

We exchanged digits and addresses, and under most circumstances, that would have been the end of it. We would have never seen each other again, except I was more hopelessly in love with her now than I had been in the beginning. I’m not just talking infatuation here, either. I’m talking deep, soul-defining devotion.

I was dreaming about her now almost every night, and every time I looked at Evelyn, I was shocked that I’d ended up with such coarseness when there were creatures like Paige in the breeding pool. I told myself if I’d married someone like Paige, Melissa wouldn’t be as angry as she is, frowning with a face that had more holes than a pool-hall dartboard.

Of course, Melissa used our infatuation with the Ellises to get lost. During the week, I saw her now and again, usually at our changing-of-the-guard ceremony under the poolside cabana each morning. She had taken up with a huge Hawaiian guy. A primo-warrior. Big, with lots of island tattoos. I cornered her once and asked her what was going on with him.

“Bite me,” was her cute reply.

What do you do with kids when they won’t listen to a thing you say, or care at all about any of the things you think are important?

We left Hawaii on January 8th and flew back to L.A. I reentered my nightmarish business fiasco. I was standing on the bridge of my fast-sinking *Titanic*, driving a leaking dot-com straight to the bottom of a sea of bullshit.

The first couple of months back at work, I noticed that most of my executives were making new resumes and taking long lunches. Who could blame them?

A few weeks later, I took a walk through our warehouse. There had been a time, a few years ago, when I would walk through this acre-sized building and swell with pride, looking at shelves crammed full of studio movie DVDs and recording company CDs. I had been like a rancher surveying my livestock. Pallets piled high with American pop culture whizzed past on forklifts on their way to the loading dock, where twenty FedEx vans were parked, doors open, engines idling. Now, as I walked around the place, my own footsteps echoed in the emptiness. We had some old movies nobody wanted, a few Eagles CDs, some Steely Dan—all stuff that wasn’t on the current hot

list. As I said, none of the studios would trust us with product anymore, so we were imploding, crashing from the inside.

Then, as if watching years of my life dissolve like an Alka-Seltzer tablet wasn't a big enough load to carry, Melissa picked this exact time to get arrested.

We were called by the narc squad in the middle of the night and had to drive down to Juvenile Hall to talk to a vice detective. It seems she'd been caught in a Valley drug raid, arrested in a house full of crystal meth. She'd been sound asleep when the cops kicked in the door. The house was, of course, rented by Big Mac, but Melissa was the only one being held.

The way it was explained to us was our sixteen-year-old daughter was claiming that the forty or more bags of "Go Fast" the cops had recovered in Big Mac's house were hers alone . . . that Big Mac had nothing to do with it, didn't even know she'd hid it there.

It was pretty damned clear to everyone that Melissa was taking the rap for McKenna, but they weren't even holding him.

"That's nuts," I told the cops. "This guy is the president of the Devil's Disciples. They sell meth. That's their main business. It's obviously his stash."

"Yeah, that's what we think, too," the rosy black detective with prematurely gray hair said. "But what're we gonna do? He's saying he never saw it. She's saying it's hers."

"Can't you see she's trying to take the blame for him? She claims she loves him," I said, thinking these cops can't possibly be this blind. They can't let this tattooed asshole with a shaved head get away with

this. "He probably threatened her to get her to say that," I reasoned. "It's duress or something."

"If you can get her to change her story, we'll work with it," he said.

So Evelyn and I went back into the holding cell where they had her and sat on metal chairs, talking through the bars. The place smelled of vomit and disinfectant. I had a flashback from my short jail term in Hawaii. I won't bore you with that misadventure here, except to say that I know my daughter had no idea what she was signing up for.

"Honey, you've gotta tell the truth," Evelyn said. She never calls Melissa honey, and I could see the metal in our daughter's face shifting light as she frowned.

"Melissa, believe me, you don't wanna go to jail on this drug bust," I said.

"You oughta know, right, Dad?" she shot back.

"Melissa, don't do this. You're going to ruin your life," I pleaded.

"Would you two mind getting out of here? I can't listen to any more of this shit. You both ruined my life years ago."

An hour later, Evelyn and I were back in our three-million-dollar French Regency Beverly Hills home on Elm. We were in our overdecorated foyer fighting about what to do about Melissa. As always, we ended up with recriminations.

"It's because she hates you," Evelyn said. "You're such a hypocrite, telling her you never used drugs, then she finds out you did half a year in Hawaii for dealing hash." Forgetting to mention that she was the one who'd busted me to Melissa.

“She’s punishing both of us for her feelings of emotional abandonment,” I said, bringing two semesters of junior college abnormal psychology into play. “You haven’t done a good job of raising her. You made a lot of mistakes.”

“*You’ve* made the mistakes, buddy,” Evelyn snapped. “I’ve always been there for her. I’ve been busting my ass!” I wondered if getting butt-fucked by Mickey D could technically be described as busting ass. Maybe.

We argued for almost an hour, did a nice two-out-of-three falls, while Melissa sat it out in a detention cell in Sylmar Juvie.

The next morning, I hired the best lawyer that money I didn’t have could buy. He was a balding, skeletal guy with a Talmudic beard named Jube Shiver. I got him from one of my dot-com account managers whose younger sister had a drug history.

“Can you get her out?” I asked our new liar for hire, worried about what might happen to her in jail . . . visions of lesbian rape hovering at the edge of my every thought.

“I’ll have her out by noon,” he said with the confidence of a gun-fighter cracking the knuckles on his shooting hand. “But the bigger problem is, what happens when this comes to trial. Her association with this biker isn’t going to be helpful.”

“But the biker is the one who got her into this. All that crystal isn’t hers—it’s his. She’s taking the blame for him. Aren’t you listening to me?”

“She *confessed*,” Jube Shiver said, dismissing my argument with a wave of a freckled hand, leaning back in an office littered with B’nai

B'rith awards and team pictures of the North Hollywood Little League Pirates. He steepled his fingers under his Talmudic beard, which was graying theatrically at the edges, and studied me like I had just tracked dog shit into his office. I was beginning to take an intense dislike to our new Jewish attorney.

"I know she confessed. That's because he threatened her," I said. "It's under duress."

"It's not duress unless the police force it. Let *me* lawyer the case. You just give me her personal background, answer my questions when I ask, and sign the checks."

He lost the whole Talmudic thing with that one sentence. Then he made some notes and nodded as I told him everything I thought would be helpful. I left out the bad stuff like all the cocaine we'd found in her purse and under her jewelry box; all the money and the portable electronic equipment she'd stolen from us and fenced to feed her habit.

I drove off an hour later with dark visions of Melissa heading to The Big House.

When I got back to the office, there was a message from my CFO. I went down the hall to see him. He told me he'd scared up an angel in New York who wanted to meet with me in the Big Apple tomorrow. This angel was a Wall Street arbitrageur who was interested in buying out my interest in our sinking dot-com.

"I've got this problem right now with Melissa," I told him.

My CFO, whose name is Martin Worth, frowned and shook his head. There were endless plays on both our names at the company. My favorite being—"At Best, he's Worthless." Shit like that.

AT FIRST SIGHT

51

“This may be our last shot,” Martin said stoically.

Why did it always come down to these “no-choice” kinds of choices?

Melissa, or the business?

Nothing simple . . . nothing easy.

Melissa . . . or years of my life down the drain with nothing to show for it?

So of course I went to New York. I had no choice.

Biggest mistake of my life.

CHAPTER



I TOOK THE RED-EYE.

The weather in New York was dismal. A bone-chilling sleet washed the city, falling from a gunmetal sky.

My Jamaican taxi driver couldn't speak American English. He spoke some kind of indecipherable island patois where every sentence either began or ended with "mon." This angry asshole sat in the front seat of his paint-chipped yellow cab, looking back at me through dirty braids, his Rasta beads clicking ominously every time he moved his head. He made me repeat the address three times, laying the groundwork for getting lost later—conning me, trying to drive up the fare. I hate all these immigrants. I'm tired of my tax dollars going to support a bunch of lazy border jumpers.

"Huh? Whatchu tellin', mon?" he asked.

“Financial District, downtown.” I handed him the slip of paper with the address on it. We were outside the American Airlines terminal at JFK.

