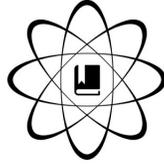


My Brother's Keeper

M.T. Bass

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Prologue

My older brother was always the golden boy of the family: he hit the longest home runs, got the highest grades, dated the prettiest girls, was decorated by General MacArthur personally, and had the most elite cosmetic surgery practice in Beverly Hills. I never quite measured up to Stitch, but I was the youngest and got away with that and much, much more. There was only one thing I was ever good at and that was finding things: the dog when he got loose and ran away; the mislaid keys to the family Buick; a case of beer or two for Saturday night parties; females more willing than beautiful; and, during the war, German ME109s, which I usually dispatched with the fifty caliber guns mounted in the wings of my Mustang, *White Hawk*. Stitch was discovered dead April 2, 1950. I would have to find his murderer.

A. Gavin Byrd

Chapter 1

“What? You mean *that's it?*”

I was already sitting at the end of the bed, lighting up a smoke and thinking hard and fast.

“Well, I'll tell you, sugar, I've been on the shelf aging like a fine bottle of bubbly—so to speak—and you just shook me up good and popped my cork.”

“Why you—”

“Hey, come on, we're supposed to rest between rounds. Wait for the bell, will you?”

As luck would have it, just then the phone rang.

“Don't you answer that, Hawk.”

But, of course, I did.

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“I got the distinct impression that I was *interruptin'* somethin',” snickered Sgt. Vince Allegro of the Los Angeles Police Department when I met him at the marina. Allegro always was observant as hell. He also had an annoyingly knowing smile that he used to great advantage in dislodging information from witnesses and suspects, who, if they were lying, usually broke down and told him the truth or, if they were telling the truth, usually elaborated to prove it—and all Allegro had to do was smile. It was magic, but whenever he turned it on me, I felt like slapping the chubby little cop silly. I guess I deserved it, though; for in his eyes I was deliciously wicked in my ways and was an invaluable source of fantasy handouts for him to use in passing the time on late night stakeouts. “And don't think I had an easy time of it, tracking you down at that motel.”

“I was on location for a couple of days.”

Allegro smiled his patent pending smile.

“Well, Vince,” I said, “she was the cutest little twenty-two year old, MGM contract player you ever saw. She had blonde hair, blue eyes, a figure that would befuddle Einstein and long, long legs with thighs that have had the benefit of a lifetime of dancing lessons.”

Allegro held up his hands, needing a moment to savor and digest the morsel I had just tossed his way. His round face flushed and glowed. His eyes glazed over and the ends of that knowing smile twitched spastically.

“You know how eager and how full of enthusiasm those young starlets are. I'll tell you, your call saved me from the kind of death every man dreams of.”

“Come on, Hawk, give me a break.”

“So, you scrambled me. What's up with the *Dorian Gray?*”

Allegro had to take a moment to catch his breath. I guess I had laid a good one on him.

“Well, the Coast Guard found your brother's boat adrift up the Santa Barbara Channel. They're towing it in now.”

“And you dragged me away from paradise just because—”

“Hawk, they said there's a body aboard: male, Caucasian, late thirties—early forties.”

“Stitch?”

“I don't know,” Allegro said gravely. “That's what I came down to find out. It wasn't my call.”

Allegro had been an orderly in the Army during the war and had followed Stitch as he island-hopped across the South Pacific. Stitch saved Allegro's leg from amputation after the six-by-six he was driving hit a mine. So, there was more than professional concern in his voice. I asked, “Who got the call?”

“Lieutenant Peletier.” Allegro pointed to a tall, sandy-haired man in a three-piece suit who was gesturing and directing police officers this way and that, even though there was nothing to do until the Coast Guard arrived with Stitch’s boat. “What a macaroon.”

“That pompous ass? Great. What’s he doing pulling down routine calls?”

“This could make a big splash in the daily rags, so I guess somebody upstairs wanted to put an officer with photogenic qualities on the case. You know, to make the Department look good. Too bad he hasn’t done a lick of legitimate police work in five years.” Allegro shrugged his shoulders and turned his back to Lt. Peletier. “I called you down cause I figured you’d want to know right away. Besides, it was only going to be a matter of time before the Department pulled your chain for a positive ID on whoever it is that’s on board.”

“Thanks Vince. I appreciate it.”

“Can I buy you a cup of joe?”

“Sure.” We walked back to Allegro’s car and, out of a thermos, he poured two mugs of official LAPD Detective Division coffee that was made barely tolerable for human consumption by the generous portion of scotch whiskey used to sweeten it. “Ah, Vince ...”

“It’s okay. I’m off duty.” Allegro grinned slyly. “Hey, you remember that guy who raped and murdered that school teacher?”

“Sure, the one I flew up to the state pen last week.”

“That’s the one. He didn’t even make it to the weekend before the boys on the cell block took care of him.”

“Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.”

“Took the words right out of my mouth.”

And so we waited for the Coast Guard to come. When they finally docked the *Dorian Gray*, Lt. Peletier whipped his charges into a frenzy of activity. Allegro and I had another cup of coffee while the lab guys did their chores, taking pictures, cataloging clues and dusting for prints. Then, before the coroner’s boys moved in, Allegro took me on board.

“Hold it just one damn minute, mister,” Lt. Peletier said as he grabbed my elbow. “Just who the hell do you think you are, trespassing on my crime scene?”

“Next of kin, for an ID of the body,” Allegro pitched in and ushered me out of the Lieutenant’s grasp.

While Lt. Peletier and Allegro tried to sort out their irreconcilable differences, I took a look at the body. It was Stitch all right, laying face down in a pool of blood. He had been shot in the head. I caught Allegro’s eye and nodded. He seemed to suddenly lose interest in his conversation with Lt. Peletier. I stepped back to the stern of the boat and blankly watched the Medical Examiner’s boys wrap up the body and take it away.

“Hey, I’m sorry, Hawk,” Allegro said sincerely when he came over. “Tell you what, why don’t you just hold tight here and I’ll talk to some of the Lieutenant’s boys and see what they’ve come up with so far.”

I nodded and sank into a deck chair facing out over the stern towards the marina channel. I could pick out Allegro’s voice behind me, but I didn’t listen. I always felt that Stitch had a head start on me in life and now I didn’t know if he had finished the race and won or if I would win by default. I watched all of the boats bob at their moorings and tried not to think. The Army Air Corps had trained me well for that. In the event of an emergency, the mind automatically reverts to a checklist and, without thinking, step-by-step clicks through it (*“drop seat—lower head—pull canopy emergency release—pull ball release bail out bottle—disconnect oxygen hose and headset—crouch and dive toward right wing tip*). Of course, in the event nothing makes the problem go away, you can always bail out and gently float to safety under the blossoming canopy of your parachute.

“Hawk, here’s how it looks to the boys,” Allegro said as he came around from behind me and

sat on the stern of the boat. He nervously rubbed his fat thigh. “No sign of a struggle. No real evidence of anyone else being aboard tonight. Nothing apparently missing—still had his wallet with a little cash in it and his watch and rings and stuff. Stitch’s own thirty-eight was found at his side. The boys already know what the autopsy and ballistic reports are going to say and nobody’s willing to bet against Stitch’s prints being on the gun. The boys are talking suicide real serious.”

I just shook my head and watched the boats bob in the marina.

“It’ll be an open and shut case. The Lieutenant won’t even get his hair mussed on this one.”

I just shook my head again in disbelief.

“Hawk, you’ve got to look at the evidence.”

The police were already bailing out and floating down to safety with their “suicide” parachute. I knew better and I wasn’t going to give up on my brother. “Evidence is a cop putting the cart before the horse.”

“Yeah, but it’s all we ever get to go on.”

“But I know better.”

“Yeah, so do I.” Allegro sighed heavily. “But Peletier will have this case wrapped up neat as can be in a week—ten days at the outside. And I just told you what the disposition will say.”

“Peletier and his disposition can rot in hell.”

Allegro nodded slowly. “But there’s not much I can do about it. It’s his case and he’s a lieutenant. I’m just a sergeant. My hands are tied, Hawk.”

“Mine aren’t.” I looked up into Allegro’s face and knew he would help me. “Get me the reports?”

Allegro looked down at the thigh that he had been nervously massaging. “I wouldn’t have this leg if it weren’t for Stitch.”

“Get me the reports?”

Allegro nodded.

“How long will the boat be off limits?”

“A week, maybe ten days—till the disposition.”

“Can you get me aboard tomorrow for a look-see?”

Allegro looked at Lt. Peletier and squinted his eyes as if he were sizing him up. “Day after. Let a bit of the dust settle. Besides, Peletier will be stuck in staff meetings all day Monday, so he won’t be around to bother us.”

“What about Stitch’s home and office? Will they be sealed?”

“I doubt it. They’ll give them the once over, but that’ll be about it.”

“Good. Thanks, Vince.” I stood up to go. “I’ve got to get the hell out of here.”

“Hawk, let the boys do their job, okay? Peletier’s a pain in the butt, but he’s got a job to do. I’ll get you the reports and I’ll get you back on the boat, but just don’t get in his way. It’ll just make waves which won’t help anybody. And keep me up on what you are doing—and what you need. Maybe I can help here and there.”

“Sure, Vince. I’ll see you.”

Allegro nodded, then turned away quickly. He was shaken. So was I. I walked slowly down the dock without looking back. *A lot of nice boats around here*, I thought to myself, *a lot of nice boats*. It was two in the morning and the rest of the marina was quiet. When I got to the end of the dock, a crowd of reporters and photographers had already gathered and had begun to push and jockey for position while they waited for Lt. Peletier to make a statement. News travels fast.

I slipped by unnoticed. Even in death, Stitch would set a front-page standard.

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Chapter 2

After I left the marina, I went right to the airport. I got there at about three in the morning. The Burbank Airport was always quiet late at night. On the rare occasions when the silence was broken, it was always the deep, throaty radials on a twin Beech or a decommissioned Gooney Bird making a dead-of-the-night freighter run—the sweetest song birds I've ever heard.

Most people pay about as much mind to an airport as they do to a busy intersection. To them it's just an anonymous slab of concrete to pass by quickly on their way to somewhere else, a purgatory for those attending to the business of coming and going. But that no man's land between earth and sky was where I lived, in a hangar on the far side of the field—the side that the rest of the world never sees, where flying is nuts and bolts, not coffee, tea and smiling United stewes. Upstairs in Hangar 10, owned by Sundance Aviation, were some rooms that were supposed to be for storage or offices or something, but with a little work they suited me just fine as a place to hang my hat. It smelled of oil and avgas from downstairs—and it was nothing compared to Stitch's digs in Bel Aire—but when you live and breathe airplanes, you can't ask for better.

I took a walk along three-three, one-five. Working my legs meant that I didn't have to work my mind and that was a relief. I had been up at four that morning to work some aerial shots for a new MGM movie, which was where I met Jeanette, the twenty-two year old, blonde star-to-be, so the walk and the unusually warm night air soon had me yawning. For a moment, I thought that I should go back to Jeanette at the motel. What I had told Allegro about her was true, but I really wasn't up to tangling with her. I needed comforting, not a challenge, so I walked back to Hangar 10, ducking and dodging the wings of Cessnas and Bonanzas tied down on the ramp. Upstairs, Elaine was sitting on my sofa, another surprise I was totally unprepared for.

"Hi, Hawk. I, ah, never did give back my key," she said sheepishly. "I...I heard..."

"About Stitch?"

She nodded. "There are no secrets in town. Not this town."

I nodded.

"You okay?"

I nodded.

"Well, I don't think that I am." She shook a cigarette out of a pack and lit it. Her hands trembled visibly.

"I'll get you a drink."

"I made some coffee. I didn't know—"

"Forget that stuff." I went to what passed for my kitchen and poured two glasses of gin over ice.

Stitch told me that Elaine had once been the closest Mother Nature had ever come to perfecting beauty and that I should believe him because, as *the* plastic surgeon in Hollywood, he should know.

In 1944, Elaine was the hottest find in town. She was a sure bet to put the likes of Bacall and Hayworth to shame, but she had only done a few supporting roles when some drunken leading man wrapped his sports car around a telephone pole. He walked away. She was rolled away. That was at the end of 1946 and I guess out of the good feelings and pitch-in-and-help attitudes left over from the war, Elaine became a *cause celebre* in the movie industry. Stitch knocked himself out working on her for three years at no charge, with stars, directors, producers and studio execs pitching in to help out with the hospital bills.

But Stitch could undo only so much of what the windshield and the dashboard had done.

Elaine had known from the start that her face would never again be fit enough for a camera close-up, so with a little help and guidance from the right people, she started editing film, and she was becoming one of the best in Hollywood. Maybe I was seeing something different, something inside, but when I met Elaine at Stitch's Christmas bash in 1948, I thought she was damn pretty. I still did.

I looked at the half-filled glasses. I poured again and filled them to the top with gin.

"Thanks." Elaine pushed her half-finished cigarette into an ashtray overflowing with Chesterfield butts—her brand—and took the glass I offered.

I sipped my gin and watched her take two quick gulps.

She cleared her throat a couple of times and then, without looking up at me, asked, "How—how did it happen?"

"The cops have some ace of a lieutenant on the case who is calling it suicide."

"No, not Stitch."

"Well, I guess it could look that way, if—"

"Looks can be deceiving," Elaine said angrily. "Believe me, I know. I do it every day."

I nodded my head and sipped my gin.

"Not Stitch. What in the world would he kill himself for? He had everything—friends, women, money. He had everything. A man who worked so hard to become a doctor? Who earned medals from General MacArthur for saving lives during the war? A man like Stitch? You know him. He's *your* brother. You *know* he wouldn't commit suicide." She caught herself becoming hysterical. She held back her sobs with a gulp of gin, then asked softly, "Do you think he might have really killed himself?"

"No." I shook my head. "And that's why I can't let that jackass lieutenant sweep this one neatly under the carpet."

"But how? What can you do? You're not a cop or even a private eye."

"I'm his brother. I can do something. I'll find a way."

Elaine smiled weakly. We sipped our gin. After a quiet moment or two, she began to speak softly, "Everybody knows how good Stitch was to me. How he—how he put my face back together. But nobody knows how he kept me from going to pieces emotionally. I was just a kid from Wisconsin who had come to Hollywood to be a star and when the dream turned into a nightmare, he was there. He held my hand and let me put my head on his shoulders and endured all my endless tears. He came to the hospital every day to see me. I know he had better things to do, but he would sit and talk to me for hours and hours. And in between operations, he had me over to his house for dinners and out on his boat for weekends, so that I wouldn't sit alone in my apartment and disfigure myself mentally."

I nodded and sipped my gin.

"After everything he did for me—" Elaine began sobbing.

"That's okay, Elly."

"We were never romantically involved, Hawk. Never. But we were like brother and sister, the way he took care of me and looked after me and talked with me. He was so happy when you and I met at his Christmas party and hit it off. And sort of sad when..." She took a big gulp of gin. "I don't understand how this kind of thing could have happened."

"Neither do I, sugar. Neither do I. But I'm going to find out."

I got the bottle of gin from the kitchen and filled our glasses again. We talked a lot about old times, until, as the sun came up, Elaine fell asleep in my arms. I lay awake, listening to the airport slowly come alive as the morning wore on.

During the war, if someone close bought the farm, you swore at him for screwing up and for ruining a perfectly good airplane. You got stinking, falling down drunk to forget, then you went up again to do your job.

But I could never just forget Stitch and go on—no matter how much gin I drank. I owed him too much to simply scratch him off a list in my brain. Sometimes we were a team. Sometimes we went head-to-head. Even though there were ten years between us, he was always there for me and, for good or for bad, Stitch had played a part in everything that had happened to me in my life—even when he was thousands of miles away.

I was tired, drunk and confused, but Elaine was right, I knew in my heart that Stitch did not put that gun to his head and pull the trigger—and I *should* know. After all, I'm his brother. Stitch didn't know how to be unhappy. All of his life, he had never once been sad, depressed or morose. It was simply not a part of his world. So, in his case, suicide was an absurdity.

Murder. It had to be murder and I had to find out who wanted Stitch dead. I had no idea how to do it, but I was determined to find a way.

My resolve relented finally and let me fall asleep to the sounds of internal combustion song birds taking off and landing.

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Chapter 3

I woke up at quarter to two that afternoon. Elaine had checked out. She left a a box of donuts and a note asking to call her later at Paramount. The donuts were already starting to dry out and get hard, so she must have left early—off into the dens of wolves to paste together their celluloid fantasies.

I decided while I showered and shaved that life has no proper sense of decorum or pace. Like a dogfight, it just comes at you suddenly, all at once from all different directions. There I was, trying to decide whether or not to call Elaine when I should have been thinking about Stitch. But the marina, the boat, the reporters, Allegro and Peletier all seemed like part of a bad dream I'd had the night before, especially after coming home to find Elaine in the apartment. I didn't know if this was a healing or a reopening of wounds. I didn't know if I would or *should* call her.

But I did have to call mom and pop, and that was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. I could only hope that the police had already 'notified next of kin' so that I wouldn't be the bearer of bad news. It was going to be hard on them, more so than if it had been Sue or Liz or me—eldest son, apple of their eye and all that. I refused to have a phone in the apartment so that people couldn't bother me at their convenience. I took all my calls downstairs at Sundance Aviation. As I walked through the hangar, Sparks had his head stuck inside an engine cowling, alternately whistling and cursing—as usual.

"Hey, Hawk, what the hell gives?" Rosa, the receptionist, lit up when she first caught sight of me. She tossed a stack of telephone messages two inches thick my way. "How come you're more popular than the Pope all of a sudden?"

I shuffled through the messages quickly. Most were from Stitch's friends. Some names I knew. Some I recognized from marquees, but most were mysteries. Stitch had a close network of friends that he tended to as carefully as a spider might a web. It was a source of patients for his practice and of females for his pleasure. A few reporters had called. The guy from *The Times* had called every hour on the hour since nine that morning. Allegro had called and so had Peletier. Elaine had left another message to call which implied that she really meant it. Hope Miller, the nurse in Stitch's office, called twice. She said it was urgent.

"Well, Rosa," I said, "my brother died last night."

"Oh yeah? I didn't know, 'cause I only read the trades." Rosa clicked her tongue at me. "Ain't he the doctor who did nose jobs and face lifts on actors and actresses?"

I nodded.

"Too bad. I never met him. I wish I had."

It was too bad, because it was one less contact for her in Hollywood. Rosa was a bitch, but she was also a stunning specimen of Italian sensuality. She knew it, too. It was too bad that she thought it was enough. "Can I use Al's phone? I got to call back home to the folks."

"Suit yourself. He ain't around."

I grabbed a cup of coffee and went into Al McGuire's office. I sat down at his desk and stared at the phone, not wanting to make the call that I had to make.

I lit up a smoke and looked at all the pictures hanging on the wall. Al was a camera nut, always had been. There were a lot of shots of B-17s, which he flew, on the ground, taking off and in formation. There were pictures of the crews that flew the Fortresses, as well as shots of Germany from twenty-three thousand feet, complete with rising columns of black smoke. I was even there on the wall, standing next to *White Hawk*, sticking my fist through a hole in the horizontal stabilizer made by cannon fire courtesy of a Luftwaffe pilot that I eventually sent spinning to his death.

I don't have any idea of how a fighter jock and a bomber driver—two unmistakably distinct species, each with a fierce, inbred hatred of the other—ever became best friends. It just sort of happened. Al McGuire had been the most popular man in the Eighth Air Force. During his entire tour, his B-17, *Angel Eyes*, suffered not one bullet hole nor a single scratch from flak, even when planes were going down all around him over Schweinfurt. Legend had it that not one of his four engines ever leaked a drop of oil and not one of his tires lost even an ounce of air pressure. Legend also had it that Al volunteered to extend his tour, but General Doolittle nixed it because of the potential negative impact on morale if he did get shot down. Al assured me in private that he was certainly not stupid enough to volunteer to fly more missions, but also that he wasn't going to fight good press when he got it. He claimed that I was his good luck charm. All I ever did was chase lassies and ales with him when we were off duty and rack up eleven-point-seven-five kills flying cover for the bomber streams in and out of Germany. Actually, I was just one of eight hundred fighter pilots in the air, but Al didn't see it that way. After he went back to the states, I saw *Angel Eyes* go down in flames, taking the whole crew with her.

Al's luck followed him into business. After the war, he started Sundance Aviation with six hundred dollars and now it was worth millions. He owned enough airplanes to be an airline, but stuck with freight and celebrity charters. He was king of the airport and had begun branching out into real estate and who knows what all else. He was always cooking up some new deal. But through it all, Al stayed the same easy-going, smiling, squinty-eyed, suntanned Californian he had been when I first met him in England.

When I came out to LA in forty-six and decided to stay, Al fixed me up right away in Hangar 10. I didn't work for Sundance Aviation, but I did anything and everything to help Al out, from pumping gas if the line boys were extra busy to flying movie stars up to Reno on the *Honeymoon Express* or down to Tijuana on the *Coat Hanger Special* to fix a problem that got a bit out of control. Al trusted me and knew I could keep my mouth shut. We still chased women and beers on occasion. Al would always ask me, "When are you going to grow up?" I'd always answer, "What for?" After all, I was flying good hours and I was happy. What more did I need?

I put out my third cigarette and looked at the phone again. The stack of phone messages sat next to my coffee mug with Elaine's on top. I started to dial Paramount, but hung up, deciding to think that one over some more. I tried Allegro, but he wasn't at his desk. I tried Hope Miller and got through. She was confused and distraught. Distraught over the news of Stitch's death—she was devoted to him. Confused, because patients were calling her at home, trying to get their records out of Stitch's files. Vanity's ore runs a wide and deep vein through Hollywood. Some of the calls were hostile and even threatening. On top of that, the police wanted to search the office first thing Monday morning. I asked Hope to meet me for dinner, after which we could go over to the office to make sure everything was in order. I wanted to stay one step ahead of the police if I could. I also wanted to know exactly who it was making threats.