“Huh? What be dat district, mon? Where dat be at?” Who did he think he was kidding? He drives a cab in New York and can’t find the Financial District? Then he got on the radio and pretended to get instructions from a dispatcher with a Middle Eastern accent. Urban terrorists, both of them.

I hate New York. I don’t get the vibe here. Since September 11th, it’s gotten even worse. They all act as if the Big Apple is the new center of the moral universe. Of course, I’m from Southern California and the only things that got knocked down in L.A. on 9/11 were some IRA accounts, so I’m probably the wrong guy to listen to.

My Jamaican cabbie managed to find the address in downtown Manhattan after giving me a fucking tour of Brooklyn and the Lower East Side. The cab fare was a mind-boggling \$85.50. See what I’m saying? Thieves, all of them.

The man I was going to see was named Walter Lily. The Lily Fund basically bought assets low and sold high, which was another way of saying they acquired sick companies. Walter Lily had a reputation on Wall Street as a “grave dancer,” a man who profited from other men’s misfortunes. But I was more or less down to my last few lifelines, so I had no choice. I had to pursue it.

The Lily Building was one of those New York addresses that looks like it was squeezed in as an afterthought, probably when some holdout

finally sold his hotdog stand and made his postage stamp of ground available to the hovering killers in the New York real-estate cabal. The building sat on only about an eighth of a city block. The architecture was expensive, turn-of-the-century stone and brick to the second floor, where more cost-effective steel and glass took over and went up for fifty stories. Like nobody on the streets would ever look up and spot it.

I rode the elevator to the top floor. My heart was pounding, and my hands sweating. I clutched the handle of my briefcase, which was full of carefully fabricated numbers and spreadsheets that my CFO, Martin Worth, had supplied.

I was meeting with Mr. Lily himself. He had insisted that I come alone. His appointment secretary explained that he liked his meetings one-on-one. I was told he had allowed fifteen minutes for our little chat.

How the last twelve years of my life could come down to a fifteen-minute chat still baffled me. But I had shot through all of the more probable suitors, swinging from the heels, trying to hammer one out of the park, missing the ball each time, going down in a whirl of air and curses.

As I exited the elevator and felt it wheeze closed behind me, I found myself standing in a very ordinary entryway.

A young, overweight girl was seated behind a marble desk reading *Vanity Fair*. Above her head was some kind of brass logo that resembled a lily, and under that, appropriately enough:

THE LILY FUND

I crossed to her. “I’m Charles Best,” I said, handing her my card. “I have an eleven o’clock appointment with Mr. Lily.”

She took my card and frowned at it as if it contained the results of her last Pap smear. She wrinkled her brow; she pursed her lips; she dangled it in two fingers like a cat turd fished from her litter box. Then she set it down on her desk and frowned at it.

I should say here that the card cost me a bloody fortune. In the middle it says BESTMARKET.COM in raised gold letters. Our logo, which is a unicorn, is embossed on the top left corner of the card. Why a unicorn? I don’t know . . . I really don’t. Somebody else picked it. But it seemed kind of show businessy, so I agreed. At the bottom, my name was also in embossed letters.

CHARLES “CHICK” BEST
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

She picked up the phone and spoke softly to somebody inside, then looked up at me. “You can wait over there.” She pointed to a worn leather sofa and went immediately back to her magazine.

I walked over and sat. I put my briefcase in front of me and picked up that morning’s *Wall Street Journal*. I tried to read an article about the mortgage meltdown, but I couldn’t make my mind stay focused. My heart was pounding, my senses quivering. I was trying to calm myself down, trying to get my hands to stop shaking.

I kept thinking my entire future was coming down to a meeting with a guy who had been alternately called a grave dancer or the Great

White of Wall Street. He was what was commonly referred to as garbi-trageur, a derogatory blend of the two words “garbage” and “arbi-trageur.” I knew he would try to lowball me. That’s why I had the doctored spreadsheets Martin Worth had pencil-whipped, putting the best possible face on a large array of unexploded financial grenades.

It was eleven-twenty before I was finally shown into Lily’s office.

As bleak and foreboding as the waiting area was, the inner sanc-tum was just the opposite. Money and wealth reeked off polished wood walls and ornate Louie XV furniture. Louis XV is my least favorite style ever since I noticed that all of the pictures of Liberace I’d ever seen had him sitting in rooms full of that kind of French furniture.

But it was everywhere in the Lily Fund offices: pushed up against the polished oak walls, decorating every available open space. Gold-leaf lion-claw legs stood on carpet that was some kind of expensive custom weave, stretched to fit under the heavy wood moldings.

I was shepherded by a sallow young man in a gray suit, past of-fices full of people who were so busy making money for my host, they didn’t even look up to see who Mr. Lily’s next victim was.

I was shown into his outer office. A woman who was in her mid-fifties paused and glanced up. A corporate diva, she studied me fiercely over half-glasses.

“Mr. Best?” she asked, coldly.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m the best Best there is!” giving her one of my cute openers. Then I smiled, flashing my full sixteen, the old Chick Best ivory personality blitz.

She didn't waver under its effect. Total points won: zip. "Go in," she instructed coolly.

The shepherd in the gray suit opened the office door and guided me into Mr. Walter Lily's inner sanctum, then positioned himself right inside the door. I was feeling like a condemned man about to hear a life-altering sentence.

The office surprised me. I don't know what I'd been expecting, but it wasn't what I found.

To begin with, despite the pricey Louis XV furnishings, Lily's workspace was unusually small and cluttered. There were books and financial statements stacked everywhere. One small window looked out on the back wall of a large building. No effort was wasted on frills in this room.

My office, by comparison, was huge and full of expensive gee-gaws. I had a two-hundred-thousand-dollar sound system you could operate with a laser remote, a door that electronically opened and closed from a button under my desk, and a hidden bar that rotated out of one wall.

I instantly saw the dichotomy. I was going broke in my huge tricked-out office, while Lily was making billions in a closet that wasn't big enough to store my sports equipment.

How did I get so fucked up?

Sitting behind a desk piled with spreadsheets was the tiniest little man I'd ever seen. He was bald, and as I came through the door, he had his arms out, his palms flat on his blotter. My initial impression

was of a large head suspended on spider legs. Then he rose to his full five-foot-two-inch height and came around the desk to meet me. He had a skinny build and hair tufting out of his ears. A gnome. I'm not going to waste a lot more time describing him or our short visit—our chat—because it was the most ludicrous business meeting I had ever attended.

“Mr. Best?” Walter Lily asked. His voice was high, a squeak actually.

“Yes sir, the best Best there is!” I flashed my grill and got no more out of him with this line than I had with his cold-ass secretary.

“I understand you're interested in selling your company.”

“Well, sir, I'd certainly consider it, but only if I got a blowout bid. We're not exactly pursuing a sale right now, because we're quite excited about where we're heading and our new quarter spreadsheets are showing renewed long-term profit and capital return. However, that said, under the right circumstances I might consider taking on the right strategic partner if appropriate terms could be negotiated.”

I know, I know. You're thinking, what a load of bullshit. But this is the way you negotiate in business. You don't sell because you're strapped for cash; you take on a strategic partner. You don't roll over and expose your soft underbelly to the Great White of Wall Street; you pretend you don't need him.

The little man wearing Sears Roebuck trousers stood for a long moment before he pulled a slip of paper out of his shirt pocket and handed it to me.

“What's this?” I said, smiling.

“My offer. Not a penny more or less,” the midget intoned, looking and sounding like a tiny Shylock, or a badly turned-out Ebenezer Scrooge.

Now, let me say right here, this is not the way business is done. My company, while currently experiencing hard times, was once the third-largest Internet site on the Web.

I admit, we made no profit, but that was a calculated strategy. We used every cent, plus all we could borrow, to expand. Product was flying out the door. Millions and millions of website hits a month. We lost money, but we built volume and name value. Name value equates to dollar value. This is a business truth. A brand name can be sold. If you owned the name “Kleenex” for instance, you would have something you could sell for a fortune. I’m not saying bestmarket.com was as well known as Kleenex, or that it was a brand name by which all Internet entertainment sales were referred to, but I am saying that people knew who we were, and in the intensely competitive world of Web commerce, this is a very valuable asset. Millions of people hit our site just because they knew it was there.