After talking to Hope, I broke down and called Chicago. The police hadn't called mom and pop to notify them—cheap bastards—so it was up to me. It was the worst twenty minutes of my life. They were heart-broken. I felt like a tail gunner whose Fort loses a wing and starts falling instead of flying: helpless, totally helpless.

I hung up just as Al came in.

"Mom and pop," I said, shrugging my shoulders. Al knew already. He was like my brother. He knew about everybody and everything that happened in town. "Took it pretty hard."

"I'm sorry, Hawk. Tough break." Al shook his head slowly. At times the war got to be one tough break after another. There was nothing else to be said.

"I'll get out of your way." I stood up to go.

"You want me to take you off the schedule for tonight?" Al asked.

I had forgotten that I was supposed to make the bank check run up to Frisco and back for Tony, one of the regular freighter pilots. I looked at my stack of telephone messages and shook my head. "Nah, I could use the peace and quiet. I'll be here."

"Anything you need, Hawk. Just name it."

"Thanks." I saluted the luckiest man to ever lift-off from the face of the earth and went out.

"Oh, Hawk..." Rosa called out. "These men are here to see you."

"Mr. Byrd?" asked one of Peletier's goons. I recognized him from the night before at the boat. With a flick of the wrist, he whipped his badge out and back like a Chinese party favor. "You the brother of Dr. Alister Dillon Byrd of Bel Aire?"

I nodded.

"We're sorry to inform you that—"

"Spare me. I was there last night at the marina." The two detectives held an impromptu puzzled-looks contest. It was a draw.

"Well, ah, Lieutenant Peletier wanted you to come down to the Coroner's office for a positive ID of the body."

"I did that last night on the boat," I said impatiently. I wished I had gotten a hold of Allegro. He'd have filled me in on what was up.

"But the Lieutenant said that we had to bring you in."

LA's finest at work. I went. The ride downtown was uneventful. I sat in the back of the unmarked police car and ignored the two detectives as they griped about Lieutenant Peletier to each other in low voices.

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I was glad I had gone. I got to see Stitch's body before they did the autopsy. There was a lot I hadn't seen last night. His right temple was one huge bruise with a deep hole in the center. Inside the hole was a dark clot of blood. The muzzle blast had scorched the side of his head around the entry wound and the bullet had taken off half of his face where it came out the other side, probably through his left eye. He was so stiff and what was left of his face was so pale. I was sad at seeing him. But I also noticed that in his ears and on his neck were tiny, cut hairs. Also, his normally heavy beard had been closely shaven. I pretended to hold his hand and saw his nails were freshly manicured. I would double check with Morris at the Beverly Hills Hotel to see if he had been in on Saturday, but why would anyone go to so much trouble to make themselves look pretty and then blow their brains out? If Stitch was going to kill himself with a gun—instead of neatly, with a drug overdose—he would have shot himself through the heart, not the face. Stitch was a doctor. He knew where the heart was and that it was a sure way to die. Besides, my brother was a plastic surgeon, a handsome and somewhat vain one at that.

There were papers to sign. I got a receipt for Stitch's personal effects and was ushered into a small conference room with a table and chairs. I smoked a cigarette. As I crushed out the butt, Lieutenant Peletier came in.

"Byrd, A. Gavin? Right?" Peletier tried to ask in the most cordial voice he could muster. "What's the 'A' for?"

"Angus."

"That's a hell of a name." Peletier smiled. "Small wonder you go by Gavin."

"More papers to sign, Lieutenant?" I asked coldly.

Peletier stopped smiling. He shook his head. "My sympathies for your loss."

He hadn't brought me downtown because he was all broken up about my brother.

“Naturally, in the event of an unnatural death, the Police Department looks into the circumstances of that death to ensure there was no foul play, so to speak.” Peletier shuffled through some papers in a manila file folder. “I do have a quick question or two for you that would help us in this matter. Strictly routine.”

“Such as?”

“Do you have any idea who your brother might have been with last night? Before his death?”

I shook my head slowly.

“Or where he might have gone?”

“He goes his own way. He’s a big boy.”

“He was.”

“Yeah. Right.”

“When was the last time you saw him alive?”

“Wednesday night—early Thursday morning. He had wanted to buzz up to Las Vegas to blow off some steam and—”

“What were you doing last night between, say, dinner time and two in the morning?”

I took a moment to size Peletier up. He was a dandy, always adjusting the knot in his tie or the cufflinks in his shirt or the buttons on his vest. He was playing cat and mouse with these questions. But to what end? Were the police wondering about Stitch’s haircut and shave, too? Or was he just trying to pacify me by convincing me that they were thoroughly checking all the possibilities out before they used the rubber stamp marked *Suicide*? I got pretty good at cat and mouse games during the war. And there, we played for keeps. “Do you think there might have been *foul play* in connection with my brother’s death?”

“Just routine questions.”

“Sounds like I might even be a suspect.”

“We just need this information for the reports. We must be thorough. Now, about last night?”

“Went for a plane ride over the desert, got some dinner and hit the sack.”

“Were you alone?”

I smiled and shook my head.

“I see. Who was she?”

“Now, Lieutenant, really. There are reputations at stake.”

“All night?”

“Until Sergeant Allegro called.”

“Allegro?” Peletier looked at me closely and seemed to suddenly remember me from last night. He frowned and shuffled through his file folder. I had upset the orderly bureaucratic routine of his world. “Right. Right. Allegro. Mr. Byrd, you actually live out at the Burbank Airport, in a hangar. Is that correct?”

I nodded slowly without taking my eyes off of him.

“That’s odd...hmmm...” Peletier rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

After a calculated pause, I asked, “What’s odd?”

“Living at the airport like that.”

“I like airplanes.”

“Yes. Of course. Do you have to pay rent to live there?”

“No, but I—”

“And I also understand, from what it says here, that you don’t really have a regular job or a steady source of income,” Peletier said as if I were infected with some dread disease.

“I fly odd jobs for Sundance Aviation and sometimes get studio work for movies. I got a lot of work on *Twelve O’Clock High* at Twentieth Century Fox—”

“Yes. I see. And your brother, he lived in Bel Aire. He was quite well off, wasn’t he?”

“What are you driving at?”

“Driving at? Nothing, I suppose, except for the marked disparity between your life style and that of your brother.”

“What of it?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Byrd. I don’t know.”

“Are you suggesting that I—”

“I am suggesting nothing. These are strictly routine questions.” Peletier studied the contents of his manila folder. “Did you know your brother owned a pistol and kept it on board his yacht?”

“Yes.”

“What did your brother need a pistol for? Did he have any reason to need some kind of protection? Did he fear for his life at all?”

“All things considered, maybe he should have feared for his life.”

“Mr. Byrd...”

“We used it when we fished. Sometimes if we caught a shark, we’d use the pistol to blow its brains out.”

“*To blow its*, ahem—yes, I see. And you yourself have used this pistol.”

“Lots of times,” I answered

“Which would explain your latent prints on the pistol that killed your brother.”

Now we were getting somewhere.

“Lieutenant, am I going to be arrested?”

“Good heavens, no. Like I told you, these are routine questions.” Peletier kept falling back on that lame excuse and I was getting fed up. “My report will have to explain all of the lab findings satisfactorily, so I am afraid that I am compelled to ask you these questions.”

“I thought my brother committed suicide.”

“Probable. Yes, probably suicide.”

“Is that what your report will say?”

“Probably.”

“But—”

“Strictly routine,” Peletier said as if to reassure me. He slapped his folder shut. “That will be all. You may go now.”

“Hey, hold on Lieutenant...” But Peletier was already out the door and barking at the two detectives who had brought me downtown. I saw Allegro hanging around outside the door to the room. I went over to him. “Hey, Vince, what the—”

“Hawk, what are you doing down here?” he hissed. “I thought I told you to stay out of Peletier’s way.”

“He dragged me in to ask me a bunch of fool questions about where I was, what I was doing and who I was doing it with. I don’t have to answer his questions. What am I, a suspect or something?”

“Listen, not now, not here.” Allegro shuffled me away from Peletier and the two detectives. “On the boat. How about tomorrow morning some time?”

“Better make it in the afternoon. About two. I’ve got a run to do tonight. Hey, what gives, Vince?”

“Tomorrow,” Allegro whispered mysteriously.

Just then, the two detectives came over to take me back to Burbank. They griped the whole way about having to act like taxi drivers instead of cops.

~::~

I wandered into Hangar 10. Sparks was whistling as he sifted through the parts of a dismantled Continental engine, so I stopped off to chat. He was the mechanic at Sundance Aviation. He fixed the planes and I flew them. He had put the big Chevy engine into my MG, miraculously transforming it from a gutless wonder into a real driving machine. A lot of people found Sparks a bit queer, but I put my life in his hands without question every day. I'm sure that the Bataan Death March and the years as a Japanese prisoner of war took their toll. He survived by taking things apart and putting them back together over and over and over again. In a town filled with high-powered *alpha hotels*, I found Sparks refreshing and down-to-earth. He was easy to talk to.

"Heard 'bout your brother," Sparks said, tossing a worn gasket into a scrap heap. "In all the papers."

"Oh yeah?"

Sparks pointed to a greasy *LA Times* on his work bench. I hadn't seen a paper yet. Sure enough, there was a front page portrait of Stitch and a shot of the *Dorian Gray*, complete with my vague, unfocused image slouching in the deck chair by the stern. I began skimming the article.

"Bad business."

"Huh?" I said, still reading.

"Detonation. Insides of these cylinders are scored but good. God damn people running low grade fuel through these engines ought to be shot in the—" Sparks brought himself up short. He looked at me directly for the first time. "Sorry."

"No problem."

"Bad business. 'Bout your brother. Sorry to hear it."

"Thanks Sparks."

"It's a pisser, God damn it."

"How's that?"

"Your brother. Asked me to give his twin in-board Mercs the once over. 'Fore he went to Mexico."

"When?"

"T'other day." Sparks rolled his eyes up in thought. "Thursday. 'Fore next week, he said."

"Hmmm." I folded up the paper.

"Hawk, you all 'lone now?"

"I got family in Chicago. Mom and pop, a couple of sisters and their husbands and kids and all."

"Family's good."

I watched him pick up a spark plug.

"Chicago's pretty far, though," Sparks said, squinting to check the gap.

"Yeah, sometimes too far. Others, not far enough."

"Being 'lone ain't good. Ain't good a'tall for a man."

"Yeah, but it's quiet and kind of peaceful like."

Sparks tossed the plug back down on the bench with the others and looked me in the eye.

"Why'd he do it?"

"Got no idea."

"It's a pisser, God damn it."

I nodded my head. I noticed Sparks pick up a nut and bolt. He started nervously screwing them together and apart over and over and over.

"Ever get a notion to flip off the master, Hawk?"

"What? Kill myself?"

Sparks nodded grimly.

"No. Never. How about you?"

“God damn it, it’s a pisser. Just once. Got home and learned the woman had re-married.”

I nodded slowly.

“But I was just disorganized. Man’s got to be organized. Bought me a model airplane kit and worked it. Got to be organized to build something. Got to be organized to take something apart and put it right again. If I learned one thing from them Japs, that’s it. Got to stay organized.”

“Right.”

“Man who looks after his engines ‘fore a trip to Mexico ain’t disorganized.”

“I think you’ve got something there.”

“It’s a pisser, God damn it,” he repeated.

I nodded.

“You flying tonight?”

“Yeah, to Frisco, Sacramento and back.”

“Take Seven Sugar Papa. Got her running true.”

“Right. Hey, can I have this paper?”

“Help yourself. Busy night, Saturday night was. Your brother and ‘bout eight other guys.”

“Thanks Sparks.”

He saluted me and went back to the disassembled aircraft engine, whistling the tune they had whistled on the Death March across Bataan.

I headed upstairs. I had lied to Sparks. There had been one time. I decided to call Elaine. Maybe she would ride with me up to Frisco, just like the old days. I’d like that.

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Chapter 4

"Hey buddy, who the hell are you?" I asked, instinctively grabbing the baseball bat leaning against the door jamb just inside my apartment. I held it low, but ready.

"Oh, I do apologize for being here like this without an appointment, but the lovely, young lady downstairs told me it would be all right if I waited up here," the tall, thin man said quickly as he stood up. He was about my age or older—maybe thirty—with smooth pale skin and delicate features. He nervously ran his palms back over the slicked back hair on each side of his head and brushed his thin, Errol Flynn-type mustache with his fingertips.

"Rosa?" I growled.

"Yes. Yes, lovely young lady."

He was dapperly dressed in a tailored suit and spoke politely, but his small, dark eyes darted all over the room like a pair of flies at the city dump. I held on to the baseball bat even though I really didn't want to use it since it was a souvenir from the 1945 World Series when Chicago lost in seven games to Detroit. Stitch had given it to me. The Cubs had made him honorary team doctor when he got back from the South Pacific. "Yeah, and what do you want?"

"I *have* been trying to get in touch with you, Mr. Byrd. I think I must have called about twenty times. I am Graves, from *The Times*. Did you not get my messages?"

"Yeah, yours and about a thousand or so others."

"Yes, of course. I see." He nodded his head and stroked his jaw with long slender fingers.

I tossed my hat on the sofa and went to get a drink, dragging the bat into the kitchen with me, just in case he hadn't already seen it.

"I am certain—oh, well, my—" Graves took a step towards me, but stopped in his tracks when he saw my Louisville Slugger. He followed with hesitant, shuffling steps, making sure to keep back at a safe distance. "I am certain that this is, indeed, a most trying time for you with your family loss and the myriad details you undoubtedly must attend to, but I thought I might have just a moment of your time to discuss with you your brother and his untimely death."

"What for?" I asked, pouring a shot of gin. I took a drink and looked at Graves down the length of the glass.

"Mr. Byrd, I am not going to try to kid you. It is my job to write stories that will sell newspapers. Your brother was quite well known about town. He moved in and about those rarefied social strata that people are inexhaustibly curious about. His death is news and—"

"I don't know anything about any of those *rarefied* social strata—"

"But his death—"

"Maybe you should talk to Lieutenant Peletier about that. I understand it's his case."

Graves sighed audibly. "Yes, well, I have, in fact, spoken with that representative of our city's finest, but I must admit, frankly, that Lieutenant Peletier's information smacks somewhat of the flavor of canned green beans."

I had to smile. Peletier did have the personality of bland, soggy vegetables, all right, though I was thinking more along the lines of lima beans. "How so?"

"Mr. Byrd, do you really think that your brother simply sailed out into the middle of the Pacific Ocean and committed suicide?"

I took another gulp of gin, staring at Graves intently. "I don't know what to think." So I lied. But I didn't know this guy from Goering.

"Why? Why would he do it?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Exactly.” Graves took a deep breath. “Did you know that there was freshly bought live bait aboard your brother’s boat the night they found it?”

“So? He liked to fish.”

“Perhaps. But what do you need bait for if you are going to blow your brains out? His fishing gear was setting out on deck, but unused.”

“Hmmm. I see.” I set aside my baseball bat. “You want a drink?”

Graves looked at his watch. “Yes, please.” He took a handkerchief from his suit pocket and wiped gingerly in a circle around his face.

I poured a second tumbler of gin and handed it to him. “What else?”

“Else?”

“That can’t be it.”

“Well, no.” Graves daintily sipped his gin, then cleared his throat. “Your brother’s boat had only twenty minutes of fuel on board when it was found, even though he had called in to have the tanks filled that afternoon.”

“Maybe he just cruised around in circles until—”

“I checked with the Coast Guard: the throttles were closed and the ignition was off when they found the boat. At eight forty-five your brother spoke to the staff nurses at Mercy Hospital in regards to the condition of a Mrs. Fisher, upon whom he had operated the day before. A check of ship-to-shore radio-telephone logs show no record of a call from your brother’s boat, so he had not left by then. The Coast Guard found the boat at eleven o-five pm Saturday evening, which leaves at most two hours, twenty minutes to exhaust over ten hours of fuel.”

“Gas just can’t disappear.”

“Yes. *Quite*. But it can be siphoned. Perhaps into another boat for a getaway. It would be an interesting alibi, let us say, if someone rendezvoused with your brother’s boat, murdered him, used your brother’s gas for a getaway, then claimed that he could not possibly have been even in the vicinity of the scene of the crime because it would have been far beyond the range of his boat, upon which he was sailing at the time.”

I took a gulp of gin.

“It *is* possible.”

“But who?”

“That is what we must find out. It appears certain that the police have no intention of nor interest in doing so.”

“Hmmm. You’ve done some homework.”

Graves took another small sip of gin. “At any rate, it certainly seems something other than *routine*.”

“Peletier’s favorite word.”

“*Exactly*. The man was born with it upon his lips. At any rate, those are facts. I am certain that there will be more such facts to come to light. But facts, in and of themselves, are cold impersonal entities—like ice cubes.” Graves looked at his glass of gin. “Facts are no more the flavor nor substance nor spirit of the story as ice cubes are the drink we crave. One needs to know more than mere facts.”

It was fancy talk, but then again, Graves was a writer. “What do you want from me?”

“Talk to me. Tell me about your brother, about his friends, his life. Give me something to pour into my glass over the facts—to swirl around and taste.”

“I don’t think what I know will help. Like I said, I don’t know—”

“One can never predict what will be important and useful. One can never tell what might click and connect with the story. Much may, indeed, be irrelevant, but one name or one trait or one long standing habit may also be the thread that when pulled will unravel it all.” Graves sipped his gin.

“Can it hurt to talk to me?”

I thought for a moment. He was too polite, too dapper, too something—I couldn’t put my finger on it. But to have a *Times* reporter working on the case from his end might help to keep some pressure on Peletier and the Department. If I could string Graves along, I might also be able to play his information off the news that Allegro would feed me from the inside. I’d be able to keep everybody honest.

“Mr. Byrd, I strongly suspect that your brother did not commit suicide. If you do not help me, though, I will have nothing more than the tidbits and table scraps Lieutenant Peletier decides to capriciously toss my way. That being the case, I cannot foresee that we will ever learn the truth of the circumstances surrounding Dr. Byrd’s demise.”

We? The truth? Graves was laying it on thick. So could I. “I’d like to know—I’d like to help.”

“Then talk to me,” he prodded.

“Well, okay, I will, but on one condition: that you tell me what you find out. If things are as you say, then I want to know about everything.”

“Of course.” Graves smiled smugly and pulled a notebook out of his suit jacket.

“We can start tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Graves frowned.

“Look, I’ve had a long, bad day—at the marina, at the police station and at the morgue.”

“But often the fresher events and incidents are in one’s mind, the more detail that can be recalled.”

“I also have to get some shut-eye. I’ve got to fly a line tonight, starting at midnight.”

“Oh, you are a pilot here?”

“Yeah, sometimes.”

“That’s very interesting. Very well, tomorrow then. We cannot have you jeopardizing the flight from fatigue. Tomorrow for sure?”

“Yeah. In the afternoon.”

“For lunch?”

“Let’s say dinner.” I intended to check Graves’ information with Allegro before I talked. In the mean time, I would stay one step ahead of everybody by taking a look around Stitch’s office.

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I can’t deal with people wallowing in their grief. I thought with the rest of the family and all the relations being in Chicago, I’d be spared the agony of enduring the flood of tears that would never bring Stitch back to life. But Hope Miller was taking it harder than I imagined even my mom and sisters were. She had been a pleasant, cheerful fixture of Stitch’s practice ever since he moved to LA and opened his doors in 1937.

Hope Miller was maybe Stitch’s age and, though she was sort of beginning to show it just around the edges—a short, shallow wrinkle or a gray hair here or there—I had always thought she was trim and attractive. Now she suddenly seemed frail and even brittle. Her voice was burdened by sobs. Her gestures were slow and weary as if life had broken her down and enslaved her spirit.

Needless to say, dinner was a strained affair. It didn’t help to be stuck sitting in one place. I was glad to finally be on the move, out of the restaurant and in the car on our way to Stitch’s office. My MG was a pure joy to drive ever since Sparks had fixed her up. She could move and I loved to move her, especially on tight canyon roads. I don’t know if Hope liked my driving, but the ride over to Stitch’s office kept her quiet. I suspected she didn’t.

As Hope dug through her purse for the keys, I stood behind her and looked up and down the

hall. It was dim and unusually quiet compared to office hours when the building next to Mercy Hospital was busy with the comings and goings of patients. She opened the door. A shadow caught my eye, but it was too late. He came crashing out of Stitch's office like a fullback charging out of the backfield to smash through the line. Hope and I went tumbling. The man in the baggy trench coat and floppy hat bolted down the hall towards the elevators.

I jumped up and chased after him. As I rounded the corner at the end of the hall, something slammed into my gut. Air gushed out of my lungs and I doubled over. I saw the soft leather briefcase rushing up into my face. I fell backwards, gasping for breath. The man ran down the stairs.

After a couple-three breaths, I was up on my feet and heading down the stairs, a bit slowly at first but quickly getting back my wind and the strength in my knees. An alarm was going off in the lobby. The man had gone out through a fire exit. I followed him out into the alley behind the building. He was sprinting away with an awkward gait, the briefcase under his arm. I started after him. He looked back and saw me gaining easily. He stopped, pulled out a small pistol, closed his eyes and began firing wildly.

I had been shot at plenty of times and with much bigger artillery than a twenty-two or thirty caliber pistol. But wrapped in the tornado-like cocoon of a four hundred mile-an-hour slip stream with the whine of the German radar in my headsets and a twelve cylinder Rolls Royce engine screaming at military power and mercilessly shaking every rivet and bolt in the plane, it was impossible to be startled by the sound of gun play. I rarely felt any immediacy of the personal danger that was everywhere around me in a dogfight. It was sort of funny, then, that the report of that little pistol reverberating in the alley and the brick and concrete dust kicked up by bullets ricocheting off the buildings scared the hell right out of me. I dove behind a trash bin with an enhanced respect for the infantry.