I looked at the slip of paper and I couldn’t believe what was written there. Two million dollars.

“Two million dollars for what?” I asked, dumbfounded. I was personally on the line for big long-term leases: the warehouse and our six-story L.A. office building. Walter Lily had to know all that if he’d done his due diligence, which I was sure he had. The two million dollars wouldn’t even cover my litigation costs when I terminated all the

long-term contracts with my employees, or handle the breach-of-contract problems I was sure to face.

The only thing that was keeping my creditors from swarming me was the knowledge that I had nothing but a thinly capitalized company. If they put me into Chapter 11, they'd get ten cents on the dollar for what we owed them, so they were carrying us, hoping we'd work our way out of debt. But Lily knew this. He knew if I tried to walk away from these contractual obligations, I'd be in court forever.

This little asshole was trying to steal my company for nothing. He had the cash and personal assets to restart the operation, reinstate my studio and record-company deals. He'd make my fortune instead of me.

Ten years ago, in the good old dot-com wizard days, we'd had a paper value of six hundred million dollars, as estimated in *Forbes* magazine. Admittedly, we'd slipped some, but this offer was nuts.

"T . . . two million?" I said, stuttering my disbelief.

"Yes." He looked at me like a malicious child who had just pulled the wings off a moth and was watching it flop around helplessly on a windowsill.

"But, sir, . . . the liquidated break-up value is at least seven," I said, retreating immediately to my absolute bottom-line number. I snapped open my briefcase and went for the doctored spreadsheets.

"Don't bother with any of those," he said as I pulled them out. "That's the offer. This time next month, you won't get a dollar from me or anyone else."

AT FIRST SIGHT

61

“I can’t sell for two million. The name alone is worth four times that much.”

“Goodbye, then,” he said. The little bandit turned and walked out of his office, leaving me standing there with the narrow-shouldered shepherd in the gray suit.

“Is he kidding?” I said.

“I’ll show you out,” the man said.

It appeared I’d come three thousand miles just to let a dwarf in shiny pants shit on me.

CHAPTER



SECONDS LATER I WAS BACK ON THE STREET, SLEET washing my head, running down my back.

I still had options. The Brooklyn Bridge was only a few miles away. I could give these Wall Street assholes a great headline. I should've cabbed over there and jumped. If I had, I'd be way ahead of where I am now. But that isn't what I did. Instead, I did something much worse.

Somehow, I found my way to the Hertz Rent a Car in downtown Manhattan. Somehow, I managed to rent a blue Ford Taurus. Somehow, I got out of New York City. I didn't really know where I was going. The windshield wipers clicked and clacked. I was out of options. My tortured thoughts circled the edge of this new business dilemma like a hungry wolf at the edge of a campfire. I drove for hours and hours, not even knowing where I was going . . . not caring. I vaguely

remember Arlington, then Myrtle Beach. I drove without stopping, except for gas. My mind was chewing on all the terrible consequences of my life, starting with my father's death . . .

Okay. As long as I brought it up, let's get on that broken-down mule for a minute. When I was a child, my father always seemed to me like somebody who had all the answers. He wasn't some big-time show-biz powerhouse, I admit, but he was funny and smart. He could make you laugh, make you believe. An agent.

He loved Hollywood Park . . . loved the ponies.

He was always taking me to the track. Money was power, he told me. And he bet heavily, trying to become more powerful. He let me pick horses and taught me how to read the racing sheet. I learned to handicap by going to the track with him at dawn, studying workout times and injury reports just like all the other six-thirty railbirds. Once, when I was ten, I got a four-horse parlay, won three hundred dollars. I started carrying wads of money around. I was only in fifth grade, but I learned that my father was right. Money was power, even in elementary school.

Mom didn't get it. She was always bitching about Dad losing the egg money, because lots of times he did. She didn't understand that money won was twice as valuable as money earned.

But Dad understood that, and so did I.

Ever since childhood, I've been a regular at the Jockey Club. When I was in the chips a few years back, a lot of my dot-com bonus cash went right through the pari-mutuel window. Call it a learned behavior, a conditioned response. Dad was Chick Sr. I was Chick Jr. We

lived in a parallel universe. The rest of the world ran in the next lane over. He got to drink and screw the B-girls at the Paddock Bar. I went to elementary school and flashed my track cash. Got my first piece of ass in eighth grade when I bought the girl a fifty-dollar ring and got laid in return. I was fourteen. Talk about a defining moment.

Then came the night when dear old Dad ruined it. The night he got drunk and put the silver Jag into the bridge abutment. They had to cut him out of the car. He came out in four pieces.

Since I didn't get my mother's vibe at all, I had focused everything on Dad. I wanted to be like him even though I'm not sure I even knew who he was. He was a big, happy guy in a checkered coat who taught me that people will respect you if you've got cash in your wallet and bullshit on your lips. Mostly what I liked about him was he paid attention to me. I thought it was about me back then, but as I grew older and gained insight into what motivates people, I realized it wasn't about me at all. It was about him. I was the only person in his life who gave a shit what *he* thought.

We buried him at Forest Lawn and I remember thinking back then that it was pretty much over the day they closed his casket. You see, my one goal in life had been to please him, to one day make him proud of me. And then, before I could do it, he took off for the big paddock in the sky. I was only fifteen when he died.

I was left to be raised by women—my mother and grandmother. What a hen party that was. They clucked and prodded, complained and bitched. My grades were never good enough, my hair never short enough, my girlfriends never refined enough. Then, under all this

criticism, I sort of started to veer toward drugs and sleazy women, just like Dad. I went into the army, where I heroically defended my post on Wilshire Boulevard, winning the war of one-liners. Afterward, it was a decade-long party that ended with six months in the Hawaii State Prison.

Through all of this, I slowly began to form a different opinion of my father. More and more, I've come to realize that Dad was just a loser with a great line of b.s. A guy who nobody listened to except sleazy women and a son who had nobody else. So, the hero of my youth slowly became an emotional stone around my neck. As an adult, I came to hate what he stood for and prayed I wouldn't end up the same way. I actually threw away my two checkered sport coats the day this realization finally dawned.

I grew up with no real male role models—nobody to try to be like. So whom did I eventually choose? Pop culture assholes. The celebrities in *People* magazine. First, it was drug-culture rock bands, then investment sleaze balls like Ivan Boesky and John Delorean. I lusted after all the things that the product machines on Madison Avenue told me were cool. I didn't like who I was, so I bought everything these false prophets and culture hucksters told me would validate me. I blew money on exotic cars, dressed out of *GQ*, put almost a quarter of a million dollars into the sound system in an office so large you could use it to play half-court basketball. I married a woman other people wanted to fuck. She gave great blow jobs but had thoughts so thin they disappeared completely in a flurry of demands, complaints, and recriminations.

The age-old loser questions started waking me up at night.

How did I get here?

What do I really want?

Why am I so damn unhappy?

And then the big, scary ones: Am I turning into my father? Is that why nobody takes me seriously?

These were the things I was thinking as I pushed the little blue Taurus south out of the sleet of New York City, onto the cracked, dry roads of Virginia, heading nowhere special, not knowing where I was going until I got there.

I drove all afternoon, into the night, my mind elsewhere, yearning for something I was unable to even describe.

You'll never guess where I ended up. Or, maybe you already have.

I ended up in front of Paige Ellis's house on a residential street in Charlotte, North Carolina.

It was 10 P.M. on the night my whole life changed.

CHAPTER



THE HOUSE WAS SMALL, WITH A TINY FRONT LAWN. IT was not the kind of place you'd expect to find the scion of the Chandler media fortune, certainly not a house I would choose if I had his money. I was parked a little way up the street. The address, written down so carefully in Hawaii, was open now on my lap. The letters, in her delicate hand, were wavering under my blurring vision.

2367 LIPTON ROAD, CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA

I looked at the house and I remember saying out loud, "Chick, this is nuts." Of course it was way beyond nuts. This was real, hardcore, front-of-the-line stalker nonsense.