A Cadillac pulled up at the end of the alley and the door flew open. Still pulling the trigger even after running out of bullets, the man jumped in. The car sped off, and I was left alone in the alley trying to catch my breath.

I don't know how long I had been gone, but when I got back upstairs, Hope was still sitting on the floor in the hall hyperventilating. I helped her inside onto the couch in the waiting room. I got the bottle of scotch Stitch kept in his desk and a specimen cup from the lab. Hope downed the shot I poured her and held out the cup for more. I poured another.

"Hell of a how-do-you-do. And he left without leaving a number we could reach him at." I feebly tried to joke and smile to calm and reassure her.

"I heard shots," she said in a shaky voice.

"It was nothing. You okay?"

She nodded as she sipped the second shot of scotch. "You're bleeding."

Adrenalin works great for doping pain, but as soon as she said something about it, the two inch gash across my cheek where the catch on the briefcase caught me began to sting. My stomach also began to ache a bit. I took a shot of scotch from the bottle and let Hope clean and dress the cut. Then, with a touch of nervous apprehension, we carefully and quietly searched the examination rooms of Stitch's suite.

"Look!" Hope whispered with a gasp.

"What?" It was ridiculous, but I whispered, too. She pointed to the narcotics cabinet. Its glass door had been smashed and its contents spilled onto the floor.

"I'll bet they read about Dr. Byrd in the paper and thought they could get away with our narcotics," Hope whispered.

I was about to agree when I noticed that a file cabinet drawer was ajar. I pulled the drawer open. Inside, two files were pulled up and were out of line with the rest: Pearson and Peters.

"I don't know if you should be looking through the doctor's files."

“Is this all the information Stitch has on his patients?” I asked.

“This is just medical information. The accountant would have billing and payment records.”

“You think you could call him and get me a complete list of patients?”

“That might be privileged information that—”

“I’m not really interested in everyone Stitch ever gave a nose job to. Besides, I know about most of the famous ones anyway. But I think our visitor might have been interested in something other than narcotics.” I pointed to the two files. “I’ll bet there’s a file missing out of here and I’ll bet that’s what our visitor had in his briefcase. Not dope.”

“Maybe we should call the police.”

“They’ll find out tomorrow morning and that’ll be soon enough. Besides, I doubt they’ll do anything about this but write another report anyway. I want to know about that missing file, though.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Hope agreed demurely.

“First thing tomorrow?”

She nodded, then followed me reluctantly into Stitch’s office.

“What’s this for?” I pointed to the Dictaphone on Stitch’s desk.

“Dr. Byrd dictated all of his notes, then we sent them upstairs to a medical transcriber to be typed up for filing. He usually came in late at night to dictate the day’s exams and procedures in peace and quiet.”

“Do you know how to work it? Can you play back what’s on it?”

“Certainly, but like I said, it’s only his notes.”

“Humor me, okay?” Hope turned it on and played the tape already in the machine. It was about a patient named Fisher, who Graves said Stitch operated on Friday. That was one for Graves. Stitch’s voice droned on and on in long strings of Latin names and medical terms that were interrupted only occasionally by English phrases I recognized and understood.

I let the machine play on anyway as I searched Stitch’s office and through his desk. With Hope’s help, I reconstructed his schedule of appointments for the past few weeks. It was pretty much as it always was: office hours Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays; golf Thursdays; surgeries Friday and Saturday mornings. The only break in the routine was last week. He had taken Wednesday off and Tuesday afternoon we flew up to Vegas together. We did that every six weeks or so to blow off some steam. Stitch loved to gamble and always got the best seats in the house for the shows. We got back early Thursday morning, in time to make his golf date with R.C., L.M. and J.W.—probably Jack Warner and some studio cronies.

I never could figure out how he did it. Stitch would push himself to the limit—stay out all night and still be ready to go in the morning after only a couple hours sleep. I think the only shut-eye he got in Vegas was on the short ride back, but he was ready to hit the links as soon as we landed. The only other events on the calendar were dinner dates Thursday with E.C. and Friday with A.R., but A.R. had been crossed out. Saturday and Sunday were open. The next week was normal until Saturday the ninth. That date through the following Sunday was filled with a line and big letters spelling out Mexico. I scanned through all the patient names, but there were none even close to Pearson or Peters.

A phone rang. Hope almost jumped out of her stockings. I was taken by surprise, too, but quickly realized it came from the Dictaphone. Stitch forgot to turn off the machine when he answered and we could make out his end of the conversation. His voice was curt and icy, yet with a certain urgency unnatural for him.

“I told you never to call me here...yes, I heard you...no...no, we have nothing whatsoever to discuss in regards to—no, not now. Not in the future, so...do not use that tone of voice with me. It will get you nowhere. Besides, you cannot order me to do anything...I see...yes...uh-huh...I did.

Yes, I did ...If that is the way you feel about things...certainly...yes, I will, but only...yes...very well, then. If you insist, but do not call me here again...No. I will be in touch with you tomorrow. Will you be at the ranch?...No? In town, then...Yes...yes...I will...good-bye.”

“Who was that?” I asked myself out loud.

“I don’t know,” whispered Hope.

“Do you think it was one of his lady friends?”

Hope just shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“When was this tape made?”

“He was going over the procedure for Mrs. Fisher. Her surgery was scheduled for Friday morning, so he would have dictated the notes Friday night—the day before he died.”

~::~

Elaine had been quiet and aloof. She hung back in a deep nighttime shadow cut out of the apron lights by the tail of another idle plane as I pre-flighted. Seven Sugar Papa was a twin Beech that had been stripped down for cargo and probably had more hours on it than I cared to know about. But I liked her. She was a good, solid airplane that seemed to fit me like a worn, but comfortable pair of walking shoes.

Elaine sat in the copilot’s seat looking out the window at nothing in particular, just the night I suppose, as I ran the throttles up to check the magnetos and cycle the props. Everything was in the green. Check: controls, instruments, fuel, flaps, trim, radios. We were ready to go. I rolled out onto runway one-five and lined up on the centerline. She turned to look at me.

“All set?” I asked.

Elaine nodded, so I slowly opened the throttles. The manifold pressure and engine needles all jumped to life and we were wrapped in the embrace of acceleration from the pair of roaring Pratt-Whitneys—Sparks had really made them sing. The airspeed came alive and shortly thereafter the tail was up and flying. As soon as we came off the deck, I cleaned up the flaps and gear and cranked Seven Sugar Papa over on her right side, filling Elaine’s window with the city lights directly below. I rolled out on a two-four-zero, heading towards the ocean, and climbed up to twenty-five hundred feet. It was a clear night with a full moon. We’d follow the coast up to San Francisco.

I looked at Elaine and had to smile. Even in the soft glow of the panel lights, I could see from the expression on her face, it had been a while since she had been up flying, really flying.

“So, what is it we’re hauling tonight?” she asked, raising her voice to be heard over the roar of the engines.

“About twenty million dollars or so,” I said nonchalantly as I leaned the mixture and played with the props to get them in synch.

“Really? *Twenty million dollars?*” She looked behind her at the big, canvas sacks that filled the back of the plane.

I nodded. “Too bad its all in checks. Otherwise we could just keep on going, flying till we got to tomorrowland to live happily ever after.”

“Checks?”

“Yeah. Cancelled checks at that. Banks don’t like to sit on them. Greedy bastards want their cash, so they fly them back and forth to trade all night long while the rest of the world sleeps.”

“Oh.” Elaine sounded disappointed.

“Even if we can’t spend it, we’d still be one hell of an expensive hole in the ground if we *stall-spin-crash-burn-and-die.*” I smiled at Elaine.

“At least it’s better than corpses,” Elaine pouted.

I laughed. “You mean that time we went to Phoenix? I thought you were going to bail out without a chute before we got there.”

“Well, how would you like it if a dead person just sat right up and reached out to try to grab you.”

“Go on. Stitch said it was just all the gasses trapped inside the body expanding when we got up to altitude where the pressure was lower.”

The mention of Stitch’s name and the talk of corpses dried the smiles from our faces. The cockpit was quiet for miles and miles with nothing but ocean waters passing below us. Elaine watched the lights of Santa Barbara approaching at one o’clock.

“That’s a pretty nasty cut on your cheek.” Elaine reached out to touch it, but I backed away. It was still pretty sore. “Who was she?”

“Always jumping to conclusions.”

“Or did you cut yourself shaving?”

I just had to smile and shake my head. Some things never change.

“Hawk, why did you ask me to come along tonight?”

“I thought it’d be...nice.” I looked at Elaine for a moment, then asked, “Why did you come along?”

She shrugged her shoulders and silently watched Santa Barbara pass off our right wing, leaving only darkness beyond. The whole world and everything in it seemed to stop. We were suspended motionless over a dark glassy ocean at twenty-five hundred feet.

“You want to fly?” I asked.

“Oh, Hawk, no. It’s been such a long time,” she said, but I could see a bit of a smile flash across her lips and dance in her eyes.

“Go ahead. Take it.” I let go of the yoke and Elaine grabbed the one in front of her. When I felt her feet on the rudders, I put mine flat on the floor. “No, no, no. One hand. fly with one hand. Now, just hold this heading, ah, looks like two-nine-zero or so and keep us at about twenty-five hundred feet.”

“I don’t know if I remember it all.” She rocked the wings jerkily and pitched up and down, trying to chase the altimeter and vertical velocity indicator. “You better—”

“It’ll all come back. Just relax. Give it time. And remember, pressure, smooth even pressure on the controls. No yanking.” It wasn’t long before Elaine relaxed and the feel of the plane came back to her. We drifted up to about thirty-eight hundred feet and things settled down.

“It’s all so complicated,” Elaine sighed, looking over the instrument panel.

“What? This? Flying?”

“No. I mean, you know, Stitch and everything. I just don’t know what to think. I don’t know what to feel anymore. I’m mad, but what can I do to change things? He was like an anchor for me and now I’m adrift. It’s unfair, but—and I’m sad because he was like a brother to me. He was really your brother. You must feel even worse.”

“Yeah.” I nudged the yoke. We had drifted to the west towards open water. I wanted to get back on course.

“And I’m afraid, too.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Bad enough to lose someone who was like a brother to me. But—but if it had been you. If I had lost you—”

“Come on, Elaine. You did lose me. And on purpose, too.”

“I guess I never really gave up, though.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“But—” she stammered

“Or maybe you thought I’d always be around whenever you might need me. Like a spare tire in the trunk,” I said pointedly.

“No, Hawk, I...” Elaine bit her lip.

I was sorry I had said that.

“No, just sometimes you start to believe that you can change life and change people just like you can change a movie, with a few cuts of the razor and careful stitching together of the scenes. And if you think that way, it can make you impatient and make you do things that you might regret later. But in the back of my mind, I always knew that one day things would work out and it would be right for both of us.”

“Has that day come? Is that why you came to my place? Is that why you came along tonight?” I questioned rapid-fire.

“Is that why you asked me to come?”

“I haven’t changed, Elaine. I still haven’t grown up like you and Al and Stitch and mom and pop and everybody always wants me to do. I still live where I live and do what I do—and I like it. I’ll just never be a doctor or a lawyer or a businessman like any of them. I don’t know what I’ll ever become. I don’t even think about it.”

“Lainie, what do you want to be when you grow up?” Elaine asked herself. She replied sadly, “A movie star. I’m going to be a star. I’ll be rich and famous and happy forever.”

“I haven’t changed, you know. I’m sorry, but I haven’t.”

“I think in the back of my mind, I always prayed you never would.” She reached over and put her free hand on my thigh.

“Have you changed?”

Elaine shook her head. “I think I just realized that if I waited long enough, what I was waiting for would be gone.”

I smiled and gently stroked her hair. “I’m glad you haven’t changed either.”

We droned on over the open ocean. I checked our position and time en route to refigure our ETA at San Francisco. With a little luck and a little help from the winds, we might have some extra ground time there to ourselves.

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Chapter 5

The *Dorian Gray* was always immaculate—I'd even go as far as to say sterile. Stitch was an absolute fanatic about his boat. The hull was a screaming bright white that punished the naked eye. The decks glistened severely. The tackle glittered deadly spikes of sunlight. I stepped aboard and got brought up short by the angry, cumulonimbus-like blossom of Stitch's blood staining the deck. I stared at the maroonish-brown splotch. It was an open wound.

"You look like hell," Allegro said to me. He was sitting on the stern.

"Top of the morning to you, too," I said, slowly prying my eyes away.

"Morning? Morning? It's almost two in the afternoon." Allegro shook his head. "You ought to take better care of yourself."

"Let's see, since Saturday, I think I can count on one hand the number of hours sleep I've gotten. It's been a rough weekend, you know?"

Allegro nodded. "Hey, nasty cut on your cheek. How'd you do that?"

"Shaving." I squinted off at the far flat horizon of the Pacific Ocean.

"Come on—when?"

"Never mind. Just fill me in on the latest with Stitch's case."

"Your guess is as good as mine." Allegro shrugged his shoulders.

"Come on, Vince. What's Peletier up to? What's he doing?"

"You mean besides rattling your cage?" He smiled. "Well, lately, the learned lieutenant spends most of his time spouting out elaborate textbook theories on murder."

"Theories? What theories?"

"Harebrained schemes that are out of Sherlock Holmes or Dick Tracy or something. I've never seen anything like it. He's always quoting Shakespeare or some ancient Greek. Yesterday, after your visit downtown, it was a Sunday school lesson on Cain and Abel."

"Aw, for Christ's sake, Vince, you—"

"Of course, what all of this has to do with the price of SPAM is beyond me. You see, Hawk, you have to understand that there are only five motives for murder: money, love, money, revenge and money. If you've got a murder to solve, look for the money."

"But Peletier does think it was a murder. Is that how he's investigating the case?"

"Peletier couldn't investigate his way to the men's room," Allegro spat. "Let's face it, he's not a cop. He's a paper pusher. He hasn't done an honest day's police work in years. And he thinks this case is going to be a cakewalk, but I bet he's headed for a fall and he's going to hit the canvas hard."

"How's that?"

"His problem is that he thinks that details aren't worth his attention. He's after the big picture, always looking for the Mafia or some kind of communist conspiracy or something. Like this morning, his boys found that Stitch's office had been broken into and some drugs were stolen. Stitch was going to Mexico next week and he had disappeared—no one knows where—last week for a couple of days—"

"That moron. I told him that last week Stitch and I went up to Vegas to blow off some steam."

"Oh yeah? Together?"

I nodded. I could see in Allegro's brow that he was making a mental note of the fact.

"Hmmm. Anyway, Peletier's auditing your brother's prescriptions, looking to break an international drug smuggling ring, no doubt."

"He thinks Stitch was killed over drugs?"

"I think he's really looking to use it as a motive for suicide. You know, a good man gone bad

and all that. But anyway, like I started to say, he's missing the details—and details get you every time.”

“What details?”

“Well, Eddie in the lab—you know him, tall with glasses and thinning blonde hair, a quiet guy. He's got a pretty wife, though. She used to be a Rockette.”

I nodded, even though I had no idea who Eddie was.

“Eddie says there were some strange hairs on the gun and he swears that maybe there was some other blood on it, too, in trace amounts. He just can't type it because there just doesn't seem to be enough of it.”

“What does Peletier say about it?”

“The lieutenant calls it an ‘isolated anomaly’. He missed his calling, Peletier did. he should have been a lawyer or a college professor.”

“Say, talking about hairs, did you happen to notice that Stitch had just got a haircut?”

“Oh yeah?”

“And a fresh manicure, too. I noticed it yesterday when I got a look at the body.”

“That's interesting. Got himself all dolled up and then blew his brains out.” Allegro pulled at his chubby chin.

“And didn't I notice some bait and tackle out on the deck Saturday?”

Allegro smiled. “You've really got an eye for details, Hawk. I just tossed it over before you got here. It was really stinking the place up.”

“A haircut. A manicure. Fresh bait. Sounds like Stitch might have had other things planned for Saturday night besides suicide.”

“I don't know about the haircut, but Stitch had called ahead on Friday to have the bait put on the boat. I checked that with Vern up in the shack there. He could have forgotten about it. But then something big must have happened between Friday afternoon and Saturday night.”

“I just had a thought. What about the gas tanks? Were they full or empty?”

“The tanks? I don't know. No way of telling, really. The Coast Guard pumped them out before they towed her in.”

“The Coast Guard drained them?”

“A precautionary measure. S.O.P., I guess. The boarding party thought they smelled a gas leak. Made the lab boys mad 'cause they slopped it on the decks and disrupted some of the evidence.”

“The Coast Guard, huh?”

“Yup.”

In thirty seconds, Allegro had shot down Graves' theory. “Hey, Vince, you know a *Times* reporter named Graves?”

“Graves?” Allegro shook his head. “No. At least he's not on the City Desk. You know, one of the vultures always hustling names off the police blotter, hoping the mayor got hauled in for drunken driving. Unless he's a new kid or something.”

Allegro knew everybody. It was part of his job. So, if he didn't know Graves, then my reporter friend was not who he said he was and I was back to square one. “What do you think, Vince Does it add up to murder?”

“I just don't know. Eddie in the lab is a good man. Darn good. I'd listen to what he's got to say, even though he's got nothing we can hang our hat on. But if it is murder, why did they leave a body? That's what I can't figure. The bottom of the Pacific Ocean is an awfully good hiding place. And it could even have eventually just been written off as a boating accident. Why leave a body?”

“Good question.”

“Unless they wanted to make a show of it.”

“Why would anyone do that?”

“Mafia types do that sometimes. Helps to inspire the ranks to toe the line.”

“Mafia types?” I watched Allegro shrug his shoulders helplessly. We both thought that one over, but came up blank. Our eyes were slowly drawn to the blood stain. We stared at it until I couldn’t stand it anymore. “Okay if I look around?”

“Sure,” Allegro said, not looking up from the deck. “Say, Hawk, you know Elaine Carter, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Seems Stitch and her were going off to Mexico together next week. We wanted to ask her about it, but we can’t seem to get in touch with her.”

That one took my knees right out from under me. “You, ah, might try Paramount. She’s editing a film there now. A Wilder flick, I think.”

“Thanks, Hawk. We’ll give it a shot.”

I looked the boat over, but it was a waste of time. I couldn’t concentrate. As soon as Allegro drove off, I tried to get in touch with her myself. No luck. Back at the airport, I stared a hole in my ceiling try to figure out why Elaine and Stitch would be going to Mexico together. I didn’t like what I came up with.

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Chapter 6

I was supposed to meet Graves for dinner at six-thirty. I got to the restaurant at quarter to six, ready to wax his tail but good. I passed the time sucking down double gins in the bar. Between rounds I tried every number I could think of where Elaine might be with no luck at all. That fueled my anger even more. I might feel bad about it later, but Graves was going to pay for Elaine, too.

At least Graves was punctual. At six-thirty sharp, I saw him talking to the *maitre d'* at the door. Long lost buddies they were, talking, laughing, and putting their arms around each other's shoulders and hugging. I sat and stared, sighting in on my target.

"Ah, here you are," Graves said cheerfully as he spotted me at the bar. "Have you been waiting long?"

I just gulped the last of my gin and dug into my pocket to pay my tab, but Graves grabbed my arm.

"No, no, no, no, no. Jimmy, put this on my tab," he ordered the bartender. "Come, Sal has our table waiting."

I followed the *maitre d'* and Graves into the dining room. Graves seemed to know all of the help—even the busboys—and a bunch of the other customers, too, calling them all by name and touching their shoulders or elbows or hands. It was a fancy place. The waiters were all in tuxes and the customers were loaded down with enough rocks and gold to put a B-17 over gross. They were Stitch's kind of people and this was Stitch's kind of place. In fact, he had always promised to bring me here sometime, but never got a chance to. I felt a bit out of place, but it also seemed a cut or two above a reporter's salary.

Sal, the *maitre d'*, sat us down in a separate, small room off the main dining room and discretely collected a ten-spot from Graves. I looked around at all the other tables, many set with expensive crystal, china and silver, but unused. I ordered a double gin. After gabbing on with the waiter like they were old war buddies, Graves ordered a piña colada.

"I asked Sal to put us back here where it will be a little quieter and quite a bit more private. I told him we would be working," Graves gushed. He was obviously in high spirits. He fussed with the red silk handkerchief in his suit coat pocket, arranging and re-arranging the way it bloomed out of his pocket. "I am terribly glad you came tonight. I was a bit concerned that after I so rudely invaded your...place yesterday, that, perhaps, you may have agreed to see me only to be rid of me."

He smiled.

I smiled back and took a pull of gin.

"At least I can assure you that dinner absolutely will not disappoint you. This is a four-star establishment if there ever was one. You cannot get better prime rib *anywhere* in town."

"Who the hell are you, really?"

Graves looked like I had slapped him in the face. The tone of my voice did it more than the question. He knew I knew.

"I've got a friend—a detective friend," I revealed, "who says he's never seen you at the police station. So, I called the city desk at *The Times* and they said I might try Arts and Leisure."

Graves turned as red as his matching tie and handkerchief. He began to straighten the pieces of his place setting over and over again.

"I'm not one to sit around and trade lies with someone just to burn up their coin on an expensive dinner. That's not how I get my kicks."

Graves lit a cigarette. His eyes looked for some place to hide, but I stared him down.

"Hell, I've got better things to do at the moment than—"

“Okay, okay, okay,” he surrendered. “Please sit. Please. You are correct, quite correct. I am not on the City Desk. I am, indeed, in Arts and Leisure, as you were told when you called the paper.”

“What are you after, pal? What the hell do you care whether Stitch was murdered or killed himself?”

“Mr. Byrd, I apologize. I just want to say straight out that I am sorry.”

“Save it.”