I had driven more than six hundred miles to park outside another man's house, so I could look into his lighted living room, hoping to catch a glimpse of his wife as she passed by the window. Unacceptable.

It was as if just letting the vision of her find its way into my brain might salve the pain of these past few days—of Melissa in jail, my sorry business going bankrupt, and the dwarf in the shiny pants with the hair growing out of his ears.

I watched. I waited. What was I doing? I swear, at that moment I didn't have a clue. I wanted to start up the blue Taurus and leave, but I couldn't move my hand to the ignition key. Every time I tried, I hit some sort of powerful force field. My fingers hovered inches away, unable to make contact and close the distance, which would have saved me.

I don't know how long I sat there. My thoughts were becoming pretty jumbled . . . pretty abstract. I thought about my dad, my wife. The first time I saw Evelyn at Mike Donovan's pool party. I thought she was beautiful then, never seeing the woman she would become. Not seeing the anger or the self-hatred that now drove her to pump iron obsessively for hours in our basement gym. I thought about Paige and Chandler Ellis and this little house so far away from L.A. I thought about the insanity of this trip down here, not knowing until I pulled the address out of my pocket what I was really doing, but then knowing in a flash that it had been my plan to come here all along.

That realization, that truth, hit me harder than any of the events of the past month. I knew this was insane, and still I couldn't leave. I

couldn't put the little car in gear and save myself, because, you see, I knew that no matter what happened to me, whether I stayed or left, I would never again be the same Chick Best. Somehow, I knew right then that my coming here had changed who I was forever.

I didn't need some Beverly Hills therapist to explain that, either. The trip here had convinced me I had lost control. My love for Paige Ellis had morphed into an uncontrollable obsession.

That's when the door opened and Chandler Ellis walked out of his house. At first I thought he was going to the mailbox. But instead, he walked to the green Suburban parked in the driveway, got in, started the vehicle, and backed out.

I ducked down as his headlights swept over my car. Then I sat up, and without knowing what the hell I was doing, I started the Taurus.

I followed him.

Why did I follow him? I've asked myself that question at least a thousand times since all this happened. I wanted to see Paige. I came all this way to maybe find a way to talk to her. So why was I following Chandler? I didn't know. I couldn't answer that, except to say some psychic force had taken control and was driving me.

At any rate, my mind reeled with questions. What was Chandler doing, leaving his house at eleven in the evening? Where was he going? Did he have a girlfriend stashed across town? Was he cheating on Paige? Was he so stupid that he didn't know he was married to the most desirable woman on earth? What would happen if I caught him with another woman in some cheap motel someplace? What if I found him screwing his brains out? How would I deal with it?

These were some of my fantasies as I followed him. Of course, the answer to that last one was I'd have to tell her. I couldn't let somebody as sweet and trusting as Paige live unknowingly with a sleazy adulterer. Well, I couldn't, could I?

I was thinking I should try to buy a camera and get some pictures—evidence. And then Chandler pulled the Suburban into a shopping center. It was now almost eleven-fifteen and most of the stores were closed, but the Safeway and a Walgreens were still open. Both were throwing neon light deep into the late-night deserted parking lot.

I pulled around to the side to stay out of sight. For some reason, Chandler didn't park out front, but drove through the parking lot and finally pulled the Suburban around to the same side of the store where I was and parked. I was only ten or fifteen yards away, still in the driving lane. My mind whirled. What should I do? Should I wait? Should I leave?

Without looking at my car, Chandler walked into the drugstore. I stared dumbly at his Suburban. Then I put my rented Taurus in Park with the engine still running. I tried to come to grips with all this.

"Chick, get the fuck out of here," I said out loud to myself. But I remind you, I was not in control, unable to change the course of these events. I was lost, as if some unknown power was setting up this maze and forcing me to run through it. So then who was in control here? Who was making up the rules of this game? Not me—at least that's what I told myself.

And then, for a fleeting moment, sanity returned. I knew I had to get the hell outta there. I knew I had to get away before he saw me.

My willpower surged.

I grabbed the gearshift to put the car in Drive, but as this first sane thought in hours hit me, everything changed. It happened so fast I didn't even see it coming.

I still don't quite understand it. I mean, I know the physics. The chronology. It's the psychology that baffles me.

At the very instant I gained control of myself and reached for the shift knob, Chandler came out the back door of the drugstore carrying a small bag from the pharmacy. He saw my headlights, saw that I had sort of blocked his exit. He started to come toward me, waving for me to back up. In a few seconds he would see me. How could I explain my appearance here to him?

What would I say if he recognized me? "Hey Chandler, whatta you doing here? Small world, right?" He would never go for that. Some coincidences defy explanation and I knew this was one of them. There was no way I could explain this. No way. Or at least that's what I was convinced of at that moment.

He was still walking toward me, gesturing, so I slammed the rental into Reverse and hit the gas.

But I was in the wrong gear and the car lunged forward, not backward. It struck Chandler hard, knocking him down. The front headlight broke and the car shuddered from the impact. Before I could take my foot off the gas, I ran right over him. I heard him scream. I felt the wheels roll over his chest; bouncing the Taurus like a speed bump.

I slammed on the brakes, opened the door, jumped out, and ran around to see. He was lying under the car just in front of the rear

tires. Only his head protruded from underneath. He was barely breathing. Blood had already started coming out of his mouth. The bag of medicine he'd been carrying was strewn on the pavement. I remember looking down. I read the label:

PAIGE ELLIS:
DARVO CET for pain.
One tablet every four hours.

Funny, how in a time of extreme crisis, something unimportant and stupid like that registers.

“Help me!” he croaked, his eyes bright but desperate.

Then he recognized me.

A strange look of clarity passed across his face. “Chick?” he whispered.

I couldn't answer. I couldn't speak. And then he started to choke on his own blood. It was oozing out of his mouth, oozing around my feet. I jumped back to keep it off my hand-sewn Spanish loafers.

“Chick . . . help . . . ” It was such a low whisper—a moan actually—that I couldn't even be sure he'd said those exact words.

I ran back to the driver's side, jumped into the car, and—God help me—I put it in Drive and inched forward to run over him again, parking the rear wheel on his chest for almost a full minute before pulling off.

AT FIRST SIGHT

73

Then I got out, ran around the car, and looked down at him again. His eyes were open, but they were no longer bright. They were lifeless—shiny, but vacant. Dark and cold as an empty house.

I'd never seen a dead man before, but it was obvious to me that's what he was.

My survival instincts took over. I looked around the empty parking lot for a witness.

Nobody. At least I didn't see anyone.

I climbed into the car and squealed out of the lot.

"Oh, shit. Oh, shit, oh shit," I moaned, my thoughts a blur as they kaleidoscoped across the event.

I drove for a mile, then pulled over, leaned out, and threw up into the street. I couldn't even begin to get my mind around it.

I didn't know how all this had happened or why. Didn't have a clue.

Had I driven all the way down here just to kill Chandler Ellis, never admitting to myself that was what I was going to do until I did it? Is that why I followed Chandler instead of staying out in front of their house to watch Paige through the window? Did I plan to murder him all along? Did I hit Drive instead of Reverse by mistake, or did I do it on purpose?

You see now why I'm writing all this down. You see why I'm so confused.

I didn't have a clue. I still don't.

But read on. It only gets worse.

CHAPTER



WHEN I WAS SEVEN, MY GRANDMOTHER USED TO DRAG me to church every Sunday, and after the service she'd make me sit through Sunday school. Even then biblical stories seemed a bit like comic books in their simplicity. I was always bored out of my gourd. Complete waste of time. Almost none of it stuck, but I do remember a few odd religious facts. For instance, Proverbs 27:4 teaches that "Wrath is cruel and anger is outrageous, but who can stand before envy?" Damn good question, especially in light of what just happened.

I had envied Chandler Ellis, envied him for his looks and his money and for the fact that he seemed to reject all of the meaningless things that in my conscious mind I knew were unimportant, but that seemed to dominate me viscerally. I had spent my life lusting after nonsense. Power symbols like a large house in the status-heavy six hundred block of Elm, or important friends, expensive cars, designer

clothes, and gaudy accessories. I had a wife with a killer body, who, I admit, I had long ago tired of making love to, but who still turned heads. It was enough for me that other men lusted for her. She was a sexual benchmark attesting to my powers in the bedroom. Being married to a body like that gave me status on the West L.A. cock exchange—identified me as a world-class swordsman. But all these symbols of success, power, and sexual prowess still failed to satisfy me or give me a moment of inner peace.