“Let me explain. Please. You see, I have been pigeon holed, Mr. Byrd—no pun intended. I have been swept aside, into a position where I cover and report on fashion shows, women’s auxiliary garden parties and the like. Dreadful stuff, actually, and hardly the heart and soul of hard hitting journalism. You must appreciate that I have few friends in management at *The Times* and at this particular instant in time, my prospects for a genuinely worthwhile assignment that would disinter me from the pages that no one reads except for rich, blue-haired old bats looking for their own monikers in print, are *severely* limited.”

Graves was pathetic. He wasn’t even going to put up a fight, just roll over and play dead. There was a pained silence at the table as the waiter served our drinks. Graves dismissed him with a flick of his wrist. “And let me guess, you thought you could use me and my brother to get ahead. Stitch’s death was your ticket out, huh?”

“I knew your brother. He was active in Hollywood and Beverly Hills art galleries, sitting on advisory boards and assisting in fund raising events. I met him and interviewed him on numerous occasions. He was certainly a man to be respected and admired. When the City Desk came looking for background, I was shocked and dismayed. I also quickly assessed that your brother was nothing more than a headline to them—and a pretty good one, too, owing to his surgical association with half of Tinsel Town. The more I spoke with them, though, the more I came to believe that something was amiss with your brother’s death. Everything was too pat with the police’s story. The City Desk was not asking any questions except about who had what done to their breasts. I concluded that unless I asked questions, no one else would—not the police, not reporters, not any one and there are, indeed, questions that are crying out to be asked, Mr. Byrd. You know that yourself. You are right when you say this story might move me out of Arts and Leisure when all is said and done, but that is not why I am doing it.” Graves’ voice was taking on a high-pitched, nervous tone. “I have no contacts with the police, so I had to find another way to get the story, which is why I came to you. If any one would help me go up against the official police story and up against my own paper, it would be you. I needed your help. I had no place else to turn to.”

“And just how did you know about me?”

“Your brother spoke of you often, of how you were a fighter and how you went your own way in life,” he explained. “He was concerned about your situation, but also he had every confidence that you would come out on top.”

I took a gulp of gin to break off my hard stare at Graves.

“I am sorry,” Graves apologized. “But I felt that if I told you the truth regarding my situation that you would not have bothered to give me the time of day.”

“Probably not.”

“Tell me, you haven’t talked to any other reporters, have you?”

I shook my head.

“I did not think so. They just want to talk to the celebrities. They do not care one wit about your brother. They are only after bankable names to sell papers and are too lazy to dig out the real story.”

I swirled my gin around and around. Unfortunately, he was starting to make some sense. How come I hadn’t talked to any other reporters? “You knew my brother from *art galleries*? That’s a new one on me.”

“He was a vibrant, dynamic man, your brother. One could not help but look up to him.”

“What was he doing at art galleries?”

“Dr. Byrd was a patron of the arts, a modern day de Medici, if you will. He was sensitive, articulate and well-versed in the fine arts. He went out of his way to assist and promote a number of young, struggling painters and sculptors, drawing attention to their work and getting their pieces shown and sold.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“He had a sixth sense for recognizing raw talent and potential.”

There was an uneasy truce as I digested what I had never known about Stitch before. Graves chain smoked his cigarette and took a big drink of water. His piña colada was untouched.

“Mr. Byrd, I did go about this entire matter in an ill-advised manner. I apologize. But I believe—I *know* there is a story here. I can feel it in my bones. It will not get written by the City Desk. I would like to write it. I would like you to help me to write it.”

I didn’t say anything. I drank some more gin. I had to think things through. Graves didn’t know anything. His information about the fishing tackle and the gas tanks was worthless. On the other hand, he was a reporter of sorts, even if he was assigned to Arts and Leisure. My call to *The Times* had confirmed that for me. And maybe even a bad reporter could be of some use. I didn’t really have a plan for finding out what happened to Stitch. Instead, things seemed to be happening to me, what with Elaine suddenly and mysteriously appearing in my life and just as suddenly and mysteriously disappearing again. And Peletier hauling me downtown for questioning and calling me a twentieth century Cain. And Allegro’s eyes lighting up when I mentioned our trip to Vegas. What was Allegro thinking? I couldn’t be sure of him either. After all, he and Peletier were both members of the flat-footed fraternity and I was an outsider. I figured the missing file and the big black Cadillac would answer a lot of questions, but it also might not be a bad idea to have a warm body on Allegro, just to keep him honest.

“I’m not sure what it means, but the police suspect that something might have happened when Stitch was in Las Vegas last week.”

Graves sighed a big sigh of relief. “Thank you, Mr. Byrd. I will not let you down.”

“We stayed at the Desert Inn. Might not hurt to go and ask a few questions.”

“I will do it.”

“Good.”

“Another drink?”

I nodded. We sat smoking in silence until the next round came.

“You and your brother were very close, were you not?”

I nodded.

“Even though he was ten years older than you?”

“He was kind of half-brother, half-best friend, half stand-in father for me.”

“Was your father dead?”

“No, but I was the youngest and after raising three other kids, mom and pop slacked off on me. They let me get away with murder. But Stitch never let up on my case. He kept me on track. Made sure I got through school. Got me my first part time job. Got me into the Air Corps. He made sure I was always trying to be the best I could. I needed it, too. Wouldn’t be what I am today without his pushing. It pissed me off a lot of times, but I’m grateful now.”

“He always seemed to me to demand perfection of himself and to expect no less of those around him as well.”

“Yeah, but he was a good time, too. He worked hard and he played hard. And when we were growing up he always made sure I got my turn at bat—if you know what I mean.”

Graves sort of smiled and sipped his piña colada.

The more I drank, the more I talked. And the more I talked about Stitch, the more I felt like drinking and did. I didn't remember the taste of dinner, but I knew I ate because I remember losing it on Sunset Boulevard. I didn't remember Graves' conversation. He asked a few questions about Stitch and listened a whole lot as I probably went on and on about Stitch and the house on Taylor Avenue and going to Washington High and sneaking in to see the vaudeville shows at the Venetian Theater where pop worked nights as a janitor during the depression to make ends meet. I didn't remember getting home, but Graves and Sal must have poured me into the MG and somehow I made it.

And for the first time since Saturday, I slept soundly—thanks to the gin. I needed it, too.

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Chapter 7

Flight instruction is ninety-eight percent boredom and two percent sheer, unadulterated terror.

About eleven-thirty, Doug, one of Sundance's regular flight instructors, came pounding on my door to get me to bail him out. He was double booked for noon and wanted me to take one of his students. What really happened was that Sweet Alice, a knock-em-dead blonde with a deep-pockets sugar daddy had decided she wanted to burn up some coin. We all figured she did it just to test how deep the hook was set, because she really wasn't interested in getting her ticket. She had five hundred hours of dual and still hadn't soloed. Most instructors didn't try to push her, though, because sitting next to her in the close quarters of a cramped cockpit was every flight instructor's—including Doug's—deepest desire come true. I agreed to help Doug out even though I was still shell shocked from dinner with Graves. I was technically legal to fly, but I was feeling pretty ragged. I brushed the taste of drunk out of my mouth with a glob of toothpaste and headed downstairs.

Doug was already gone. Needless to say, he took Sweet Alice himself. I got Big Ed.

No one had actually done a weight and balance, but Big Ed was so big that every one swore that with any instructor weighing more than ninety-five pounds, the plane was over gross. Evidently, Big Ed really hated to fly, but he had something to prove to himself or to someone else or something. He valiantly stuck to the program, always showing up on time for lessons and never bouncing a check—two of the most important attributes instructors look for in a prospective student pilot. Doug told me Big Ed was coming along, slowly, but coming along none the less. Big Ed eyed me with suspicion when I introduced myself. I thought he might have been taken back by the excessive magenta in my eyes, so I quickly donned sunglasses and tried to reassure him. I sent him out to pre-flight the plane, while I scorched my mouth trying to gulp down two cups of steaming hot coffee under Rosa's disdainful stare.

Out of Burbank, I like to slip over the mountains to the northeast and do air work over the desert for the general safety of Western Civilization—so that if my student does *stall-spin-crash-burn-and-die*, we won't take any civilians with us. In the morning, the air is cool and calm. As the afternoon wears on, the convective activity starts the bumps and grinds and you have to work a little higher up. Tuesday was a scorcher by noon, so Big Ed and I were up pretty high. Good thing, too. It was what saved us.

Inside Eight Four Nine, a Cessna 140, side-by-side with Big Ed, I felt like a sardine packed in a can with a tuna. He kept jabbing me with his elbow as he worked the throttle. I kept wondering if Doug was having as much fun with Sweet Alice. Big Ed was friendly enough. He was making an effort to smile, but he didn't seem to really trust me. I guess because we hadn't ever flown together. His take-off was routine.

"Doug always heads west into the valley," Big Ed wheezed with a nervous chuckle.

"Change of scenery will do you good, don't you think?" I smiled and pointed to the north. Big Ed's eyes were wide as we headed towards the mountains.

While I waited for the plane to do its thing and get us out over the desert where I could do my thing, my mind churned like a washing machine, thinking on and on about Stitch and Elaine and Graves and Allegro and Peletier and the big black Cadillac and everything all together. I kept asking myself the same questions over and over, trying to come up with answers that I could live with. All I got was more questions. Big Ed's lesson was going to be pretty routine. Doug had recommended just a review of the basic maneuvers. As I worked him through a few medium banked turns and slow flight at minimum controllable airspeed, the questions kept churning like an undercurrent. It distracted me and kept me from noticing that Big Ed was getting increasingly nervous about

something, as the growing perspiration stains under his arms should have warned me.

I demonstrated a stall series and then talked Big Ed through it. He didn't do well on the recoveries, so we went through them again. Even his power-off stalls were weak. He was losing too much altitude and using aileron instead of rudder to lift the wing. By the time we got to power-on stalls, Big Ed was a smoking hole waiting to happen, but I was on autopilot, going through the maneuvers by rote while my mind was back on the ground. It was the departure stall that did it. Full power, pulling back on the yoke, climbing and banking to the right. Big Ed lost it. The controls buffeted. The stall broke. The nose dropped, but Big Ed didn't recover. Before I knew it, Eight Four Nine fell over the down wing. The windshield filled up with the desert floor spinning around and around and around. *Stall-spin-crash...*

"I got it," I said to Big Ed, but his fists were locked on the controls: full back elevator and full power in a spin. He was frozen with fear. I pushed the yoke, but he was strong and stronger still from the adrenalin pumping into his bloodstream, probably gallons at a time. I yelled and screamed and cursed at Big Ed, but his ears were off the hook. The lights were out and no one was home and we were very soon going to be auguring our way to China.

I tried a shot to the solar plexus with my elbow, but I couldn't get a clean shot around his huge, barrel chest. I tried punching, but his fat just absorbed my fists like a sponge. In the windshield, the desert began to take on distinguishable features—rocks, boulders, cactus and creosote bushes. Time was getting short.

I bashed Big Ed in the face as hard as I could with my elbow again and again and again and again, until finally he let go of the controls and grabbed his bloody nose.

Engine idle—aileron neutral—rudder opposite to rotation—brisk forward elevator—

I felt like I was pushing the rudder pedal through the fire wall and into the engine compartment.

The spin finally stopped, *but God!* The airspeed was wound up to the top of the yellow arc and the desert floor was blossoming into detail. If I yanked back on the controls too hard, the horizontal stabilizer would fail and shortly thereafter the wings would fold up. If I didn't pull up quick enough, we'd kiss dirt pushing the red line. I closed my eyes and pulled, trying to feel the air frame straining, trying not to go too far too fast, praying the Gs I was pulling wouldn't bend the wings. I sank deeper and deeper into the seat, until we were straight and level, twelve feet off the deck. Even the rattlesnakes were diving for cover.

Big Ed was in a coma the whole way back to the airport. After I landed and parked, he just sat in the plane, staring straight ahead in a trance. My knees were rubber, but I made it to the office. I didn't even want to look at what I had done to the poor little Cessna.

"Hawk, you got a—Hawk? What's the matter? You're white as a ghost," Rosa exclaimed.

"Tell—tell Sparks to check Eight Four Nine. I damn near pulled the wings off."

I went into Al's office and dug out his bottle of scotch. I put the bottle on the desk and stared at it a good five minutes before I could muster the strength to lift it to my lips. Fifteen minutes and eight or nine shots later, Big Ed came in from the plane. His face was a bloody mess.

"That thon-of-a-bith knocked my font teeth out," Big Ed garbled at Rosa, spitting blood and pointing at me sitting behind Al's desk. "I want him reported to the polithe for athult, athult and battery."

I swear, if I had had a gun just then, I would have blown Big Ed's brains out without a second thought.

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Chapter 8

I got the hell out of the office and headed upstairs when Big Ed started demanding that I be arrested. Otherwise, I might have done a serious rearrangement of his fat ugly face—starting where I had left off with my elbow in the plane. I sat on the sofa in my apartment all afternoon and stared at a bottle of gin. I didn't drink, because...because I don't know why, except that my hands had begun shaking badly and I had an incredibly tight knot in the pit of my gut. I just stared at the ugly old lady on the label and tried to get my hands and stomach under control. I tried hard not to think about how I had damn near bought the farm, but the stomach somehow always knows anyway.

I was sort of stuck in time there. I didn't notice a single minute go by. The afternoon still passed and about five or six there was a knock on the door. I didn't answer. The door opened slowly. I was hoping it might be Elaine.

"Hawk?"

It was Rosa. I didn't say anything. She came in anyway and quietly closed the door behind her.

"Hawk, I've got something for you. Some lady dropped it off for you. I thought I'd bring it up." Rosa stepped into the room carefully and looked around cautiously. Rosa had never been up before. In fact, Rosa rarely ever came out from behind the counter. The counter was her fortress, her first line of defense. She held out a big manila envelope. "I thought it might be important."

I nodded wearily and took the envelope. It was from some accounting firm I had never heard of before. I tossed it aside because I still had the shakes and I didn't want her to see. I tried to say thanks, but my throat was so dry and hoarse that I ended up coughing and hacking. Staring at a gin bottle for four and a half hours will do that to you.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked sweetly.

When I kept on hacking, she quickly fetched a glass of water from the kitchen. I gulped it down. "Thanks."

"Are you okay?"

"I nodded and smiled weakly. For some strange reason, Rosa didn't leave. It was almost as if she were waiting for some kind of invite to stay. She smiled coyly back at me.

Rosa and I had always sort of been verbal sparring partners, but we had never gone a sanctioned round together from bell to bell—not that I wouldn't have wanted to. Any warm-blooded male with a pulse would have killed to wrestle Rosa in the sack. She was a constant topic of hangar talk, though nobody but nobody at the airport had ever made a second of time with her, not even Al, who signed her paychecks—and he had tried hard, too. Rosa's voice was as sharp as a KA-BAR knife when she spoke to any of the pilots or line boys or Sparks or me. She could whittle a man's stick down to size quicker than you could spit with a single word or even just a glare of her eyes. But here she was in my place with her weapons sheathed. I had to wonder what she was really after.

I motioned towards the couch. She came over and sat down, not at the end, but right next to me, shoulder-to-shoulder, hip-to-hip, knee-to-knee. If anyone had told me that they had gotten this close to her, I'd have demanded to see the gun film. Her hand found my shoulder.

"You came very close today, didn't you?" she purred.

I nodded and looked at my trembling hands. I swallowed hard. My throat felt abused, like I had just spent six hours at altitude, sucking bottled oxygen. All I could muster was, "Can I get you a drink or something?"

"Or something?"

"You know," I winced.

“A martini, please.” Rosa leaned comfortably back into the sofa as I got up and shuffled uneasily to the kitchen. If I ever lived to be ninety years old—and after my flight with Big Ed, I was having serious doubts about making it—it wouldn’t be any harder to move myself from couch to kitchen as it was just then. I came back with glasses, ice and vermouth. I tried to pour two martinis, but my hands shook so bad that I splashed gin on the coffee table. Rosa grabbed my hand in hers. “Here, let me do it.”

I sat and watched as if I were totally helpless. I didn’t dare try to light a cigarette, even though I was dying for one.

Rosa sat back again, sipped her drink and pulled at the hair on the back of my head. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t concentrate. It was as if my mind had flown right into the middle of a zero-zero fog bank.

“Hawk, what’s the matter with—”

“You know, during the war,” I interrupted quickly. I knew what she was going to say and I didn’t want to hear the question or face the answer. “It was all around you, every day, but you never noticed it. It could have been literally inches away, where bullets or cannon fire went through the plane—like that picture of me in Al’s office—yet somehow missed you, but you just went ahead and did your job, like people get up every morning to go downtown to work. I don’t know Rosa. It’s strange. I don’t know.”

Nothing was going to help. I was babbling and I knew it. The more Rosa tried to get intimate with me, the more I became like Big Ed, frozen with inaction, fighting a hell of a tense tug-of-war on the inside, but totally out of touch with the reality of the beautiful, willing woman beside me. The less I responded to her advances, the harder Rosa tried and the more I felt like my body was just a lifeless hunk of putty. I was thankful that after a little more small talk, she finished her drink and stood up to go.

“Well, then, good night, Hawk.” Her voice had that sharp edge again as if she had just run it over a whetstone.

I nodded without looking up. I didn’t want to see the look in her eye. I knew it could kill. She showed herself out, closing the door extra hard. I felt like a barrage balloon shot full of holes, withering up as it deflated and fluttered to the ground.

I laid down and curled up in a ball on the couch, trying to understand why, why, why, I had let Rosa leave and what was wrong with me that even if she had stayed, nothing would have happened.

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Chapter 9

I woke up at three in the morning, still on the couch. My mind was as clear and as clean as a desert morning sky. I lit up a smoke. My hands weren't shaking any more. That was good. Had it been because of too much drink or because of Big Ed? No matter. It had passed and I felt pretty good. I got up and made some coffee, a pilot's best friend—until it hits his bladder, that is.

As I stood in the kitchen, savoring the smell of brewing joe, I remember how Rosa had come up to see me and realized that her offer of comfort was lethal. It was just her style to kick a man when he was down and that was what she was trying to do to me. If I had fallen for her trap, she would have owned me. It would have just been a matter of time before she crushed me out like an old cigarette butt. Of course, that wasn't why I didn't do anything with Rosa, but I was better off anyway. If only she had been Elaine.

That was a reflex thought. Elaine was an unknown commodity any more. After what Allegro told me about her and Stitch, I couldn't be sure that the Elaine I loved and desired really existed or ever did, for that matter. Nothing like doubt to start clouding up the horizon of a perfect day.

I poured a cup of coffee and went back to the couch where I had almost met my doom at Rosa's hands. Still, what a way to go. She was a piece and three-quarters. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it in a million years. The envelope Rosa had brought up with her was still there on the couch where I tossed it, wrinkled from where I had slept on it. I picked it up and opened it. Inside was thirty or forty type-written pages of names and addresses. At first I didn't put it together, but then it hit me. Hope Miller had come through for me. It was a list of Stitch's patients from the accountant's billing records.

I went straight to the 'P's. There it was, right between Pearson and Peters, the only one: C.W. Pendleton. The name didn't hit any payoffs with me. The address was a post office box in Huntington Beach. I checked the phone book. Pendleton's galore, but no C.W.s. There wasn't even anything close: no Carls or Charleses or Cliffs. The number was probably unlisted. Here was my first hot lead and already it was cooling off fast. If only I had gotten the plate number off of his Cadillac, then I could have gotten Allegro to look him up. The post office certainly wasn't going to give any information to me. Allegro might be able to get it out of them, but then I'd get stuck trying to explain about being in Stitch's office and why I didn't squawk about Pendleton stealing the file and trying to shoot me. If Peletier found out about it, he'd be gnawing my back side hard and I'd end up further out in left field on Stitch's case than I already was.

I sat and smoked and drank coffee and thought for a long time on how I could get to Pendleton. The post office box was all I had to work with. I had never gotten a good look at his face, so about the only sure way of intercepting him was to loiter over the box until he came to empty it. The only problem was how to do it without raising the suspicions of the postal clerks and without scaring off the quarry. I thought it over some more as I showered, shaved and put on some fresh threads. I got another cup of coffee and lit a fresh smoke. I put the list back in the envelope and sat on the couch turning it over and over in my hands.

In the war, if you concentrated too much on the distant horizon, trying to see the bandits fifty or seventy-five miles out, you missed the ones about to jump you and wax your tail. Sometimes it happens the same way that the answers to the toughest problems are right in front of your face. I stared at the envelope that Rosa had brought up for about twenty minutes before I made the connection. Rosa always used bright pink envelopes to send out pictures and bios to producers and casting directors. I had never seen anything like them. They were uglier than sin, but she said it was her signature and it helped her envelopes to stand out in the slush piles. If I sent one of Rosa's

envelopes to Pendleton's box and waited even across the street it'd be impossible to miss him after he picked it up.

I decided to go downstairs and get some of Rosa's envelopes right away, before she came to work, figuring that after spurning her advances the night before, I'd be dead meat in her eyes. It was about four-thirty. The hangar was lit up bright like an operating room. I saw that the patient was Eight Four Nine, the plane Big Ed and I almost took our last ride in. Sparks was slowly shuffling around the plane. He wasn't whistling and, even more unusual, he wasn't cursing. I stopped halfway down the stairs and watched him slowly circle the plane two more times, silently eyeing every inch of the plane. The worst part about bending any airplane was the grief you got back on the ground from the crew. Sparks was hard on anybody who abused his planes. He poured his heart and soul into each and every one of them. He had so little else in his life.

I slowly came down the rest of the stairs, bracing myself for Sparks' wrath, but when I got down, he just looked at me and shook his head.

"Hawk," Sparks hissed softly. "Hawk."

"I couldn't help it, Sparks. Honest."

Sparks just shook his head, took me by the arm and slowly led me around the plane. He showed me the metal skin of the fuselage where it was wrinkled like a ninety year old man's face. He showed me the horizontal stabilizers where they were both visibly bent. He jiggled the rudder hanging loose in its hinges. He pointed out all of the rivets that had been popped and where the fabric on the wings had been torn loose from the wing ribs. I had taken a ride on the hairy edge.