I wanted to be envied for my status symbols, and sometimes, I was. But even when I saw envy in the eyes of others, it wasn't enough. It felt empty because there were always guys like Chandler Ellis, who had more and seemed to care about it less. I envied him because he seemed to fit so tightly inside his skin, comfortable and full of grace, while I wore my hide like one of my dad's garish sport coats.

But most of all, I envied his relationship with his wife. I envied the way Paige looked at him when she held his hand. Envied that look of love and adoring devotion that she focused on him every time he spoke. So what happened may not be entirely my fault, at least not if you believe the Bible. Maybe I really couldn't help myself, because as Proverbs clearly states, "Who can stand before envy?"

I no longer envied Chandler Ellis. Instead, I'd killed him. Turned him into Charlotte, North Carolina's latest hit-and-run statistic. And I'd accomplished this in a split second without even knowing I was doing it. Then I ran over him a second time, making sure the job was finished, destroying any chance I had of deluding myself later that I had done it by mistake.

But hold it. Let's throw a flag at that for a minute. Maybe there *is* another side to all of this. Maybe there's a sliver of emotional salvation hiding in this human tragedy.

Let's accept, for the moment, the pure insanity of driving six hundred miles to get here just so I could look at another man's wife through his living-room window. Maybe once I'd followed Chandler to that drugstore and he'd started toward me in the parking lot, I'd had no other course of action. Up till then, I had used bad judgment, but had committed no crime. Once he advanced on me, waving his arms in a threatening way, maybe then I had simply panicked, reacted . . . hit the wrong gear by mistake and run him down. After all, it *was* a rental car. I *was* unfamiliar with the gearbox. Maybe I had acted out of pure self-preservation. Maybe I had accidentally hit him, then realized that there was no explanation for my being in Charlotte. Knowing I would be an immediate suspect in a vehicular assault, maybe then and only then had certain brain synapses, bred into me by thousands of years of natural selection and *Homo sapiens* survival instincts, kicked in. I had done the only thing left to do under the circumstances. Back up, park on his chest, and finish the job, ending any chance for *his* survival. Kill or be killed. Law of the jungle, primal and pure.

On the surface, I liked this second scenario a hell of a lot better than the first, but I didn't trust it. I knew it was bullshit—a cheap rationalization for murder. But in those first moments of fear and confusion after I left the parking lot, I clung to that rationale like a man clinging to the side of a life raft. I was in a swirl of white water, wallowing and swallowing, adrift in a confusing storm of emotions.

AT FIRST SIGHT

77

The first hour after I ran Chandler Ellis down was pretty much time lost. The best way to describe it is to say it was reminiscent of one of my old interplanetary drug hazes back when I was ghost-busting on acid. I was in a daze, my reality strobing and morphing into shapes, sounds, and colors I didn't recognize at the time or remember well later. All the while, I was driving the damn Taurus. Miraculously, I didn't hit anybody else. My mind was elsewhere, skipping over facts, landing on half-truths, bouncing and flying like a flat stone hurled against the tide.

And then I found myself sitting in the car parked next to a shimmering lake. I didn't know its name, or the time, or even where the fuck I was . . . somewhere near the Township of Salisbury, still in North Carolina, I think. A full moon lit the water. My head was throbbing; my neck and shoulders ached from having clutched the wheel in a vice grip for almost two hours. My whirling mind began to slow and I grabbed for it, trying to regain control, but only managed to hold my turbulent thoughts for a second before they snapped loose, spinning off wildly again. Like sparks flying off a miller's wheel, tiny particles of reason finally floated down and landed around me.

Had anybody seen me do it? Somebody in the market? A drunk lying in the shadows? But before I could focus on these questions, my thoughts were spinning again, catapulting over broken memories and the verses of old songs, which I chanted mindlessly as I sat there.

Then another grab for sanity. The car. Was Chandler's blood on the car? As that lucid, worthwhile question lingered, I suddenly heard

myself chanting, “Oh God, oh God, oh God,” as if the Supreme Deity would have anything to do with me now.

Once more I grabbed. This time I managed to hold my tortured thoughts.

I locked onto something important. Tire treads.

I remembered a documentary I saw on A&E dealing with the new forensic science being employed by police departments. Investigators could trace a car using tire tracks. They could make random pattern matches. Isolate something called “unique identifiers.” They could graph the imperfections in the tire tread and scan them into a computer. If they found the car, they could match the tire tread to the unique identifiers found at the crime scene.

There was also something called “paint fragment analysis.” Tiny paint particles, so small you couldn’t see them, could be left on skin or clothes. They could retrieve dust-sized samples from Chandler’s body and tell what color and make of car the paint came from. I was starting to panic again.

I got out of the car and walked around to the front. It was a mess. A broken headlight and frame. A caved-in right front fender. Some of the blue paint was scratched and scuffed. There was blood. Chandler’s blood. Not much, but some. It had seeped into the broken headlight. Shit. I had to do something about this.

I sat on the hard ground and leaned up against the car to think about it, trying to sort out my options. Without warning, I began to cry. Deep, soul-wrenching sobs choked my throat and constricted my breathing. It wasn’t so much that I was feeling sorry for myself.

Although, truth be told, there was some of that. It was more as if I was saying goodbye to the last remnants of who I thought I was.

No longer could I accept myself as someone who had been put upon by life. No longer could I blame my emotional shortcomings on my dead father's fucked-up value system, or on my mother or grandma. In truth, they had all helped to form who I was, shallow and transparent as that man had become. But none of that mattered anymore. I now knew I was no longer struggling against the events of an unfair childhood. I was no longer a victim of my father's death, or my mother's low-income circumstances. I couldn't think of myself as someone put upon by the choices and actions of others. Chick Best, the victim, was gone.

This new Chick had just committed murder. He had killed another man. This new Chick was an aggressor. A perpetrator. This new Chick had taken a human life, parked on a man's chest and waited for him to die. I'm telling you, it was an impossible idea to come to grips with.

Being a victim is so much more satisfying. In failure, as a victim your excuse is built in. *It's not my fault. I had no advantages growing up. My father was a cheap, slick asshole.* When a victim succeeds, he has heroically overcome adversity, risen above cultural and sociological disadvantages to win bravely in the face of all odds.

However, there is no heroic rationale for murder. Murder is pure aggression. Murderers are unredeemable psychotics. So I sat and cried for the loss of the man I had been. I cried until my throat was dry and my eyes were swollen. When I was cried out, I sat in silence, my mind aching, but no longer spinning.

I knew that I had a lot of things to do, and I had to do them quickly. First I had to repair this fucking car. I couldn't destroy it or ditch it, because the Hertz Rent a Car in New York City would want to know where it was. If a blue Taurus went missing from Hertz and the police got blue Taurus paint off Chandler's body, a ten-minute computer run would find me and I would end up hosting a shower party in the North Carolina State Prison.

I had to repair the car so no one would notice. I knelt down and studied the right front fender. It was bent. No large paint chips seemed to have been knocked loose, but the rim was scratched and the paint underneath scraped, so that would need to be straightened and repainted. I had driven over Chandler's chest with the right-side tires. Can skin and clothes be used to match treads? Did I leave tread marks on Chandler or on the pavement? I wasn't sure, but to be safe, I needed new rubber.

How long before Chandler Ellis's death would become front-page news? With luck, it wouldn't make the papers until tomorrow evening. Of course, because he was related to the *L.A. Times* Chandlers, the electronic media would jump all over it, pending notification of kin. That meant it could make the TV news by sometime tomorrow, maybe sooner. So there wasn't much time, and I had a lot to do.

I looked at my watch. It was still only 1:35 A.M. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since I'd hit Chandler, but in reality it had only been a little over two hours. I opened my wallet and counted my cash. Eighteen hundred dollars. I always carry a lot of cash when I travel because I sometimes incur personal expenses that I don't want

showing up on my Amex card. Don't ask, because I'm not going to explain that further.