"It's a pissar, God damn it. I don't know how you made it home without her folding up like a paper fan on you. You are one damn lucky pilot, Hawk."

I slowly walked around Eight Four Nine again, just like I had seen Sparks doing when I came down. I didn't say anything. I just stared at the damage I had done the day before. I was sweating.

"I'm damned surprised this poor old bird just don't collapse into a big heap of a snot rag right here this very moment before our very eyes. I'd say you redlined her and fluttered the tail. You ain't got but a half dozen rivets left doing any hold back there on the empennage and it'd be a good bet that the wing spars got a hell of a crick in them."

"Jesus," I mumbled.

"God damn right there, Hawk. It's a pissar. He must have been a sitting on your shoulder there, yesterday."

"I'm sorry, Sparks."

"Don't be sorry, Hawk. You should get down on your knees and kiss the ground and be damn thankful you're here for me to cuss at."

"Hey, Hawk," Al McGuire called out as he came through the hangar, "Heard you almost took a dirt nap yesterday."

"Damn near got a chance to ask Stitch face-to-face what happened to him."

"Ah, don't worry, you ninny, you'll die in your sleep when you're old and gray, just like I will," Al said cheerfully. "What's the prognosis, doc?"

"Well, boss, I figure you now got a whole lot of Cessna 140 spare parts in stock," said Sparks.

"I'll bet that's the good news. Don't tell me, let me guess the bad."

"The only way to get this bird airworthy is to send her back to Wichita on a truck, have them melt her down and start from scratch again. It's a pissar, God damn it."

"Well, strip out what you can, Sparks, and we'll park the carcass in the bone yard," Al said with a smile. Nothing ever got to him.

"Right, Boss." Sparks shook his head in disbelief.

"As for you." Al put his arm around my shoulder and we walked towards his office. "You have got to stop punching out students. It's bad for business. How many times have I told you that

physical abuse simply does not produce an acceptable level of referrals?”

“Right, Ace,” I said with a big, uncomfortable sigh, looking back at Eight Four Nine over my shoulder. “So, what are you doing here so early?”

“I’ve got to go play golf with some bankers at six. I’m trying to put together a land deal down south in Orange County.”

“Orange County? Say, you wouldn’t know a C.W. Pendleton out of Huntington Beach, would you?”

“Pendleton? Hmmm, doesn’t ring any bells. How come?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Say, Hawk, if you’ve got a nest egg stashed away, I could get you ten times more on this deal.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, but...”

“From hand to mouth, from pillar to post, eh? You know, Hawk, money does come in pretty handy now and again.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

“Yeah, but they won’t put out for you if you’re broke.”

“Well, you know me.”

“I know you all right. So, tell me, how are you doing? I mean really.”

“I’m getting by, no sweat,” I assured.

“I’ve never known a student—or anybody, kraut or dog-face—to ever get the better of you in the air like that fat boy did. You shouldn’t be flying if you’re not one hundred percent. For your own good. What with Stitch’s death and all, maybe you need a break.”

“I’m fine, Al.”

“If you say so, I buy it. Your word’s good enough for me. I just wanted to make sure.”

“Thanks, Al.”

“So, you’ve got a shoot today with Marantz, don’t you?”

“Damn, I forgot all about that.” It was a good thing Al had mentioned the two days of film work I had booked. If I had missed it my name would have been mud. The Associated Motion Picture Pilots Union was more an exclusive fraternity than anything else. You can’t get an AMPP card without picture credits; and Hollywood being a closed shop, you can’t fly in a movie without a union card. Needless to say, an AMPP card is as good as gas in the tanks and bullets in your guns. Stitch was able to work that problem for me with his studio connections and even got me my first couple jobs. I had done a half dozen flicks or so, including *Twelve O’Clock High*, which picked up an Oscar the year before, so I was one of “the boys”. It was good coin and good flying. I enjoyed it, but standing up Paul Marantz and a production crew would have been a pretty thorough method of self-destruction in the business.

Suddenly, it felt like the coffee was burning a hole in my gut. I got some big pink envelopes out of Rosa’s desk and hurried back upstairs without looking at Eight Four Nine again. I tried to go over the script, but my stomach was boiling over and I just couldn’t concentrate, no matter how hard I tried.

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Chapter 10

The filming was out of a small private airport southeast of Palmdale near Llano. Normally, I would have used one of Sundance's planes to commute out and back, but this time I decided to drive. I told myself that it would be a real good chance to shake the dew off my MG through the mountains and then wind her out across some desert. I was lying to myself, but the early morning drive felt good anyway, even if I didn't really push the envelope.

Production meetings are always the same. Directors and producers always ask for the impossible and the stunt pilot, while never refusing them, tries to negotiate some small margin of safety so that he might walk away from the day's shoot and live to fly another day. The sacred laws of aerodynamics are particularly unforgiving when busted. On the other hand, you can't bite too hard on the knuckles that make out the paychecks, even if their notions of flying and airplanes do come straight out of a Cracker Jack Box. Today, Paul Marantz would be doing the stunts so I let him horse trade with the powers that be over his own hide. I just watched as they marked up the story boards and scribbled on a chalk board, nodding and shaking my head at the appropriate places to stay in Marantz's good graces.

I had only done a couple on-camera things, just being one of the crowd when formation shots were needed. Most of my work was hauling cameras for aerial shots. It took solid, steady flying. You had to be able to fly the same line over and over and over, at exactly the same altitude on exactly the same track. Nothing ever got done on the first shot and sometimes the final cut in the movie was put together with film from different takes. If your altitude was off or you tracked too far out or too far in, the images on the film wouldn't match up. Some of it could be worked out at the film lab, but that meant spending time and money fixing what should have been right in the first place. A camera pilot also has to have an eye for camera angles in three dimensions. Dog fighting helped me out there. While most guys had to climb up the tail of a bandit to make a kill, over half of mine came on deflection shots. I was building a good reputation in the movie trade as a precise flyer who made sure he was in the right place at the right time.

After the main production meeting, I had to sit through Marantz's usual 'man-machine-mission' briefing. It was getting harder and harder for me to concentrate, but I got my sectional and topo maps marked up with all the checkpoint ticks, altitudes and rendezvous points. By the time we got Marantz's 'knock 'em dead' and 'break a leg', I thought I was going to lose the two jelly donuts I had eaten during the first meeting. A couple of deep breaths calmed my stomach, but I was the first one out of the trailer and into the crisp fresh morning air of the high desert.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't *Mister A. Gavin Byrd* himself."

I recognized Jeannette's deep voice right away. This morning it possessed a touch of Jack Frost in it like October in Chicago.

"What are you doing here? They didn't say anything about you in the meetings."

"Making a living, Mr. Byrd. Second unit exteriors."

"Standing around looking pretty was never hard for you."

"Yes, well..."

"Hey, Jeannette, I'm sorry about Saturday night. I—"

"Forget it," she dismissed it with a dramatically eloquent wave of her hand. "I know. I heard about your brother. Sorry."

But was she? It didn't really sound like it. "Thanks"

"I'm surprised to see you working here so soon after."

"Life goes on."

“Yes, I suppose it does. Well, I—”

“How about if I buy you dinner tonight to make up for running out on you like I did.”

“I don’t think so,” she said nonchalantly.

“Or, if you’re busy, maybe after we break tomorrow we can pick up where we left off,” I tried again.

Jeannette smiled an icy smile. “Oh no. No, I just don’t think so. See you again sometime, *Mister A. Gavin Byrd.*”

I stared after her as she walked away. There seemed to be an extra bounce in her step and a longer stroke to the swing in her hips, probably for my benefit to remind me of what I was missing. She played the cool blonde good, too good. Oh well, like the saying goes, there’s nothing more useless than altitude above and runway behind you.

The shoot was a car-plane chase, with Marantz in a Stearman biplane chasing a car down a winding canyon, then out across a stretch of flat desert road. I was carrying the camera man, the director and the cinematographer in a twin Beech just like Seven Sugar Papa, so I should have felt right at home. It was a lot of low level work, first threading through the canyon and then getting down on the deck as Marantz danced his wheels on the roof of the car. Marantz was the best stunt pilot in Hollywood, but I had flown wing man for some of the Air Corps best and kept up. I’d have no problem, I told myself.

In the morning, Marantz and I went up and flew the route about ten times to eyeball the terrain, get our checkpoints fixed and get a feel for the flow of the scene. At noon we topped off and headed back with loaded cameras. As the car raced down the road, Marantz and I were supposed to go in low and make a pass, then climb out, circle back and drop back down into the canyon for another run. We rendezvoused at the radio tower on top of a nearby peak. On the director’s signal we dove into the narrow slit in the side of the mountain, wing tip to wing tip. Beneath the rim of the canyon, everything below and to the sides whipped by in a greenish-brown blur. The canyon was so tight that there was no room to maneuver. If something went wrong, the only place to go was up. My palms were sweaty on the throttles and the yoke as we went in low and slow to get the first shot. The stall warning horn blared and the voices of the director and the camera man crackled over the intercom with inane instructions as I tried to concentrate on not shredding Marantz’s wing tip with my right prop.

I was a little too heavy handed on the throttles in the first pull out and shot right past Marantz. I had to do a three-sixty to form back up on him, which meant we lost some shooting time. As we went back into the canyon, I found myself taking a deep breath like I was diving under water. And when we came back out again, I gasped for air. We were supposed to get four passes in as the car made its way down the winding canyon road. We only got three.

As we broke out into the open desert, Marantz got down on top of the roof of the car, just like the script called for. It was the hardest part of the scene, because the mismatch in the speed of the car and the different flying speeds of the planes made it difficult to stay together. Marantz had less trouble in the biplane than I did in the twin Beech. Every time I felt the buffet of an approaching stall, I surged ahead of Marantz and the car. I got an earful about it from the director, too, over the intercom as we went back and loitered by the radio tower, waiting for the car to drive back up to the top of the canyon to start it all over again.

On the second run, I did worse. It wasn’t for lack of trying. I tried hard, so hard that I was drenched in sweat. I had a death grip on the controls. I was fighting the plane, not flying her. By the third run I was all over the sky and the chatter of instructions over the headphones became just a painful buzzing in my ears. When we came out of the canyon I realized that my vision was tunneling. I felt like I was graying out, even though I wasn’t pulling any Gs. Fifteen feet off the deck is no place to be dizzy, so I pulled out just as Marantz began his tap dance on the roof of the car.

Dead silence on the headset. I ripped them off anyway. Then I opened my window. I had never been claustrophobic in a cockpit before, but I needed air. I headed back to the barn.

The door to the cockpit opened and Gene Dyer, the cameraman, came in. He shut the door and sat down in the co-pilot seat. Dyer had been around and had seen it all. He was the unofficial, kindly and white-haired father figure on the set. I had flown with him before and we got along pretty good.

“The rushes will be a bust,” he said after sitting for a moment studying and, no doubt, framing me.

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.” And I did know it, too.

“You were all over the sky, son.”

I just nodded my head.

“What’s eating you? I’ve flown with you before. I’ve seen enough to know that you’re one damn good pilot and I’d put my life in your hands any time. What happened today?”

What did happen? That I didn’t know. I shrugged my shoulders.

“Your brother?”

I nodded, but I wasn’t so sure. It would be as good an excuse as any, though, and I’d need a good one once we got down on the ground.

“It’s a tough one. Maybe you should have passed on this job, son. That’s a heavy weight to shoulder and still keep your mind on your work.”

“I didn’t want to let Marantz and you all down. Besides, I thought I needed work to take my mind off of it.”

“You should go home and take care of things.”

I nodded.

Dyer reached across and patted me on the shoulder. “I’ll talk to Marantz and I’ll talk to our young, hot-shot director friend back there. Maybe I can damp out some of the fireworks. Don’t worry about it. We were beginning to lose the light anyway.”

“I appreciate it.”

“You just bury your brother and pay your respects. When you’re ready, come back to work. There’ll be other jobs for you,” he assured.

“Thanks Gene.”

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I had never been fired from a job before. I guess I didn’t exactly get fired from that one—Gene really did go to bat for me—but I also wasn’t welcome on the set anymore. That was okay by me. I wanted to get as far away from that set—and Jeannette—as I could as fast as I could. I was out of the plane before the props stopped spinning. I gave back the check they had for me and hopped into my MG to head back to the city.

On the seat next to me was one of Rosa’s pink envelopes addressed to C.W. Pendleton and a Smith and Wesson thirty-eight.

I drove straight on down to Huntington Beach and mailed the envelope to Pendleton at his own Post Office. It was six-thirty pm. The letter would be in the box in the morning.

Realizing those two jelly donuts were all I had had to eat all day, I stopped at a diner for a bite to eat, but it didn’t want to go down. I settled for a couple cups of coffee. I drove out to the ocean to watch the sun set. I felt excited that I would be catching up with Pendleton. I owed Stitch so much that I would never have a chance to pay back. The least I could do was grab Pendleton for him and haul him down to the police department. I also wanted to wipe that smart-ass-know-it-all

smile off of Peletier's face. It'd show him and his silly theories of murder up for what they were.

I drove back to the Huntington Beach Post Office at ten and parked in a shopping center lot across the street. I had all of the approaches to the Post Office covered. It was just a matter of waiting for a tug on the line. My MG wasn't the most comfortable place to sleep, but I had done it before. This night, though, my eyes wouldn't close. I tried to think about avenging Stitch and showing up Peletier, but my mind kept returning to recent defeats: Stitch's death, Elaine's betrayal, Big Ed, Rosa, Jeannette, and the movie shoot.

I don't know if finally I really slept or not. I only remember smoking and watching the stars as they faded with the dawn. At quarter to seven, a big black Cadillac slowed and pulled into the Post Office. I shook off my weariness and swung the MG into the lot after the fat man in the Cadillac went inside. My adrenalin started to pump. I checked that my revolver was loaded. He wouldn't pop off at me without a fight this time.

The fat man came out with Rosa's pink envelope under his arm. As he got into his Cadillac, I hopped out of my MG and into the passenger side of his car. I stuck the gun into his side and it and my fist got swallowed up in folds of fat.

"Oh my God!" Pendleton gasped, almost dropping his cigar into his lap. He had a round chubby face with two squinty little pin holes for eyes. He instantly began wheezing and sweating. Before I knew it the car smelled like a locker room full of dirty sweat socks.

"Where's your friend?" I asked with an evil, weary laugh.

"Friend? What friend?"

"The jerk with the pistol and the briefcase."

"What do you want with me? Money? My wallet—"

"Yeah, give me your wallet." His fat stubby fingers pulled a wallet out of his inside suit jacket pocket and gingerly handed it to me. I looked through it quickly. "So, you are Pendleton."

"Yes, of course I am. What do you want with me?"

"How come you and your friend broke into Dr. Byrd's office in Beverly Hills?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," he denied.

I jabbed the gun into his blubber, trying to find his ribs. "Don't make me lose my patience."

"But—But I—"

"Listen, fat man, Dr. Byrd is downtown in the city morgue and I got this courtesy of your friend at his office last Sunday." I pointed to the scabbed over cut on my cheek. "And then he tried to shoot me down in the alley behind the building until you pulled up in this Detroit battlewagon, picked him up and drove off."

Pendleton exhaled, sounding like a California sea lion snorting. "Are you from the police?"

"No, but if you don't talk to me, we can go downtown and you can talk to them about breaking and entering, assault with a deadly weapon and maybe even murder."

"Murder?"

"Like I said, Dr. Byrd is in the city morgue."

"I didn't murder him. We don't need to bring the police into this."

"Don't we? Then, let's start with why you stole the file from Dr. Byrd's office." From the pained look on Pendleton's face, I knew I had struck a nerve.

"Are you a private eye?"

"Yeah, of sorts."

"Are you working for my wife?"

"No."

"I'll pay you double what she's giving you—plus a bonus of, say, two thousand dollars."

"Clam it, fat man. I'm not working for your wife. I have other interests."

"Who?"

“All I want to know is why you murdered Dr. Byrd.”

“I didn’t murder him!” His voice betrayed panic.

“You tried to murder me.”

“No, not me. That was Mary. You scared the bee-gee-bees out of her.”

“Mary?” That took me back for a moment.

“She couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn at point blank range. It would have been a one in a million shot for her to hit you.”

“She packs a mean punch.”

“That, though, is undeniably true. A fact I can attest to as well.”

“Why did you steal the file?”

“I had Dr. Byrd do some surgery on Mary. She’s my mistress, if you must know. When I saw his picture on the front page of the papers after he was killed, I realized that if his files became public or even simply fell into the wrong hands, I would be a dead man. You see, sir, I am living off of my wife’s family’s money. They are sticky with oil. I’m sure you’ve heard of them, the Van DeVries. They are all terribly ugly, but also quite, quite wealthy. If my wife found out about Mary, I would be put out with the trash faster than two shakes of a lamb’s tail. And if I lose my wife, I lose my Caddy and my country club tab, and my tailored suits and my allowance and, without money, I’d surely lose Mary. The Van DeVries money is all I have going for me. Don’t you see? I had to protect myself. It was only a file for gosh sakes. I can’t let anyone find out.”

“And the drugs?”

“Drugs?”

“The narcotics cabinet was broken into.”

“Really? All I can say is that Mary is a high spirited woman with strong appetites and nearly uncontrollable urges. She is an exciting woman. And look at me. I am not a handsome nor desirable man. My wife’s money keeps Mary happy.”

“And you’d kill to keep it flowing?”

“Yes, quite possibly, but not Dr. Byrd. He was not a threat to me. He was most discreet in this matter. In fact, he said mistresses were quite common in his practice.”

I pulled the gun out of Pendleton’s side. His beady little eyes weren’t expressive, but they and the volume of sweat he had poured out showed he was too terrified to be bluffing me.”

“I’ll pay you.”

“I don’t want your filthy money—or I should say, your wife’s money.”

“I’ll pay you double what my wife is paying you.”

“You pathetic slob.” I got out of the car.

“Please, I’m begging you. Triple. I’ll triple what she’s paying you.”

“Sweat it out, fat man. You’re on your own.”

I got into my MG and got the hell out of there. All I could think about was why all these fat people were trying to get me killed for no damn reason at all.

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Chapter 11

Leaving Pendleton simmering in a pool of his own sweat, I beat it west, laying rubber on every corner in Huntington Beach, hunting for the Pacific Coastal Highway. I wanted to be able to see the ocean. I needed to look out at a distant horizon and get my bearings again. When I found it, I headed north slowly, not caring where I was going or when I got there.

I must have been driving for more than an hour when I realized I had passed the marina. Having gotten only about fifteen minutes sleep in the MG in the past two days, I was dead tired and ached all over. But suddenly I got hot with anger. Pendleton turned out to be a bust and as beat as I was, I had to do something to get back on track. I did a u-turn in the middle of the block. I probably missed plenty on the *Dorian Gray* the first time I looked her over under Allegro's watchful eye.

I started below. Stitch had one hell of a lot of clothes on board. Even though he practically lived on the boat during the summer, April was a little early for him to have moved aboard. Of course, he was supposedly taking an extended trip to Mexico with Elaine. Not wanting to think about it, I moved on quickly. I was more tired than I realized. I ended up looking into the refrigerator in the tiny galley for fifteen minutes. I just stared blankly at the meager contents: two wine glasses chilling—odd because there was no wine—and a case of beer, also odd, because Stitch never drank beer and never brought it aboard except for me or other guests. Elaine didn't drink beer, so that meant he was expecting somebody else that night.

I couldn't come up with an answer to that one, which wasn't so bad, but when I had a hard time remembering the question, I figured I needed to sit down and rest for a minute. I grabbed a beer and went aft to collapse in a deck chair, stepping around the stain of Stitch's blood like our old mutt used to walk around the exact spot out front in the street where he got clipped by a passing car and broke his leg. The sun was hot. The beer tasted good, even at nine-thirty in the morning. I was debating whether it was worth it to go get another when the gentle bobbing of the *Dorian Gray* rocked me to sleep. I don't know how long I slept, but when I woke, my face was burning from the sun and Allegro was standing on the dock, flaring out his already over-sized trousers by digging his fists into his pockets.

"Permission to come aboard, Cap?"

I waved him onto the *Dorian Gray*. "What are you doing here?"

"Got back from Vegas late last night. Gee, that place." Allegro took off his hat and scratched his head. "I dropped fifty bucks in the slots. If the little woman hears about it I'm hamburger."

"Not from me. But, hey, can't you get Peletier to approve it on your expense account?"

Allegro chuckled wryly and squinted out towards sea. "So, how's it feel?"

"How's what feel?"

"Taking the helm. Rumor has it you scored big in your brother's will."

"Hadn't heard a thing about it."

"No? You'll be set for life—the boat, the house, stocks, bonds, cash. Darn near had our Lieutenant friend foaming at the mouth."

"Go on. How do you know and I don't?"

"I hear things. It's my job." Allegro shaded his eyes with his hat and looked me over closely. "Every time I see you, you look worse and worse. I've seen skid row bums looking bright eyed and bushy tailed compared to you. What's worse is that you're starting to get that two thousand yard stare. Stitch and I saw it plenty on the islands. It ain't a good sign."

"Lay off me, okay? You were talking about Vegas."

“Yeah, Vegas,” Allegro said thoughtfully as he rubbed his double chin.

“What did you find out?”

“Hmmm, you were up there with Stitch, right?”

“Yeah, last Tuesday. Came back early, early on Thursday. About four in the morning, but I’ve already sung this song.”

“What did you and Stitch do while you were there?”

“Played. We were out to blow off steam.”

“Were you together much in Vegas?”

I shook my head. “Stitch is into games. He goes to play poker and black jack and sometimes golf. I go to play the field. Plenty of well-tuned women out there in the desert and I’ve had my share of luck—unusually good luck, even for me.”

“Yeah?” Allegro’s eyes lit up.

I just nodded. I was waking up more and Allegro’s questions were starting to feel uncomfortable. It also annoyed me that he had even found me at Stitch’s boat. Nobody knew I was going to be there—not even me. It was too coincidental.

“Well...gosh darn it. I must have talked to every dealer and pit boss on the strip and nobody had ever seen your brother.”

“A lot of times Stitch got into private games with high rollers—”

“No, Hawk, I checked them, too.”

“Or maybe...”

Allegro shook his head. “I said *ever*. Nobody’s ever seen Stitch in any of the casinos, and they keep close tabs on regulars and high rollers.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You stayed at The Sands, right?”

“Desert Inn.”

“Right. Right, Desert Inn. I knew that. No matter. I talked with the maid for Stitch’s floor. She said his room hadn’t been used at all. The bed was still made, all the towels were unused, the little soaps were still wrapped up, the toilet was still ‘sanitized’ for his protection.”

“And not in the casinos?”

“Or any of the bars or lounges or restaurants either. Maybe that’s what Stitch wanted you to think, though. You don’t gamble, do you?”

“Little bit. Mostly just the slots when I’ve got the time and the change to spare. I lose interest too quick. It’s only money.” Shrugging, I dismissed the question.

“Did you see Stitch at all after you got to Vegas?” Allegro questioned.

“Not after we checked in.”

“Did you ever, on other trips?”

“Once in a while for breakfast.”

“Ever for dinner or lunch?”

“Sometimes we’d have dinner and take in a show—with his connections he always got good seats—but I usually had other plans.”

“What kind of other plans?”

“On the past couple trips, a dark-haired, dark-eyed decorator named April. If you must know.”

“What did Stitch really do in Vegas?”

That question had some top spin on it. “Hey, what am I, on trial?”

“Ever heard of the Gabrielli Family?”

“Vince, I’m from Chicago. I grew up reading about them in *The Tribune*. It was front page Dick Tracy stuff.”

“Stitch was treating Angelo Gabrielli.”

“Pop Gabrielli?”

“What was your brother doing treating a mob boss, Hawk?”

“Where’d you dream up this fairy tale?”

Allegro eyed me over good. He began, “When I couldn’t find hide nor hair of Stitch on the strip, I thought to check the golf courses and even the marinas at Lake Mead. Zip. No luck. I couldn’t figure it out. What else is there to do in Vegas? Then it hit me. I asked around at hospitals and, sure enough, I connected.”

“Connected what?”

“About five or six years back, the Gabrielli Family moved their operations out of Chicago. It was supposed to be a business move, but really the old man was sick and they figured he might live longer if they got him out of the Windy City. The past couple years, Angelo Gabrielli has gotten worse and has been in and out of the hospital. Guess who the attending physician is.”

“Not Stitch.”

“A hot shot doctor from LA who comes in every three to six weeks to treat the old Italian gentleman with a half dozen body guards and who is also a big hit with all of the nurses.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“His name is on all the orders.”

“Why Stitch? How did he get involved?”

“You tell me and we’ll both know. I tried to get in to ask Gabrielli, but I might as well have asked to see the Pope himself.”

“I don’t know a thing about it.”

“Come on, Hawk! You chauffeured him up there and back every trip to help keep his movements from being traced. Don’t you lie to me and tell me you didn’t know what was going on.”

“I swear, Vince.”

“If you think I’m being hard on you, wait till Peletier gets you downtown. His nostrils are flaring like a bloodhound and he’s straining at the leash, ready to get hot on the trail of the mafia. He’s going to clean up this town, starting with you and Stitch.”

“That’s not fair!” I felt my fists clenching.

“Nobody gets close to old man Gabrielli without a blessing from the Vatican and they just don’t pick doctors out of the phone books, that’s for sure. Come on, Hawk, stop covering for Stitch.”

“I told you, I don’t know anything about it,” I insisted. My temples throbbed. My head began to ache.

“It’s either me or Peletier.”

“Vince—”

“Hawk, what if they put a contract out on Stitch?”

“It doesn’t make sense.”

“Tell me.”

“I don’t know.”

“Then Stitch was using you?”

“No.”

“You can’t close your eyes to this. And I can’t protect you from Peletier. He already thinks you’re crossing him on this case.”

“How’s that?”

“Your prints were all over Stitch’s office.”

“I’ve been there before, to see Stitch and talk to him.”

“Your prints should have been latent. They were the top ones everywhere. Can you explain any of that?” Allegro grilled.

“Damn you, whose side are you on?”

“I’m on Stitch’s side. I want to know what happened to him.”

“It sure as hell doesn’t seem like it.”

“Believe it, Hawk. Believe it,” Allegro said with a weary touch of sadness in his voice. “I’m on Stitch’s side. No matter what, all I want is the truth.”

I got up and left without another word. I would have ended up popping Allegro in the chops if I had stayed to listen or argue. Damn him. What was he up to? How did he find me there? On the drive back to the airport, I became convinced the police were following me.

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It was late afternoon. I parked and charged through the hangar. Sparks tried to get my attention by sounding like a leaky tire.

“Psst. Psst. Hawk. Psst. Over here.” He motioned me over to the Beech Staggerwing he was working on. I went. He muttered conspiratorially under his breath. “That fellow is here again. The one from the paper.”

“Who? Graves?”

“Yeah, that newspaper fellow. Said he just got back from Vegas and had to see you right away. Said he had something to tell you. He’s waiting up in your place.”

“Right now?”

“Yup. Right now. Didn’t know if I should of sent him packing or no.”

“That’s okay, Sparks. I need to talk to him.”

“Hawk.” Sparks grabbed my sleeve. Sparks *never* touched another person except under extreme situations. It was serious—or at least Sparks thought so. “Something about that fellow.”

“How do you mean?”

“Don’t know, rightly. God damn it. It’s a pisser. Know how you can listen to an engine and know something ain’t right? And sometimes you don’t know what ‘til you tear her down, but you got a little voice whispering that something ain’t right? Well, he stood down here talking at me for awhile while I worked. Didn’t say nothing, really, just ran off at the mouth. I don’t rightly know for sure what it is, but something ain’t right under that boy’s cowl. You follow?”

I nodded. “I’ve kind of had that feeling, too, but I can’t put my finger on what it is. So far, though, he’s been pretty harmless.”

“Yeah, but—I don’t know. It’s a pisser, God damn it. I don’t know.” Sparks kept slapping a wrench into his left hand. “I don’t know. All I know is you got to listen to those little voices, Hawk. You got to listen.”

“Right. Thanks. I’ll be okay.” I hurried upstairs. I was anxious to hear what Graves had found out in Vegas, too.

“Watch yourself, boy. That there Graves fellow, he’s an oil burner,” Sparks called out after me.

I waved in thanks. Upstairs, Graves was sacked out on my bed. I slammed the door hard to wake him up. He was off the bed in a flash. “When did you get back?”

“A couple of hours ago,” Graves whined, rubbing his eyes.

“What did you find out?”

“Nothing. Not a damn thing,” he reported with disappointment. “I cannot imagine what the police are so terribly interested in Las Vegas for. Nothing odd or suspicious there as far as I could see, just business as usual in the capital of decadence and corruption.”

Either Allegro was a really good cop or Graves was a really bad reporter. “Corruption?”

“Gambling and sin in the desert. You know the tally.”

“Uh-huh.” I watched Graves closely, waiting for what he was itching to tell me. I could see it in his eyes. I could see it in his smile, which stretched his thin lips tight like two red rubber bands. “Except for one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“About that woman friend of yours, the one you mentioned at dinner the other night.”

“What about her?”

“She’s not really an interior decorator as she represented herself to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she engages in the oldest profession.”

“The what?”

“She is a walker of the streets, a prostitute.”

“I never paid her a cent.”

“Hmmm. Yes, well, then, perhaps in your case it was true love,” Graves snickered.

I could have slapped the grin right off of his face. “How do you know she’s a whore?”

“I asked her and she told me. Quite simple, actually.”

“What else did she tell you—about me?”

“She refused to speak about you. Practically clammed up as tight as a—” Graves stopped and thought for a moment. “As tight as a young virgin’s thighs, when I mentioned your name. And we were getting on so well up until that point.”

“I don’t know if I believe you.”

“I am not telling you this to ruin your day. When I could not get any kind of line of information on your brother, I decided to take an alternative approach and seek her out. She was working when I found her.”

“A hooker.” Who was paying her, I wondered.

“A high class one at that. High rollers and what have you, but a hooker just the same. You could not possibly have believed she was an interior decorator, could you?”

Yes, I could and I did. Who did she work for? Stitch or the Gabrielli Family? Maybe Allegro was right. I had been used all those times. That didn’t sit too well with me. First, I’d have to get Graves out of the way. “Listen, Graves, I got a tip that the fellow who broke into Stitch’s office was named Pendleton, from Huntington Beach.”

“Pendleton?”

“Yeah, something about he’s married into the Van DeVries family or something.”

“Oh yes. They are simply filthy with money, all of which was pumped out of the ground. Serious oil people, the Van DeVries are. How did you find that out?”

“A contact on the police force I’ve got. I just came from talking to him at the marina. Maybe this Pendleton guy knows something. At least the police think he might.”

“Maybe I should look into this.”

I smiled, happy he was taking the bait.

“Would you care to tag along?” he asked.

“No, I’ve got some business of my own to take care of.”

“In Las Vegas?”

I nodded. Graves smiled an evil, spiteful grin and I heard that same gremlin’s voice that Sparks heard. Something wasn’t right with Graves, but I didn’t have time to sit down and figure it out. There were other questions I wanted answered first. For that, I had to go to Vegas.

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Chapter 12

I wanted to drive up to Vegas, but I thought the police might follow me. With the cops waxing my tail, I'd never find out anything, so I reluctantly fired up Seven Sugar Papa. Even though ceilings and visibilities were unlimited the whole way, I sweated out what should have been a milk run. I was nervous, frantically trying to check every instrument and every system every second. Before today, I had never in my life been on an airplane ride that was too long.

I got in before dark, though, and headed straight for the Dunes, which was where Graves said April worked. April had always been a good time for so little sweat and so few headaches. It took a lot of hard work to keep a woman like Jeannette happy, but having fun with April was as sure and as easy as obeying the laws of gravity. Was it too easy? Was Graves right? I had never suspected her for a moment.

I sat in a dark quiet corner where I could see the entire bar area and most of the other tables in the main lounge. I ordered Seven-Up. I saw April leave with a man, then return forty-five minutes later. After twenty minutes more, she left with a pot-bellied Texan, who was so loud I could hear him drawl all the way across the bar. She was back within an hour. After I saw her leave for the third time, I ordered a double gin. When she returned and was back on-station at the bar thirty minutes later, I still had not touched my drink.

I walked up behind her. "Buy you a drink?"

"Why sure, hon—" She came up short when she swiveled on the stool and saw my face.

"How's the decorating business?"

"What are you doing here?" Her voice was suddenly curt and she was all business.

"I've been watching people come and go, come and go, come and go." I stared at April. She turned back to the bar. I signaled the bartender for drinks and sat down next to her, on the stool reserved for customers. "You know, I don't really care what line of work you're really in."

As soon as the bartender set down her Seven and Seven, April grabbed it and took a drink, a long drink.

"I just want to know one thing, did you get paid for me?"

"Hey, didn't we have good times together?" The hard edge in her voice softened.

"I thought so. I thought we always had great times together."

"Then does it make a difference?"

I nodded.

"No, it doesn't."

"It does to me."

"What, are you looking for a refund?"

"I just want to know. That's all."

"Don't ask. Don't ask me that, please." There was a desperate sincerity in her voice.

"Was it my brother?"

"You mean there's another one of you running around loose?" April smiled coyly, changing tactics. Her initial shock and coolness at seeing me unexpectedly was completely gone. She put her arm on my shoulder, naturally falling into the easy manipulative intimacy that was the marketing tool of her trade. But there was still a note of urgency in her voice. "Listen, Hawk, let's discuss this somewhere else, okay? This isn't the best place in the world to have a private conversation."

"I need to know." I grabbed her wrist and took her hand off of me. "I need to know who paid you for me."

"Please don't." She looked nervously around the lounge.

“Was it the Gabriellis?” Just as I asked, I was gripped tightly on the shoulder from behind. April took a last gulp of her Seven and Seven, then slipped out of my hands and away from the bar. She stopped and looked back to flash a quick smile.

I couldn't get mad at April. We did have fun, fun that cannot be bought. She probably never knew a thing.

“Come with us, Mr. Byrd.”

I was surrounded at the bar by three thugs who all towered over me even after I stood up and outweighed me by at least thirty pounds. “Do I have a choice?”

“Nope.”

I shrugged my shoulders, pushed away my untouched double gin and went with them. They took me out of the city in a big, black Buick sedan. It was a very quiet ride through the desert. Not a word was spoken. I listened to the hum of tires on concrete for an hour, until we pulled off on a gravel road. After another mile or two we pulled up to a fortified hacienda ranch that overlooked the lights of Las Vegas like the city was a jewel owned and on private display. I had never been there before, but I knew where I was. Two of the thugs took me inside to a dark paneled study furnished with a big desk and leather chairs. As we waited, I wondered if this was the “in the desert” that Stitch had referred to on his Dictaphone machine.

Double doors swung open. A shriveled up little man in a wheel chair was pushed into the room by a younger man in a pinstriped suit. I could only barely recognize him as the dashing, arrogant gangster whose face was always on the front page of *The Chicago Tribune*. Of course, Chicago was thousands of miles away and my childhood nearly twenty years back. Time had taken its toll, but still, I was face-to-face with a legend. Stiffly, he waved off the thugs who had brought me. They stepped outside, but left the door ajar. The man in the pinstriped suit stayed, standing behind the wheel chair with his hands clasped behind his back. I wasn't a doctor, but I could feel death's presence when Pop Gabrielli was wheeled into the room.

“Angus, come close. Come closer, please. Do not make me strain myself to speak.” His Italian accent still came through vocal chords blown out by smoke, drink and disease. After a brief fit of coughing, he motioned me to the leather chair at his side. I sat down. He immediately began patting my knee as if I were a small boy. “How terribly sorry we all are to hear about your brother. He was a good boy, a very good boy. I loved him like one of my own sons.” Gabrielli looked back over his shoulder at the man in the pinstriped suit.

I said nothing, figuring I was brought to listen, not to talk. I couldn't doubt his sincerity. A dying man would not waste his precious breath to sweet talk a nobody like me.

He wiped his mouth with a white handkerchief grasped in his left hand so that it looked like a little ghost puppet. “You know me?”

I nodded. “But how do you know Stitch?”

The old man's jaw bone kneaded his doughy face into a close approximation of a smile. “Long, long ago. You—you were but a tot, when Alister came to work for me and my brothers, loading and unloading the union trucks. He was a special boy, Alister was. You could see it. A very special boy. He caught my eye.”

I nodded respectfully. “He was treating you here in Las Vegas, wasn't he?”

“Alister has been treating me for years and years, Angus, every since he graduated from medical school.”

“Since...”

“That was our arrangement, young Angus.”

“Arrangement?”

“Yes, for seeing him through school.”

“You paid for his schooling? But I always thought—”

“Your father worked hard, my son, but hard work is no guarantee of much money, only hard work.” He waved his little ghost of a handkerchief before him. “Acquiring money is an entirely different talent. It is my special talent.”

I looked down and noticed the Persian rug beneath my feet for the first time. I slowly shook my head.

“All I ever asked in return was to be able, on occasion, to use that which I had paid for. Nothing more than that, ever. A man of my...talents, shall we say, must take special care in the counsel he seeks. Unfortunately, my condition has gotten much worse and my needs have been great. Alister never complained once about coming. I would have gladly paid him, but he would not hear of it.”

“You owned my brother?”

Gabrielli shook his head so violently that I was afraid it was going to fall off. He began to cough and hack. After a moment he was able to speak again. His ravaged voice was devoid of expression, but his anger still came through. “No one owned your brother. No one. My charity is not punitive.” He took a moment to reign in his anger. “I loved Alister like I love my own sons. I helped him like a father helps his sons. I helped him achieve his career as a doctor, but he lived his life and I lived mine. He helped me hold on to my life for a few precious years more, as a son might so help a father.”

I looked skeptically at the old man.

“Believe me, young Angus.”

No one called me Angus except my mother and father, and, now, Angelo Gabrielli. I didn't like it. “And April?”

Gabrielli's putty-like face tried to hold a devilish grin.

“Alister was always looking after you like a mother hen after her chick. He knew that troubled look you have on your face now. He saw to it that you were, shall we say, unencumbered with details that would have only caused you needless worries. We paid for April and, before April, Rebecca. I trust you found them pleasant diversions. They both came highly recommended. Alister knew the kind of women you would find irresistible.”

I nodded my head, but my fists were clenched hard. I was angry at being so easily led around by my dick.

“We spoke of you often, Alister and I. He was quite proud of his baby brother. The ace fighter pilot, single-handedly shooting Germans down out of the sky. He made you sound bigger than life when he talked about you, like you were some kind of real life John Wayne cowboy hero.”

“But Stitch was the real hero. He got the medals from MacArthur.” I dismissed the praise.

“No. He always told me that his medals had more to do with Army politics than with true heroism. He only watched the war and helped to clean up after it. Boys like you fought the war. To him, that was real hero's work.”

There was a long pause in our talk. I listened to Gabrielli wheeze and wheeze. I watched him wipe his mouth with movements that seemed only barely under his control.

“I had always thought,” he began quietly, as if confiding secrets in me, “that we, the family, could do something for you.”

I said nothing.

“You know, we helped to set Alister up in Hollywood. He wanted out of Chicago and it was becoming clear that much of our operation would move west. It was a simple thing. We helped make business good for him. Alister seemed to thrive in California.”

It hurt to hear such things about my brother, but I still said nothing.

“After the war, there were so many opportunities for sharp young men such as yourself.” Gabrielli sighed loudly. “But Alister always stood between us and you.”

“To protect himself?”

“No, to protect you. He was looking out for you.”

“That’s a laugh.” I smirked wryly.

“Truly, Angus. Truly.”

“Oh yeah? Well, the police think I’m up to my eyeballs in this mess and I guess I am. After all, I acted like Stitch’s personal pilot.”

“I am not talking about that. He only had you bring him here because he had so little time ever to spend with you and because he loved flying with you. You boys, what with your flying and Alister’s sailing, those were your natural elements. He knew flying meant as much to you as sailing did to him. You were something of a free spirit that he would not stand to see caged into compromising obligations, like he had with his practice and such.”

“What are you driving at?”

“I always suspected that Alister was less than entirely happy as a doctor. He never would say so, but perhaps his desire to become a doctor was more a desire to please your mother and father, especially your father.”

“Maybe so, but what does that have to do with Stitch’s death?”

“Perhaps nothing. Perhaps everything.”

“What did you have to do with his death?”

“Angus, my boy, Angus.” Gabrielli was visibly dismayed at what I said. “Alister was my only hope for life. Why would I ever jeopardize my one chance to prolong my miserable existence?”

“You have many powerful enemies.”

“Yes, enemies who now watch nature do for free what they could not buy for fifty years with all of the gold in Ft. Knox. No reasonable man would accept the risks of my family’s retribution when death stalks so close to me. You see, my sons are very strong and powerful, too.” Gabrielli motioned towards the man who had wheeled him and still stood with his hands behind his back. “Yes, and perhaps the treatment we sought in Mexico was only a desperate grasping at straws—”

“Stitch was taking you to Mexico for treatment?”

“Yes, on his boat. Certain options are not available here in the states and even now, I must take care not to give the authorities any excuse to arrest me. I will not die in Alcatraz. No. Never. But let me make one thing clear, Alister was a son to me and I would not hesitate to exact vengeance, if I thought his death was—was, well, business related. You understand?”

I nodded. I looked aimlessly around the room.

“I was so looking forward to sailing on Alister’s boat. I had heard so much about it.”

“Who killed him?”

“I do not know.” The old man shook his head and waved his little ghost puppet. “The Los Angeles police were in town making inquiries, but they do not seem to know much about your brother.”

“Who was it? My brother wouldn’t have killed himself.”

“Angus, my boy, should we not just let him lie in peace? He is dead now. What can we do? The time to have helped him has passed.”

“Help him? Was he in trouble?”

“Everyone has their frustrations to live with. So did Alister. He was a volatile man, as you know, prone to extremes, the highest highs, the lowest lows.”

Stitch was high strung. The best of the best—like winning thoroughbred race horses—always are. A lot of doctors were like that as far as I could tell from meeting Stitch’s friends and associates. I felt Gabrielli was getting at something else.

“What was it? Tell me. I want to know.”

“We should let the earth take him and let his soul find its peace,” Gabrielli carried on.

“Could he have really killed himself?”

“Perhaps. But—oh no, I do not know. I do not think so, but who has not felt the heavy weight of despair upon his own shoulders and considered it?”

“Why?” I begged, believing he knew something he wasn’t sharing.

“Let him rest in peace, Angus, I beseech you.”

“I want to know.”

“You must reason the cost. I fear it is not worth the price.”

“My talent is not profit and loss. I don’t really care about such things. I only want to know. You know what happened, don’t you? Tell me.”

The old man shook his head slowly. “Your brother was not so simple a man as he may have appeared. No man is. I fear even I never much understood him, even as often as we talked and as close as we became. There are dark alleys off of every life that are best left for the mice and the cats and the other creatures of the night.”

“What? What was it?”

“Do you love your brother?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then serve him in death as you would have served him in life.”

“You won’t tell me?”

“Do not be angry with me. I am dying. I will soon join Alister—too soon. Listen to me. There is no profit in your quest, only debts. Only debts and more debts, and many doubts.”

I wasn’t going to learn anything more from Gabrielli that would help me. Impatient, I stood up to go. His son reflexively reached inside his suit coat and held his hand there, ready to pull out a gun.