I got back in the Taurus and drove all night, heading north. I stopped at a self-serve car wash in Richmond around 5:30 A.M. and scrubbed the front end of the car until I was pretty sure there was no blood left. I bought some dark glasses and a ball cap at a drugstore. The tire store I eventually picked was in Newport News, Virginia. It was in a grungy neighborhood full of low-end businesses where it looked to me like cash would talk. It was seven in the morning when I parked out front of Dale's Tire Town and shut off the engine. Dale hadn't worked too hard for his slogan. In red script it read: DALE'S Where the Rubber Meets the Road. *Pu-leeze*.

At nine-fifteen, a man who turned out to be Dale himself drove in and opened up. I waited until a few employees arrived, and then, wearing the sunglasses and ball cap, pulled up to one of the tire bays and got out. Dale was a speed-thin southerner with a skinny neck that looked like it was made up of gristle and rubber bands.

"Cha' need?" he slurred at me through tobacco-stained teeth the same color and texture as a grape-stake fence.

"New tires," I said, forcing a smile through my own too-dry pearlies.

Dale squatted down and looked at the rear tires on the Taurus, then he got up and checked the front pair. He rubbed his chin like he was preparing to shave. Of course there was still over a half-inch of good rubber all around, and that turned out to be what was bothering him.

“Zis a feckin’ joke? You one a them TV consumer guys with a hidden camera, tryin’ ta see if I’ll sell ya tires ya don’t need?”

“No . . . no. I, uh . . . I don’t like the way these tires are riding. I’m gonna throw ’em in the trunk and put ’em on my wife’s car.” Even to me, this sounded more like an excuse than an explanation. Or was it just my guilty conscience revving?

An hour later, I paid for four new Firestones. They were identical to the ones Dale had just taken off the car, minus the unique identifiers that could be used to match the tread marks on Chandler’s chest and send me to prison. Dale threw the old set into the trunk. They didn’t all fit, so the last one we rolled onto the floor behind the front seat. I muttered some nonsense about my wife’s car, paid with cash, and left.

As I pulled out I glanced in the mirror and saw Dale watching, shaking his head slowly. *This bubba’s definitely gonna remember me*, I thought.

“Yessir, Officer. Yankee in a suit. Guy came in here, swapped a perfectly good set of Stonies for a set of new ones. Didn’t make no damn sense ’tall.”

When you watch this stuff on TV or in the movies, it seems pretty simple. It’s another thing altogether when you’re actually trying to cover up a murder yourself. Everything you say or do has repercussions. Trying to wipe a trail clean is no simple task. A tiny mistake is like a pebble thrown into a still lake; the circles of ripples roll out, but it’s still pretty easy to judge where the stone originally landed.

I parked by a body of water about ten miles away, went through the bushes, and found a good place to ditch the tires. I rolled them into a lake I didn't know the name of and watched while they sank.

As I was doing this, I started to rehearse the story I was planning to tell at the auto body shop. I needed to find somebody who could fix this car immediately—somebody who had the right Taurus parts in stock—the headlight frame, the glass lens, and the correct color of paint so the rental agency wouldn't spot the damage. I couldn't be hanging around in a broken-up blue Taurus while the cops two hundred miles away were finding pieces of Taurus blue paint on Chandler's body. They'd put out a TV story and a four-state bulletin and I'd be toast. I needed to get this done fast and get outta here before the police lab found anything. I needed to fly under the radar.

I drove north again. The further away from Charlotte the better. I had already decided that Newark, New Jersey, would be the best place. It was close to New York, where I would fly out. Big city, lots of auto repair shops. This time, I figured the bigger the auto body shop the better. The more work they got, the less likely they were to remember my little headlight and fender repair job.

As I drove north on the interstate, I kept my mind off Chandler Ellis—the sound his body made thumping under my wheels, the sound of his whispery voice.

“Chick, help me.”

Instead of focusing on that I went over my new story . . . Driving at night . . . Hit an animal . . . Damn thing ran across the road. Deer. *Are there deer in Virginia? Had to be, they're everywhere* . . . Hit the

deer, it veered and ran on. Never saw if it was hurt . . . Stopped, tried to find it. Walked around looking—following the trail of blood, so I could try to help it, but—

No. Too much. Don't overdo it. Make it boring, so they'll forget it. Just hit the deer. It kept going. I kept going . . . like that.

I picked an auto repair shop called Top Hat Auto Repair. A cartoon of a man wearing a tuxedo and top hat, holding a wrench and screwdriver, graced the chain-link fence out front. Underneath it advertised: Body Repair—Parts Center.

This time I bought a pair of drugstore reading glasses to go with my ball cap and went inside without my suit coat.

The estimator checked out the damage while I mumbled my deer story. He didn't seem to be listening or to care. His uniform identified him as Lou, but everybody called him "Wheezy." "Hey, Wheezy, we got the new parts sheets in from Holbrook Supply yet?" "Hey, Wheezy, you gotta phone call on six." Wheezy seemed to be the guy everyone asked questions of—a manager-type who still wasn't quite managerial enough to keep from wearing his name over his pocket.

After checking the damage, he rocked back on his heels and looked at me. "Cost you around a thousand dollars and 'cause we're busy, gonna take about two t' four days."

"Two to four days? See . . . the thing there is, I'm due in Montreal in ten hours, and I was wondering if there was any way you could get on it right now?"

He shook his head. "No way. If you can't wait, best thing is get it done once you get home," he said.

“Except, it’s my son’s wedding,” I replied. Desperation and panic seeped into my routine like flop sweat on a bad comedian. “We’re using this car for the wedding,” I continued implausibly. “I sort of don’t want to have to pull up in front of the church with a bashed-in fender.”

“Rent something else,” he said.

I looked shocked. “What makes you think it’s a rental?” I was going for indignation but only achieved petulance. He pointed to the windshield. There, pasted on the back of the rearview mirror, was a Hertz decal. Great . . . I might as well have left my confession pinned to the front seat.

“Look, Lou. Wheezy. I’m sticking with this car. There’s gotta be a number that gets it done this morning.”

I peeled two hundred dollars off a roll of fifties and put them into his hand, thinking, even as I did it, *This is stupid, Chick. No way is this guy going to forget you now.* But I was desperate. I couldn’t be trying to fix this car once it was on the news.

“How long you got?” Lou asked, putting the cash in his pocket.

“I really need to get moving. Why don’t we start by you telling me how long it’ll take?”

Lou looked at the front end again. “Well, providing we got all the parts and paint, we gotta hammer this out and Bondo it. I’ll hafta use fast-dry body filler, then I gotta paint the fender, put it in the paint oven for at least an hour or two to dry—still gonna be a little tacky. Then I gotta reattach the new headlight rim and lens. Two o’clock at the earliest, maybe three.”

I nodded my head. I didn't trust my voice to speak. I was starting to shake.

Of course, Chandler's death made the late morning news. I sat in the waiting room at Top Hat on a cracked leather sofa, trying to read tire literature as the 11:00 news, with Ken and Barbie, came on. This pair of vinyl cupcakes had too-sprayed hair and too-white teeth. Their padded shoulders were almost touching as they told the viewers that Chandler Ellis, nephew of the late Otis Chandler, of the Los Angeles Chandler publishing family, was found dead in a supermarket parking lot, the victim of a hit-and-run.

They put up a press picture of Chandler in his football uniform from Georgetown University, right arm cocked back, helmetless and handsome, ready to rifle a pass to a streaking wide out.

His copper ringlets and hero looks made his death all the more distressing to Barbie, although she didn't put it in quite those words. "Chandler Ellis, who was graced with looks, athletic skill, money, and social prominence, forsook a modeling career after college to work with learning disabled children. He also headed the Ellis Learning Foundation, which sponsors research into all forms of learning problems in children. He will be missed," was the way she phrased it, but you could tell that, given the chance, she would've boned the handsome bastard in a heartbeat. I sat numbly, pretending to read an old *Motor Trend* magazine.

The repair work took until four o'clock, but Lou had rushed it, as promised, and the paint and Bondo were both a little tacky when I got the car back.

“Hertz will never know you bent it,” Lou grinned.