“Your brother loved you, Angus. Show your love for him.”

“Can I go now?”

The old man nodded. He made one last attempt at a smile. “Is there anything we can do for you?”

“Just take me back to town, to the airport, please.”

“Anything else?”

I shook my head. “Just take me to the airport.”

And he had it done.

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Chapter 13

I tried hard—too hard—to sleep on the couch in the pilot’s lounge at McCarren airport, but didn’t. About two in the morning, I decided to head back to LA. I had trouble holding heading and altitude. I chalked it up to being tired, but I also found my mind drifting off, trying to fit together the jigsaw pieces I had in the puzzle of Stitch’s death. I had a handful from everybody, too—Peletier, Allegro, Elaine, Graves, Gabrielli. I wasn’t even sure, though, that any of them were from the same box. I bounced Seven Sugar Papa down hard on the runway, like a regular navy carrier pilot, but other than that, the flight went okay, not great, just okay. I was walking across the tarmac when I got bushwhacked from behind.

Al McGuire had heard my radio calls in the pattern and set up an ambush for me. He came at me from seven o’clock, pedaling on his bike like a maniac. He smacked me hard in the ear as he passed. I could hear him cackling as he circled back around for another pass. He chased me to the hangar where I scrambled onto my bike. Dog fighting on bicycles was one of our favorite pastimes in England when we were stuck on the base. Sometimes we’d have the whole squadron going at it. Al McGuire would come over and wax a few hot fighter tails, showing just how badly the Army way had screwed up again by putting him in a bomber group.

Al and I chased each other all around the apron, in and out of the pools of light shining down from their poles. Pumping my legs and wrestling the handle bars, planning intercept angles and defying gravity to turn back in for the kill, purged my mind of its troubles, at least for a short time, until Al zigged when I zagged, and we ended up in a tangled heap of arms, legs, bicycle spokes and handle bars on the asphalt.

Completely fagged out and laughing like hyenas, we unknotted ourselves and our bikes, then lit up smokes.

“Been a while,” Al gasped.

“Yup. But you still got the touch.”

“Either you got it or you don’t.”

I nodded, trying to catch my breath with a long pull off my cigarette. It made me dizzy. Al did the same.

“Old Sparks told me Rosa’s been up to see you,” Al said with a knowing grin. “You been dancing on her rudder pedals?”

“No way.” I shook my head. I didn’t really want to be reminded, much less talk about it. “It was nothing.”

“Sure Hawk. Sure.”

I shook my head and lit another smoke right off my first one. “Life’s been a bit too much of a bitch lately.”

“Pretties, ponies and air-e-o-planes—all give you the ride of your life. But they’re all bitches, too, and they’ll bury you if you let them.”

“Yeah, well, I’m just getting to the end of my rope with this thing with my brother.”

“Hey, you know the drill: try ‘A’, if ‘A’ don’t work, try ‘B’, if ‘B’ don’t work try ‘C’, if ‘C’ don’t work, then toss the God damn book and try anything that comes to mind.”

“Is that how it works? Anything goes? Imagine that. And I thought the Army had everything figured out and put down in black and white.”

“Pretties, ponies and air-e-o-planes—anything goes. You don’t give up until you go splat.”

“Balls out, throttle to the wall.”

“Sure. What have you got to lose? Your virginity?”

“Yeah, what have I got to lose.” We both went quiet as I dwelled on those words.

The dawn was just beginning to show to the east like a woman’s slip beneath the hemline of darkness. Al McGuire and I watched two strangers in suits walk towards us. They were Peletier’s men and they had come to take me downtown.

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I sat cooling my heels in an empty interrogation room for forty-five minutes. A fact confirmed by the number of my brand of butts in the ashtray. If this didn’t start soon, I’d run out and then I’d really start getting irritable. I wasn’t mad just then, because I figured that Peletier was sitting on his thumbs just like me for no reason except to try to unnerve me. It was exactly the kind of guy Peletier was, but I wasn’t going to let it work on me. Like Al McGuire said, anything goes, so be ready.

Peletier finally came into the room with a scowl on his face that he must have sucked a bushel full of lemons to perfect. He didn’t sit down. Instead, he stood at the far end of the table and stared down into an open file folder. Allegro was right, he was a paper pusher, not a cop. He’d never find out who killed Stitch.

“We’ve been looking for your girlfriend, Byrd. Where have you been hiding Miss Carter?” Peletier finally asked after going through a ritual of straightening his vest, seating the knot of his tie, and tugging at the long sleeves of his shirt beneath his suit jacket.

“Hey, pal, I don’t hold the registration slip on her.”

“Where is she?”

“How should I know?”

“You were sleeping with her, weren’t you?” Peletier cracked a venomous smile.

Anything goes, I thought to myself, and I wasn’t going to take any of Peletier’s crap. “You got pictures to prove that, ace, or just a set of dirty sheets?”

That broke the Lieutenant’s stride. He sought refuge in his manila folder, then came back out swinging. “Then why don’t you just tell me about you and your brother and Angelo Gabrielli and what makes you three so cozy.”

I lit a cigarette and said nothing.

“In what capacity were you and your brother working for the Gabrielli family?”

I blew smoke in Peletier’s direction.

“We know you went up to Las Vegas yesterday.”

“It was a free country last time I checked.” I refused to let him shake me up.

“You’re walking on thin ice mister.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t look bright enough to light a blow torch.” The veins on Peletier’s neck bulged and throbbled. He was getting really worked up. “Who murdered my brother or are you blowing smoke out your ass on that one, too?”

“The exact cause of your brother’s death has not yet been determined—”

“You guys are really worthless, you know that?”

“Byrd, if you insist on standing in the way of this investigation, I will knock you down and knock you down hard. And you will get hurt.”

“Give me a break already.”

“Are you going to answer my questions?”

“Sit and spin, buddy. I’m tired of your face.”

“For two cents, I’d throw you in a cell downstairs to rot.”

“Do it.”

“I don’t want to infect the vermin.”

“It might make the job of tailing me easy enough for the bozos you got following me.”

“If you are not going to co-operate, then get the hell out of here,” Peletier screamed, finally losing his temper.

“Gladly. Remember, you invited me.” I got up and left. The astonished look on Peletier’s face told me he didn’t believe I would leave. In his LAPD Handbook, it was probably written up as undignified to chase after witnesses, so I got away clean.

On my way out, Allegro came up along side of me. “Hey, Hawk, what gives?”

“You tell me, Vince.”

Allegro shrugged his shoulders. “I told you Peletier would try to come down hard on you.”

“If that’s the best he can do, well...what can I say. The guy should be a drill instructor in the Girl Scouts.”

“He thought he had a gimme on this one. It’s turned out to be a real tar baby. He’s taking heat from upstairs.”

“Got a tissue? I think my heart’s bleeding.”

“Why did you slip his tail and go to Vegas?”

“That’s my business,” I snapped.

“Hawk, come on. It’s me, Vince.”

I looked at Allegro. He smiled at me, puffing his chubby cheeks up like balloons. I reminded myself that I was still in the den of lions and that I shouldn’t fall for any bad cop/good cop routines. “I needed to talk to somebody.”

“Gabielli?”

“As a matter of fact, no. A girl, named April.”

“About what?”

“Personal, Vince.”

“Sure, Hawk.” Allegro followed me out onto the sidewalk and into the bright sunshine. He squinted painfully and shaded his eyes as he looked up at me. “What about this Graves fellow?”

“What about him? Works for *The Times*. He’s doing a story on Stitch. I’ve talked to him a couple of times.”

“He’s Arts and Leisure.”

“Yeah, he said. I guess he’s trying to make something of himself with this story and escape all of that.”

“He’s queer.”

I looked at Allegro, trying to read his face. “What do you mean, that he’s an oddball or what?”

“Or what.”

“Come on. How do you know that?”

“I talk to people. I find things out. It’s my job.”

I couldn’t tell if Allegro was grinning or just squinting.

“Why is a faggot so interested in what happened to your brother?”

“He works for *The Times*. He’s trying to get ahead by doing a story—”

Allegro shook his head. “He’s not out to climb the news room ladder to success. He’s too lazy. From what I hear, he’s turned down transfers and promotions to stay right where he is.”

I lit a smoke and looked up and down the street.

“What made him crawl out from under his rock?” Allegro asked aloud.

“I don’t know, Vince.” I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“Watch him, Hawk. Just watch him. I got to go.”

Allegro turned and went back inside. I stood in the middle of the sidewalk and smoked. I didn’t know if Allegro was baiting me or not, but he had hit the nail on the head. That was what bothered

me about Graves and what those little voices had been warning Sparks about. Why was Graves so interested in my brother? I tossed my smoke in the gutter and went to find a pay phone to ask him, but he wasn't at *The Times* and he wasn't at his apartment, so the whole way back to the airport I writhed in uncomfortable speculation.

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Chapter 14

When I got back to the airport, a letter from some law firm was waiting for me. My parents had gotten Stitch's insurance money, a tidy six figure sum. My sisters had both already done well in marriage, so they got furniture, paintings, art objects, family heirlooms and college money for all their kids. I got everything else: the house, his three cars, the boat, stocks, bonds and a stack of money too big for me to imagine all in one pile. The temperature of the office got noticeably hotter as Rosa suddenly forgave my past indiscretion and warmed up to me.

Ignoring her, I went upstairs to ponder my new fortune, but I came to no conclusions. I also couldn't sit still or lay down for more than two seconds at a time. I paced myself out as much as I could within the confines of my apartment, until finally deciding to go take a look at what I had inherited.

Stitch always called his place "*Frankenstein's Castle*." He joked that in his business, he had taken home more than enough human spare parts to put together a bench full of ball players so that Los Angeles could have a major league baseball team. That was Stitch's one regret about leaving Chicago. He really missed watching the Cubs play.

It wasn't the biggest house in Bel Aire, but to me it was a mansion. In fact, all that open space inside made me—one who finds the glove fitting confines of airplane cockpits quite comfortable—feel exposed and vulnerable, like I had no place to hide. Seeing it empty and quiet, I couldn't imagine what Stitch did with all of it besides throw massive parties that always made me drift around at the edge of rooms watching all of the different people and trying to figure out how Stitch ever thought of things to say to all of them. It was out in the shallows of the crowd at one of Stitch's bashes that I had met Elaine. She used to run with the schools in deep water and I probably never would have met her if it hadn't been for her accident. But that was the difference between Stitch and me: Stitch could talk to anyone and he was a friend to everybody and their brother, while I spoke when I had something to say and I spoke what was on my mind. My friends were few, but they were loyal and close.

I wandered aimlessly around from room to room. The expensive furniture and Stitch's infamous "Art Objects" made me feel like I was in a museum. I kept my hands in my pockets. There were parts of Stitch's house that I had never been in before and I could imagine that there might yet be some dark corner still waiting to be discovered. His bedroom upstairs was bigger than my whole apartment and probably bigger than the hangar downstairs. I figured that if it weren't for the huge bed, Seven Sugar Papa would fit in quite handily.

I never knew there was a third floor in the house. The only way up seemed to be a stairway off of the master bedroom. It wasn't just a storage attic, either. The room was finished off nicely with a vaulted ceiling and skylights. It was filled with work tables, easels, paints, paintings, drawings and sculptures. Everybody knew Stitch was a pretty good hand at sketching. In fact, he was great at drawing faces. He said he had to be, because if he couldn't show his patients on paper what their faces were going to look like after surgery, no way they would ever let him near them with a knife. He made light of his talent by doing cartoons of people like the kind you might get at a carnival or the state fair. He drew a pretty good one of me in a biplane with my characteristic Byrd profile against a setting sun. It was the only thing on the walls of my place, and from some of the talk at his parties, I gathered it was something of an honor to have one of Stitch's caricatures hanging in your office or your living room. Stitch always deflected praise by changing the subject or excusing himself from the conversation.

There were reams and reams of sketches in pencil and in charcoal of every imaginable subject:

flowers, fruit, animals, ocean, beaches, mountains, houses, cars, boats, clowns, old people, children, naked women and naked men. They were amazingly realistic, almost like photographs out of text books. His paintings, though, were different. The subjects were distorted, pulled apart like a walk through a house of mirrors. Some even reminded me of what Sparks' jump suit looked like after working a particularly nasty engine overhaul. I was fascinated looking at them, not because I like art at all, but because his paintings were like dreams and nightmares to the reality of his sketches. And this whole art thing hidden deep inside his house made me think that he was living a sort of Dr. Stitch and Mr. Hyde kind of life.

"He was very good, wasn't he?"

I turned around quickly to see Elaine standing in the doorway to Stitch's studio.

"I was driving by and saw your car parked out front. I, um, have my own key."

"You seem to have a key to everywhere."

"That's not very nice to say."

"I've been trying to call you."

"I know," she said matter-of-factly.

"Where have you been?"

"You look tired," she said, ignoring me.

"I am tired. I've had a damn rotten week so far."

Elaine came into the room and casually walked around, looking at Stitch's paintings. "What do you think of his work?"

I followed Elaine around the room with my eyes. "I don't know. Some of it looks pretty good, like the sketches. The paintings, well, I don't know squat about art, really."

"He was very, very good—especially his paintings. I'm not just saying that either. He had a front, named Anthony Ringwilder, that he used to show his work. His paintings received excellent reviews and sold very well, bringing top dollar prices."

I watched Elaine closely. There was something in her voice, a tone of familiarity or admiration or excitement that hinted at a closeness between her and Stitch beyond mere friendship.

"But you never knew about any of this, did you?" she asked subduing herself.

"No," I said. "I take it you did, though."

She nodded. I think I was one of the only ones who knew. Besides Ringwilder, of course. It was Stitch's one great love in life."

"What about being a doctor?"

"That was for your father, really."

I nodded. It was the same thing that Gabrielli told me. Stitch had always been held up as an example to me when I was growing up. I never had any inkling of this. I just couldn't understand how I never saw it.

"As a doctor, he thought that he would have the time and the money to at least stay close to it, but it wasn't enough for him to simply be a patron of the arts. You know Stitch, he was a doer. He never could sit on the sidelines and just watch—like going off to fight with MacArthur in the South Pacific. He didn't have to go. So, of course, once he felt he had matured as an artist, he had to show his work. He couldn't just let it collect dust up here."

"How do you know so much about *my* brother?"

"We spent a lot of time together, while—"

"Like little trips to Mexico?"

Elaine stopped walking. She looked a little shocked. "Oh Hawk, it's not what you think."

She didn't sound completely convincing. "I had the pleasure of talking with Angelo Gabrielli yesterday."

"And did he tell you why we were going to Mexico?"

I nodded.

Elaine nodded back at me, but her eyes were accusing, as if she had been betrayed.

“So, my brother sold his soul to Gabrielli to become a doctor, just to please pop.”

“And that was his hell, too, because his heart was really here.” Elaine motioned around the studio. “He was a very unhappy man down deep. It was tearing him apart.”

“I never imagined.”

“Not many did. He was something of an actor himself. I guess, perhaps, dealing with so many in my profession, a little of the grease paint rubbed off on him.”

We stood in an awkward silence, both looking about the studio.

“Why have you been avoiding me?” I asked.

“Because of this Gabrielli thing,” she sighed. “Stitch wanted to keep you out of it completely, but he needed help on the trip. I volunteered to go. I owed him so much. After he was killed I didn’t have any one to turn to except you. But then, I realized that they might come after me, and that I would be putting you in danger.” Elaine looked down at her feet. “I also didn’t know what to tell the police about everything. It would have put you on the spot, too.”

“I’m already on the spot.”

“I’m sorry. This is all such a big mess.”

“Gabrielli told me that none of his ‘business associates’ or ‘competitors’ were involved.”

“Do you believe him?”

I nodded.

“Who then?”

I shrugged my shoulders. Another long silence.

“Hawk, are we—”

But before she finished, I stepped over and kissed her. She didn’t resist and we held each other tightly. We went downstairs and made love in Stitch’s bed. I felt a bit guilty as we smoked in silence afterward, because I had not really done it out of love for Elaine, but because I had to prove something—to myself? To Elaine? To Stitch? Before I could figure it out, I fell into a deep sleep. When I woke, Elaine was gone.

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Chapter 15

I sat up and looked across a bed that was as big as a Navy flattop. It seemed to go on forever. I wasn't mad that Elaine was gone this time. I wouldn't have to sortie against my doubts of the night before. I lit a cigarette. My mind was clear for a change, as if I had just broken out on top of an overcast. Two thoughts stuck out fat and happy like bomber silhouettes. First, that Stitch's paintings were bringing down top dollar, and, second, that Stitch's front was the key to unraveling everything. I remembered what Allegro said, 'Follow the money and you'll find your killer.' I didn't know exactly how, but in a burst of unsubstantiated faith, I saw in my mind that it was all going to fit together, Graves included. As I smoked a second cigarette, I planned out what I had to do.

At the top of the list was a visit to the Wilshire Gallery in Beverly Hills that was, according to *The Times*, supposedly showing Anthony Ringwilder's work. I strolled around, looking closely at the paintings and the sculptures. The paintings were all of the same style as I had seen in Stitch's hidden studio. The sculptures were noticeably different, though, even to my unartistic eyes. They were cruder and unfinished-looking, too sloppy to really be Stitch's work. From the eight by ten glossies the gallery had posted, Ringwilder looked to be a rugged, blonde-haired guy with broad, rounded features. Even though he was Scandinavian looking, his eyes were dark and commanding, staring back directly at the camera lens. It was hard to tell, but I guessed that he was over six feet tall and weighed out in two hundred or maybe two-twenty. The printed-up bio on Ringwilder was suitably vague. He was described as a native Californian, living in Hollywood, who often sought inspiration in the desert.

The gallery was kind of deserted, so the girl at the desk spent a lot of time answering my questions. She was more than friendly, but I had things to do. She was a big fan of Ringwilder, talking on and on about his genius, his sensitivity and his charisma. He obviously had her under some kind of spell. She said that though his sculptures were moving slowly, Ringwilder had sold twenty thousand dollars worth of paintings in March. I chalked that up as a tidy sum, still operating from my pre-inheritance frame of reference, but I also couldn't see Stitch taking a life or death stand over it. The last anyone had seen Ringwilder was the Friday before Stitch was killed when he came in to pick up his check for March sales. I tried to get his address, but that was against gallery policy.

From the gallery, I headed right to Hollywood and pounded the pavement up and down the strip, figuring that if I hit enough of the art supply stores, galleries, bars, and other likely hangouts, I might pick up a line on Ringwilder. He was a popular guy. Besides the fact that over half of Hollywood held a marker on him, everyone I talked to had some kind of story about his wild, outrageous behavior—like crashing a high society party or making a nuisance of himself to society in general by accosting innocent pedestrians on the street. People admiringly called him 'beat', but I wasn't sure exactly what that meant. As the afternoon wore on, I noticed that more was said about his personality than his talent. Most were surprised at his success and acceptance in Beverly Hills and wondered out loud when he might get around to paying off his bills. No one had seen him for a week and a half, but that wasn't unusual. He was always dropping out of sight to head out to the desert or to make the scene in San Francisco. I was able to get a couple of addresses for him, but neither checked out. It was either Ringwilder staying one step ahead of his creditors or greedy shop keepers trying to make sure they got theirs before I got mine out of him. I was getting nowhere, so finally I called Allegro.

"Hey, Vince, Hawk here. How's it going?"

"So-so. Got no complaints. How you?"

"Okay. Listen, I've got a favor to ask."

“Shoot.”

“I’ve been going over some of Stitch’s papers and I found an IOU from some guy named Anthony Ringwilder.”

“How much?”

“About twenty grand.” I heard Allegro whistle. “I was wondering if you might be able to help me get a line on this guy from a car registration or a driver’s license or something.”

“Ringwilder, huh? That sounds like it should ring a bell or two. Hang on.” Vince put the phone down and I listened to the squad room percolate for about five minutes. “You got any idea what this guy looks like?”

“I’ve seen pictures. Blonde. Six-two. Two-ten or so. Looks like a big strong guy. Why do you ask?”

“Well, we had a call from the Santa Barbara Sheriff’s office about a John Doe that washed up on a beach a few miles south of town. There was a washed out receipt on the body made out to a Mr. Ring-something or other. They’re looking for some help nailing down his ID. Think you could take a look for us?”

“I could try. I didn’t know the guy though.”

“No sweat, why don’t you come on down and by the time you get here, I’ll have an address for you.”

“How about if we meet at Casey’s. I want to stay off Peletier’s turf.”

“Yeah, I suppose I can’t really blame you. The Lieutenant has been going a bit loony tunes lately.”

“I’ll buy you lunch.” I knew that would clinch it.

“Deal.”

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I met Allegro at the dark, quiet watering hole for rank and file cops down around the corner from the station. Casey was an ex-patrolman whose separation from the force had something to do with an off-duty shooting, but the real story was something of a well-kept family secret among the boys in blue. Allegro was already halfway through a bowl of chili and a grilled cheese sandwich by the time I got there. A thick file sat on the bar. I sat down next to Allegro. Casey brought me a beer.

“Already at the feeding trough, I see.”

“Got to rush this one before I’m missed. We’re short in the squad room today. Mel called in sick.” Allegro shoved a pair of photos my way without breaking the rhythm of spoon moving from bowl to mouth. “Take a look at these here.”

I could see immediately that it was Ringwilder, even though he was bloated, wrinkled and paled from what I guessed was at least a week in the water. There was even a washed out gash in his cheek, which could have been where the blood came from that Eddie in the lab found on Stitch’s gun. I needed time, though.

“Jesus, Vince.”

“Not a pretty sight, eh Hawk?”

“Well, he’s blonde and looks big, but I can’t tell you for sure if it’s Ringwilder or not.”

“Yeah, the guy looks like an albino prune,” Allegro said, tearing off a bite of grilled cheese and turning one of the pictures his way to look at it. “It was worth a shot anyway. Here, I got an address for you.”