I paid the bill with cash and drove out, leaving Top Hat Auto Repair in my good-as-new Taurus with the traitorous, Hertz-stickered rearview mirror. Obviously, I was not born for a life of crime.

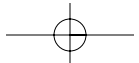
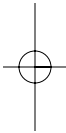
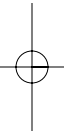
The rest was relatively easy. I returned the car to Hertz in Manhattan and put the charge on my credit card. The girl walked around the car looking for dings. Nobody touched the almost-dry paint. Nobody noticed the repair job.

I left New York on an eight o’clock flight to Los Angeles. All the way there, my stomach churned. Something told me I was never going to get away with this.

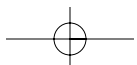
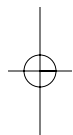
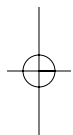
But throughout it all, one thought kept popping up. I’d knock it angrily back down, but unexpectedly it would bounce up again like one of those blow-up clowns with a weight on the bottom—grinning, red-nosed, and ridiculous. One positive thought in this ocean of negativity.

Want to hear it? Get ready, because it really sucks. What I kept thinking was:

At least Paige Ellis is a widow.



CHICK & PAIGE



CHAPTER



OF COURSE PAIGE DIDN'T KNOW THAT RIGHT AWAY.

After Chandler left for the drugstore, she sat in the front room of the wood-sided house on Lipton Road and tried to work on a seascape she was painting, but the pain from an extruded disc in her back, which sometimes kicked up after long runs, was killing her. She was getting ready for the Boston Marathon, pushing her distances out, and was experiencing more pain than usual. She wondered how she could have let her medication run out in the midst of her marathon training. Luckily, she reached Dr. Baker before he went to bed. When her back flared up, he normally prescribed Percocet, but that drug was a federally controlled medication, and because she had let it lapse, he said he couldn't prescribe it again without an office visit. As a temporary substitute he prescribed Darvocet. Not as potent, he'd told her, but it should do the job until he could see her. The

doctor phoned in the prescription to Walgreens, and Chandler had rushed out to get it. But that was almost two hours ago. Now she was worried. It wasn't like Chandler to leave and not come back without calling.

The room was getting cold, so she went into the bedroom to put on a sweater, her lower back throbbing painfully with each step. Her MRI showed a slight extrusion at the S-7 vertebra. Dr. Baker had advised her against long-distance running, but when pressed, he admitted that the damage was already done, and said that in due time the disk extrusion would be absorbed. If she could withstand the pain, it probably wouldn't get worse. She decided to keep training and treat it with painkillers. She loved the feeling she got when she was pushing it. Five or six miles out, her endorphins kicked in, her spirit soared, and her body never felt more precious to her. So she kept early-morning runs in her schedule and endured the discomfort.

She returned to her easel and worked for a few minutes longer on the painting, which depicted the sandy Maui beach where she and Chandler had walked each evening at sunset. Several photos she had taken were clipped to the side of her easel. The two distant cone-shaped mountains of Molokai rose majestically from the turquoise-and orange-tinted ocean. Chandler joked that her painting looked like Madonna's leather concert bra.

Hawaii had been a time of immeasurable love. Except for a few dinners with the Bests, she and Chan had been mostly alone. They had walked the beaches holding hands. They would talk until midnight, lying on the beach chairs on the balcony of their room, listen-

ing to the distant surf and the sound of palm fronds rattling in the breeze. Then they would strip out of their clothes and screw like bunnies, laughing and holding each other for hours until she would finally suggest they go to bed, knowing they wouldn't.

"Eat me," Chandler would tease.

"You first," she'd giggle, and then, likely as not, they would start all over again. Hawaii had been the happiest time of her life.

Paige loved having sex with Chandler. He was an emotional but tender lover, willing to take her to undreamed-of heights, then hold her up there letting her ride the edge of ecstasy just short of orgasm. She couldn't seem to get enough of him and saw no reason to stop trying.

It was after twelve when she decided to call the drugstore to see what had happened to Chandler. Maybe he'd had car trouble. His cell was in the charger on the desk. Nobody picked up the phone at the drugstore. The answering machine finally clicked on with a message about store hours. They had closed at midnight.

Now she was really worried. Where was he?

A few more restless tries at getting the burnt sienna right on the underneath tips of the billowing clouds at sunset. She was tense and was botching it, layering it on too heavily. She set her paints aside and closed the tops on her oils, then spent another forty minutes pacing.

When the phone finally rang, she jumped at it, snatching it up so fast that she fumbled it out of its cradle.

"Hey, babe, where the hell are you?" she almost shouted.

A slow, drawling voice said, "This is Robert Butler. I'm parked outside your house calling on a cell phone. Is this Mrs. Ellis?"

“Yes . . . Robert who?”

“I’d like to see you if I might,” the voice continued softly.

“See me?”

“Yes ma’am. It’s a police matter. If I might, I’ll go on up to the front door and ring. See you in a second.”

“Police? What police?” she said, but he had already hung up.

Dread and fear now choked her.

She rushed to the door and fumbled for the latch chain with numb fingers, swinging it open to face a thin, middle-aged man with narrow shoulders. He was wearing khaki pants and a wrinkled blue blazer. His salt-and-pepper hair was cut into an old-fashioned, fifties-style flattop, which framed a sun-creased, friendly face. He was holding a badge in one hand and a Bible in the other.

“What is it?” she said, her voice shaking with anxiety.

“Could we step inside?” he inquired gently.

“What do you want?” she implored, taking a step backward as he followed her in and closed the door.

“I regret to inform you, ma’am, that your husband was run over by a car in the Walgreens drugstore parking lot. They didn’t stick around to report the accident so it’s a hit-and-run.” He said it fast—gave her the bad news in two sentences, as if practice making these kind of calls had taught him not to draw it out.

The words staggered her. This narrow-shouldered, plain-looking man had just hit her with a sentence more powerful than a fist. Her knees went weak and she found herself reaching for a chair.

“That’s absurd,” she heard herself say.

“The paramedics who picked him up listed him as ‘death imminent.’ That’s the classification they use until the docs at County Hospital can make it official.”

“He’s dead?” she said dumbly, feeling the blood draining out of her head. She suddenly felt sticky and wet, white with fear. Her voice was disembodied, and although vaguely familiar, seemed shrill.

“Yes ma’am, I’m terribly sorry. He was dead at the scene. But like I said, the doctors at the hospital have to be the ones to pronounce him.”

She felt an agonizing sense of grief sweep over her. Suddenly, her legs buckled and she sank to her knees, falling forward, banging her head on the carpet.

Detective Butler rushed to catch her, but he was a split second late and she went down anyway. He helped her to her feet, then led her to the sofa in the living room.

“Where’s the kitchen, ma’am?” he asked.

She didn’t answer. She had her head in her hands and could hear herself moaning—long, wailing, groaning sounds that she didn’t even recognize as her own until she realized they stopped each time she took a breath.

Robert Butler turned away and went toward the back of the house. She heard water running, but all she kept thinking was, *death imminent?* A two-word phrase so immense she was still unable to comprehend it.

Seconds later, Bob Butler was back at her side, handing her a glass of water. She took it and looked at it, not sure what he wanted her to do.

“Drink,” he said softly, and she obediently sipped the water, her hands trembling before her eyes.

“Mrs. Ellis . . . I’m sorry to have to do this now, but if we want to catch this perpetrator, time is of the essence.” She didn’t answer, so he continued. “I’m going to have to ask you a few questions. Is that going to be okay?”

She nodded her head but still couldn’t speak.

“Could you tell me why your husband went to the drugstore so late at night?”

“Pills for my back,” she finally managed to say. “He was picking up a prescription for me.”

“You’ve been here the whole time? You didn’t leave the house?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Can anybody confirm that?” She shook her head. Then he leaned back and studied her carefully. He seemed to make a decision, then continued on. “What I want you to know, Mrs. Ellis, is I’m not going to let this hit-and-run go unsolved.” He waited, then added, “That’s a promise. Me to you.”

Somebody hit Chandler and drove away, leaving him to die alone? The idea was preposterous. Chandler was . . . He always seemed so . . . Charmed.

“My own wife was the victim of a hit-and-run, three years ago,” Robert Butler was saying. “So while most people won’t understand what you’re going through right now, I want you t’know I understand exactly how you feel.”

She looked at him, not really processing much of this. They were just words that buzzed in her anguish. The detective was looking at her with sad understanding, as if they shared a secret.

Then this soft-spoken, plain man picked up his Bible, opened it to a dog-eared page, and began to read, first from Philippians 4: “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice.” His voice was soft, soothing. “And the peace of God which passeth all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

He continued reading the Bible to her, how long, she didn’t know. At first it just annoyed her, but then she began to listen to his carefully selected passages.

“Hebrews 9:27: ‘And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many.’” Then: “Acts 9:41: ‘And he gave her his hand, and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it was known throughout all Joppa; and many believed in the Lord.’”

His words began to finally soothe her. They cut into her grief with gentle wisdom. She listened, locking onto each sentence, holding tight to the ideas he was reading to her, as if they were slender ropes spun by God that somehow led to Chandler.

Afterward, when she thought back on it, it seemed odd that a police detective working a violent crime detail would sit in her living room and read from the Bible after destroying her life with a few declarative sentences.

Only later did she find out that after Bob Butler's wife was run down and killed, he became a born-again Christian. He carried his Bible with him everywhere, right along with the North Carolina state penal code. Later still, she found out that his fellow detectives at the Charlotte P.D. called him "Bible Bob" behind his back. He had become something of a department joke, reading scripture to grieving relatives as well as unrepentant criminals.

But during those first minutes after the horrible realization of Chandler's death fell on her, crushing her, he tried to shield her from the pain by reading to her from the Bible in his soft, comforting drawl.

And finally, "Revelations 14:13: 'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth. Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them.'"

CHAPTER



I MAY HAVE HAD TOO MUCH TO DRINK ON THE PLANE. AT least my flight attendant, a smartly turned-out fruit cup named Denny with minty breath and plucked eyebrows, thought so. He cut me off somewhere over Denver. Back in the pre-9/11, dot-com wizard days, I would have given this prissy asshole some primo grief, but since the World Trade Center went down, flying has become a contact sport with bomb-sniffing dogs and cavity searches. These days, if you even get out of your seat too fast, your fellow passengers will knock you into a bulkhead, and the crew will take you off the plane in handcuffs.

So I cut Denny some slack and sat there nursing the last one, trying hard not to think about Chandler and the rented Taurus and what a gross, horrible thing I'd done.

Of course, it was a little like being in the desert and saying you weren't going to think about water. Once you say it, that's all you *can*

think about. So I played tag with my thoughts, a terrible game of mental “gotcha,” where my conscience, or memory, or whatever it was, kept catching up to me, and each time it did, I had to readdress a new menu of negative terms that described me. *Check, please.*

But of course I couldn't leave . . . couldn't get off the plane until it landed. Worse still, I couldn't bear my own company. I wanted to get away from myself. If it could have helped, I would have asked Denny to move me to a new seat.

L.A. was hot, smoggy, and ugly. I say this as one who loves this fast, transient, slightly glitzy city. Normally L.A. is my kind of place. An hour from skiing or the beach, enough fun and glitter to keep you endlessly diverted. Booty, in short-shorts, whizzing by on Rollerblades almost everywhere you looked. A town designed for insincerity and bullshit. My town. But today it all looked different. As I deplaned, everything felt different, darker and less interesting.

Then I did something I swear you wouldn't believe. I stopped at an airport book stand and bought a copy of *Hustler*, a skin magazine with pictures of naked hookers in high heels doing squats and editorials so simplistic it's like they were written in crayon. I took it to my car, which was parked in the big lot across from American Airlines, and drove until I found a liquor store on Century Boulevard. There are plenty on that boulevard of broken windows. I stopped at the first one I saw and bought a bottle of blended scotch, took it to the car, and had a few stiff ones right out of the bottle. Then I opened my April edition of *Hustler* and had a handkerchief date with myself right there in the front seat.

Why I did this is anybody's guess . . . some three-hundred-dollar-an-hour Beverly Hills shrink would probably say I was trying to confirm my sense of self, or that sex, even self-administered, is a subconscious confirmation of life . . . a validation of my existence. Or maybe I just needed to get my mind off of what I'd done for a few minutes. At any rate, there I was, parked behind the liquor store, looking at shaved pussies, working on a dishonorable discharge.

The problem here is, I couldn't really get hard, which is generally not a problem for me at all. I'm a charter member of the diamond-cutters club. But all I had going here was a modified flounder. I finally did a soft ejaculation and closed the magazine, zipped up, and began looking around to see if I'd been spotted. Then lethargy and despair descended. Somewhere in the back of my mind, the old Chick started heckling me. *What's the problem, CB? Can't get a good chubby anymore?* The question began to haunt me. Doubts about my own sexuality hovered and I began to wonder if killing Chandler had somehow altered me, taken the pump out of my python.

A friend of mine once boiled man's existence down to one short sentence. "You know what life is all about, Chick?" he asked. "The cars, the houses, the great clothes, the rings and watches . . . Know why guys need all that stuff?"

"Status?" I answered. We'd been drinking in the men's bar at the Jonathan Club, where he was a member.

"No, not status."

"What, then? What's it all about?" I grinned drunkenly, thinking he was about to give me some funny punch line.

“It’s about getting laid.” He saluted me with his drink and continued. “Boil it all down and that’s all it is. You go out and buy a sexy car or a big pinky diamond. Why? So your brother-in-law will think you’re hot shit? No way. All that stuff, everything we do, everything we buy—it’s all just about getting laid. Take that outta the equation and life becomes a zero-sum experience.”

It’s strange that such monumental truth, such soul-defining wisdom, would be learned in a bar. But I swear, I’ve held everything I’ve ever experienced up to that simple equation, and it’s bulletproof. No exceptions.

Follow the bouncing ball.

Why did I buy the house in the six hundred block of Elm? Answer: So people would know I had money.

Yeah, but what people, Chick? Ugly people? Old people? Male-type people?

Well, no, not exactly.

So why would I spend three million I don’t have, on a house I can’t afford . . . put myself into a hole, and cause myself endless sleepless nights? Why do that if I’m not trying to impress the guys I play golf with? Who *was* I trying to impress?

Yeah, Chick, who?

Well, the house was a great investment. Property values in that neighborhood are . . .

You’re lying. Who did you buy it for? Not for Evelyn. She was already married to you. So who? Let’s hear it Chick. Stop hedging.

Well . . . I guess I wanted other girls to know I had it.

Yeah, but what girls, Chick? We talkin' porkers here?

No, not porkers. Pretty girls. California beauties. Great-looking west side squid. I bought it so pretty girls would look at me and smile and wish I wasn't married so they could sleep with me. They'd covet what I had and find me desirable, because if you want the absolute truth, I don't find myself all that desirable. I think I'm a loser with nothing I really care about, so I need those things to help prop up my self-esteem—my self-image. My unspoken message is, Take a ride on the Chick Best Express. Maybe once you see everything I have, you'll spread 'em and let me deliver a load.

So that was the whole enchilada. Boil it down and, just like my friend said, everything we do or buy is just about getting laid. So it followed then that I'd killed Chandler Ellis because I wanted to sleep with Paige. Because of that fantasy, I'd committed a murder.

But what if God gets so angry he takes the starch outta my monkey?

What if, from now on, because of psychological stress or guilt, or some other Freudian malady, I'm cursed to limp-dick my way through the rest of my life?

WHAT IF I CAN'T GET IT UP ANYMORE?

I took another deep swig of scotch.

"You've gotta stop drinking so much," some ghost from my past whispered in my subconscious. Grandma, my father . . . the long gone dot-com wizard . . . somebody.

I pulled out of the liquor-store parking lot into a brown smoggy day.

You see what I was doing here, don't you?

I was determined to punish myself. Determined to make myself pay a price for what I had done. Losing my hard-on was just about the worst thing that could happen—the worst thing that I could imagine. But back then, twelve hours after I killed Chandler, I thought it was just temporary, a stress-related anomaly. Back then, I still thought I had something to live for. Back then, I was just getting started. It was only the first day of my slow drive through hell.