I nodded and took the piece of paper from Allegro. He excused himself and headed back towards the can. I flipped open the file full of photos and multi-colored official paperwork from

three different counties. I took an extra photo of Ringwilder's body and stuffed it into my flight jacket. I paid Allegro's tab, including a little extra for pie. I tipped Casey pretty heavy and made up some excuse for him to tell Allegro, then left before he got back. I had felt Allegro's watchful eye on me, though, and I knew he had seen me take the picture. Allegro never missed a trick.

I didn't see much point in heading back to Hollywood to check on the address Allegro gave me. I called the apartment manager and heard the now familiar litany that Ringwilder was three months behind on his rent and that if I was a friend of his I should tell him that if he didn't show his face around there with some money soon, he was going to find his stuff out in the gutter. I called Graves and told him to meet me at the *Dorian Gray*. He sounded like he might have other plans, but I insisted. Then I drove to the marina, taking Mulholland Drive as fast as the MG could go and still hold the road, just to lose Peletier's tail on me.

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I got to the marina first and watched Graves gingerly step aboard the boat. In every single move he made, it was now obvious that what Allegro had told me about him was true. He got brought up short by the stain of Stitch's blood on the deck.

"Er, good day, Mr. Byrd. How are you today?"

"Fine, Graves, just fine." I watched him closely. It made him squirm. He didn't know what was up.

"I did track down that Pendleton fellow in Huntington Beach that we spoke about. I do not believe he is a viable suspect, though. He seemed motivated, rather, out of extreme paranoia that his mistress might be discovered by his wife and—"

"Graves, do you know anything about a fellow named Ringwilder?"

A fleeting look of pain played across Graves' face like how the wind dances across the surface of a pond. He quickly got hold of himself. "Yes. I know an Anthony Ringwilder. He is a local artist. I have had the opportunity to interview him and to review his work. I found him quite an interesting personality. He shows much promise as an artist. Why, er, why do you ask?"

"What was his connection with my brother?"

"Your brother? Well, ah, I would—I am not sure I understand what this might have to do with your brother's murder."

"I think Ringwilder was the last person to see Stitch alive," I explained.

"Is that so? Well, perhaps we should attempt to locate this Ringwilder guy and ask him..."

I shook my head slowly. That pained look swirled across Graves' face again.

"Why—why not, Mr. Byrd?"

"Ringwilder's dead, too."

Graves' knees gave way. He stumbled towards the starboard side. I made no move to help him. He finally steadied himself on the side of the *Dorian Gray*.

"Why, Graves, are you all right?" I had to smile behind his back. I had struck a nerve, the right nerve.

"Yes. Yes. Fine. Fine. I am not possessed of a sea worthy set of legs. Not one for boats, you understand."

"Yes, I see."

"How—how unfortunate for Mr. Ringwilder."

"Yeah, the cops just found his body washed up out of the ocean south of Santa Barbara." I whipped the picture of Ringwilder's bloated face in front of Graves. He took the picture. His hands trembled as he stared at it. His shoulders began to shake as he wept. I walked to the stern and stared

out across the marina. *A lot of nice boats*, I thought to myself. I let Graves have a minute, then started back in on him again. “Okay, pal, spill it. What’s your stake in Ringwilder?”

He looked up at me from his knees with hurt, angry, animal eyes. “I loved him.”

“Yeah, I figured.” I was disgusted. “And what about my brother and Ringwilder?”

“Your brother stole him away from me.”

I stared down at Graves. “Cut the crap.”

“I am not lying. It is true. Anthony dumped me for your brother—and a cozy couple they were, too. He had found his sugar daddy, Anthony had. I tried to help him as much as I could with my reviews, but a rich, well-connected doctor who loved to dabble in the arts and play at being an artist could do so much more. Anthony dropped me for his sugar daddy.”

I grabbed Graves by the lapels of his jacket and pulled him to his feet. “Don’t you lie about my brother like that, you little shit. Stitch was paying Ringwilder to show his paintings and Ringwilder was getting ready to skip town with twenty grand or more of my brother’s money.”

“Is that what you think, that it was just business and nothing more?”

I stared hard at Graves, on the verge of putting my fist into his face with enough force to knock the ink right off his driver’s license.

“You don’t know anything.”

“I know my brother and I know he wouldn’t—”

“Oh no?” Graves screamed. He squirmed out of my grip and ran down into the cabin. I followed, but stayed up top by the door. He went right to the clothes closet. “And I suppose these are *all* your brother’s things?”

I remembered all of the extra clothes on the boat. Graves started pulling things off of hangers and throwing them around the cabin. “Hey, hold on there.”

“*This!* I gave this to Anthony for his birthday!” Graves waved a sports jacket that Stitch wouldn’t be caught dead wearing back and forth like a flag, then dropped it to the floor. “Look, Mr. Byrd, look here. These shirts and pants and shoes are two different sizes. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

My mind began to fog. I suddenly didn’t want to hear or see any more.

“Anthony was a whore! A damned whore! But I loved him,” Graves sobbed, then gathered strength. “And your brother just used him. He did not really care anything for Anthony. He did not really love him, not like I loved him. He was getting ready to toss him aside like a used tissue. He did not need Anthony any longer. He had used him to shield himself from criticism of his work until all of his rich Beverly Hills friends started buying his paintings. Then, that selfish bastard wanted all of the praise for himself. I heard the whispers in the galleries. I knew what was going to happen. I tried to warn Anthony, but he laughed at me. He told me to leave him alone, that I was just jealous. Your brother did not care what would happen to Anthony once he was revealed to be a phony. It would have ruined him, simply destroyed his integrity and his reputation as an artist. But I loved Anthony, and I could not bear to see it happen. I loved him. Your brother was just using him. I loved him, though...”

Graves went on and on. I drifted back to the stern and looked at all of the boats bobbing in the marina. To the west, the sun was setting behind long taffy stretches of stratus clouds. *A lot of nice boats*, I thought to myself, trying not to think of other things. *A lot of nice boats out here.*

~::~~

Chapter 16

I slipped Mickey, the guard at the Paramount lot, a ten instead of the usual five spot.

“Haven’t seen you ‘round much, Mr. Hawk,” Mickey said.

“Been busy,” I mumbled back, staring straight ahead through the dust-caked windshield of the MG.

“Building twenty-seven, sir.” Mickey opened the gate. “And thank you, sir. Good to see you again.”

Ever since my talk with Graves, life had gotten excruciatingly quiet. You never hear the rush of the wind around an airplane until the engine dies and quits making all of that racket, then time stops and you listen with fascination, until you realize you are going down.

“Sam, what are you doing back so soon?” Elaine asked when I walked into the editing room without knocking. She didn’t look up from the Moviola machine right away. It wasn’t until she had waited too long for Sam’s voice that she turned around and saw me. “Hawk, what are you doing here?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Everybody’s got to be somewhere, no?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Need to get my wheels back down on *terra firma*.” I walked aimlessly around the small, dark editing room. Film was draped everywhere like shiny black crepe paper. I looked over Elaine’s shoulder at the tiny movie screen, but didn’t really see what was frozen there.

Elaine followed me around the room with her eyes. “I don’t understand, Hawk.”

“You know, for the past week, I’ve watched my brother get torn down brick by brick. Everything that ever happened to me, everything I ever did was either because of him or in spite of him. He was the beacon I tracked.”

“Hawk, I—”

“Brick by God damn brick. Until...”

“Until what?”

I stopped pacing. “I found out the real story about Stitch and Ringwilder.”

“From who?” Elaine asked calmly. “Graves?”

“*You knew?*”

She looked back at the image frozen on the Moviola screen. She nodded.

“Damn.” I swore without much conviction. Nothing could surprise me anymore. I sat down in a director’s chair.

“I’m sorry, Hawk. What can I say?”

“Why?”

“He was looking to escape.”

“Escape? Escape what? He had everything, I know, because now it’s all mine.”

“Everything but his freedom.”

I could only shake my head. “I just don’t understand that.”

“That’s because you are free. Tell me, what were the happiest times of your life?”

“Flying,” I answered without hesitation.

“And what were the happiest times of Stitch’s life?”

“Out on the boat, fishing, I guess.”

Elaine nodded. “But he always had to come back to shore. It was only a temporary escape. You never have stopped flying.”

“I still don’t see what he was escaping from. His big house? His golf matches? His big parties?”

His—”

“His life, Hawk. His life. He told me many times that the war was both his salvation and his damnation. He had gone to do his part, just like everybody else. But the front line had shocked him back to life. He came home to whining, vain, flabby middle-aged women and men who only wanted to be young again. He came back and saw how old and decrepit and corrupt Angelo Gabrielli really was. He found it impossible to just pick up his life where he had left off.”

“That doesn’t explain Ringwilder to me.” I struggled to reconcile the information she threw at me.

“I can’t do that. I don’t know how what started out as a business arrangement became—changed into something different. Stitch was a pioneer desperately in search of a frontier. Ringwilder was the direct antithesis to everything in Stitch’s life. Ringwilder was breaking all of the rules: artistic, social and even sexual. Maybe Stitch wanted to be out on the edge of things like that. Not so much a desire to be that way as not to be the same as he was and always had been.”

“Maybe so. What happened?”

Elaine shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know details. It was between Stitch and Ringwilder. Stitch kept it that way.”

“But...”

“But Ringwilder had a Svengali-like personality. I think Stitch finally saw that he was playing him, pulling on puppet strings just like Gabrielli was, and he did not want to be manipulated any more. He didn’t need Ringwilder for his paintings, and I think he was finding that he had allowed himself to be sucked into that whole bohemian life-style and that wasn’t really what he wanted.”

“I’ll bet Ringwilder took it like a man, too.”

“I don’t know exactly, but I am afraid it got ugly. Stitch wanted him out of his life before we left for Mexico. Ever since his death, I’ve been waiting for Ringwilder to surface and make a big stink about things.”

“He won’t. He’s dead, too.”

“Really?”

I nodded in confirmation. “The police found his body washed up on a beach in Santa Barbara. Whatever happened on Stitch’s boat the night he was killed, Ringwilder was part of it. My guess is they argued and fought about what you said until Ringwilder shot Stitch and tried to make it look like suicide. When he tried to swim to shore, he drown and his body was carried up the channel by the currents.”

“Is that what the police say?”

“No, that’s what I say. And I am going to see that the police don’t make the connection. I’m not going to see my brother dragged through the mud.”

“It was all such a mess.”

“Yeah, a regular tar baby.”

“I wish I could fix things in life like I can fix movies.” Elaine pointed to the Moviola machine.

“You can, only with a bit of acting instead of editing.”

“How?”

“Have you talked to the police?”

“No, I’ve been hiding out from them as best as I can. Between Gabrielli and Ringwilder, I just didn’t know what to tell them.”

“What blood type are you?”

“Type O.”

“Perfect.”

“Why?”

“The police lab found trace amounts of type O blood on Stitch’s gun. His type is A. I figure it

came from Ringwilder. There was a struggle and Stitch hit him with his pistol before he got shot. It's the only solid evidence the police have that Stitch's death might be something other than suicide. You have to talk to the police and tell them that you and Stitch argued and that it's your blood on the gun."

"Argued about what?"

"About going to Mexico. About getting married," I plotted. "About not getting married. About something that would make Stitch mad enough to hit you and then despondent enough to sail out to sea and shoot himself. You are the one in the movie biz. You are the one that knows how to create these flickering illusions of life. Just give them a reason to believe that Stitch committed suicide."

Elaine nodded slowly.

"Do you think you can do it?"

"I was a pretty good actress once."

"I know you were—still are." I shouldn't have said it, but I did. "You had me fooled for a long time, didn't you?"

Tears came into Elaine's eyes. "I'm sorry, Hawk. If I couldn't have Stitch—"

"Because of Ringwilder."

She nodded.

"And I was the next best thing. Always coming in second. It never changes, does it?"

Elaine tried not to sob, but did. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

I got up, went over and put my arm around her. "Forget it. Just do this for Stitch."

"I will. I'd do anything for him."

~::~

Elaine turned in an Oscar-winning performance for the cops. Peletier closed his case neatly and went back to shuffling paper. Stitch's body went back home to Chicago on the train, and I crawled into a gin bottle and stayed there for the rest of April.

~::~

Chapter 17

One day Allegro stopped by my place. He yanked the covers off of me and shook me out of the deep well of gin sodden slumber.

“Come on, Hawk. Get your flea-bit carcass out of that bed. It’s almost three in the afternoon.”

“You woke me up just to tell me that? What a guy. Who are you anyway, Father Time?” We started a tug-of-war with the blanket. “Bug off, will ya? I want to sleep.”

“Talk to me. Just for a minute.”

Allegro smiled his patent-pending smile, and I knew all was lost. I sat up in bed and reached for a smoke. “Go ahead. Make yourself comfortable.”

Allegro looked around the trash heap that my apartment had become after a month of neglect as if he were afraid to move.

“What? You worried you might step in something?”

“No. No, not that.” Allegro sat down on the end of the bed, still looking around. “Holy mother, this place is a pit and a half.”

“So give me a ticket for littering already,” I said, drawing up my legs away from Allegro. I smoked. Allegro looked around the room. After a long while, I finally said, “You wanted to talk to me?”

“So, Hawk, how are you doing?” Allegro asked with a big smile.

I knew what he wanted to hear, but I was determined not to tell him or anybody else. “Just peachy, Vince. Just peachy keen.” I started a second smoke from my first one. “What brings you out to beautiful Burbank?”

“You do.”

“I’m honored.”

“You’re sloshed.”

“Yeah, that too. S.O.P.”

“‘Bout time you started getting on with things, isn’t it?”

“Oh, Vince, you aren’t going to lecture me, are you?”

He shook his head. “Nah. Nobody ever listens when I do, so I gave that practice up a long time ago.”

“Smart move professor.”

“But...”

I covered my eyes with my hand for effect, but also because they really hurt from my hangover, which, lately, wasn’t so unusual either. “Don’t, Vince. Please don’t.”

“It’s been over a month.”

“Believe me, professor, you don’t know the score.”

“Oh, I think I pretty much got the story line down pat.” Allegro’s smile changed. He knew.

“What, has Graves been stinking up the air with foul stories about Stitch?”

“No. As a matter of fact, our reporter friend quietly packed up his things and moved north to San Francisco. He’s working for *The Chronicle* up there.”

“You figured it out?”

“I can put two and two together. It’s my job and I’m pretty darn good at it—unlike a certain person whose name I won’t reveal, but whose initials are Lieutenant Peletier.”

“I guess I didn’t do such a hot job at investigating either.”

“I don’t know about that. You found out what happened, didn’t you—and before everybody else did, too. That’s the name of the game.” Allegro offered a smile of reassurance.

"It just seems like I should have been able to do something."

"In my line of work, there are no happy endings, only closed out files. You did good, as good as anyone could do."

"Did Peletier...?"

Allegro shook his head. "That girlfriend of yours put on a dandy song and dance. Her blood type even matched the traces Eddie in the lab found on the gun. That was the clincher."

"If you knew, why didn't you tell?"

"I didn't really feel I had anything to say about the whole thing that'd be of any use to anybody but the print boys."

Allegro rubbed his fat thigh.

"Thanks, Vince."

"No point in killing a bunch of trees and splashing them with ink over this one." Allegro looked down at his legs. "I told you I was on Stitch's side. Besides, I owed him."

"Vince, I—"

Allegro held up his hands. "There's nothing you got to say. Nothing anybody has to say."

I nodded. "You want a drink?"

"Sure."

After pulling on some trousers, I shuffled out to the kitchen. Allegro followed me, carefully picking his way through the Dresden-like rubble. I couldn't find any clean glasses, so I washed one for Allegro. I'd drink out of the bottle.

"To a good friend," Allegro toasted.

I clinked his glass with the gin bottle. "And a good brother."

We drank.

"Let's not talk about the past, Hawk."

I nodded and took a second drink under Allegro's watchful eye.

"When are you going to get around to moving into the house?" Allegro asked curiously.

I took another stiff drink.

"I can't believe you're still living here when you've got Stitch's place in Bel Aire."

"I—I don't really—I just can't live there," I stumbled to explain.

"Sure. I understand. What are you going to do with the place? Sell it?"

"I'm letting Elaine live there."

"For free?"

"No skin off my back. There's no mortgage on it."

Allegro gave off a long low whistle. "Sweet deal."

I nodded and drank. "She deserves it."

"What are *you* going to do, Hawk?"

"I don't know."

Allegro grabbed the gin bottle out of my hand before I could drink again. "Whatever you do, don't drink yourself to death."

"Sure, Vince, sure."

"I don't want to stand around and watch them scrape you out from under a bridge or pry you out of some downtown doorway."

I nodded.

"I'm not lecturing you, you understand, but I've got to tell you that's where you're headed."

"I guess the whole thing really tumbled my gyros. Just didn't know which way was up any more."

"You going to be okay?"

"Yeah." I looked Allegro in the eye. "Yeah, I will."

"Good." He nodded, then stood up to go. "Well, gotta run. A double homicide down in Chinatown—real nasty one, too. Brothers."

"Good luck with that."

"Take care, Hawk. Call if you need anything."

"Sure, Vince."

"Keep in touch." Allegro paused at the door. "He was a good man. He really was."

I nodded and waved as Allegro left. I had a bad taste in my mouth. I capped the gin bottle and set it aside.

~::~

I started flying again, giving lessons and running bank checks up and down the coast. It felt real good to get back into the cockpit, to be back in control of things again. I missed it more than I realized. But it quickly got too routine, too easy. After a couple-three weeks, I was just along for the ride. My feet started to itch and my mind began to wander. The air around LA began to stink more and more and I finally realized that this wasn't why Stitch had given me all his money.

I turned over most of my assets to Al McGuire to invest for me. He had some wild plan about buying land and building houses in the orchards out in Orange County. I thought it was crazy, but I knew he would take care of me. Besides, Al McGuire was the luckiest man alive. He'd come out smelling like roses no matter what. With the rest of my cash, I bought Seven Sugar Papa and pocketed a big chunk of change for expenses and emergencies. I tried to get Sparks to teach me everything he knew about fixing planes, but he finally gave up and decided to come with me to open a bush pilot operation in Alaska. He had no ties in LA and was beginning to feel the city closing in on him, too.

I had decided that Alaska was about the only frontier left where I might find some adventure. Flying in the wilderness, the routine would never be routine. There, like the war, my skills would be put to the test every day, fighting the winds, the mountains, the glaciers, the snow, the cold and the ice. My life would be on the line every day. I was sure Stitch would have understood and would have approved.

~::~

Thank you for reading my story.



~::~

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[My Brother's Keeper Page at Amazon](#)

If I can answer any questions, please feel free to contact me:

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Crime pays...Even in the future.

When androids are reprogrammed into hit men, detectives of the Artificial Crimes Unit repo the AnSub and track down the hackers. Partners Jake and EC's case of an "extra-judicial" divorce settlement takes a nasty turn with DNA from a hundred-year-old murder in Boston and a signature that harkens back to the very first serial killer ever in London.

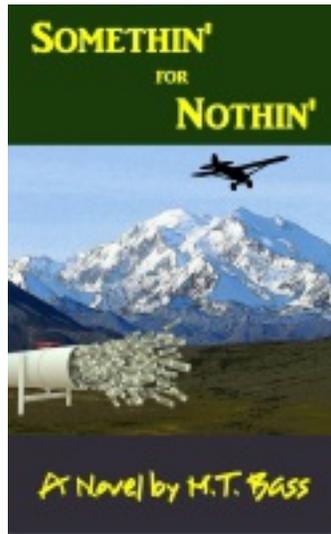
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[Untethered Page on Amazon.com](#)

At District High School #6241, Connor wants only to get close to Liz, the cheerleader whose locker is just across the hall, and forget the suicide of his father in jail, but his family's dark past and a rebellious nature force him to the fringes of student social circles and into an unlikely alliance to fight back against a tyranny of conformity.

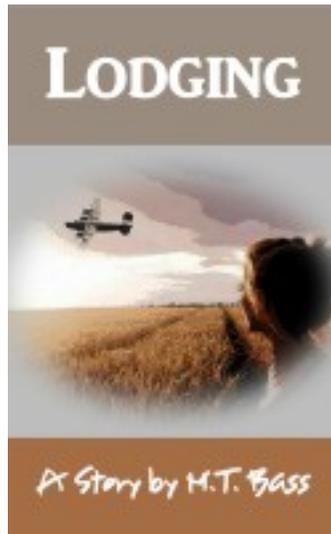
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[Somethin' for Nothin' Page on Amazon](#)

Anchorage, 1976 — Albert and Waxy flunk their Intro to Philosophy midterm and drunkenly decide to drop out of The Ohio State University and go to Alaska to "strike it rich" working on the Trans Alaska Pipeline. After Albert's father cuts off his credit card, they get bartending & dishwashing jobs at an Anchorage bar, where Albert becomes involved with the bar owner's girlfriend, CiCi, who is also the lead singer in the house band. Albert "acquires" a union card to get a pipeline job for himself, but then learns that Waxy has become part of a crazy scheme with Jimmi the Pilot, Beantown Bob and Moe the Eskimo to find and recover a long lost government payroll from an Air Force cargo plane that crashed in the Alaska Mountain Range decades ago.

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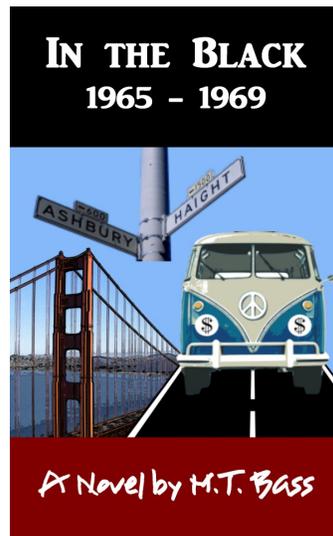


[Lodging Page on Amazon](#)

Lodging — bending of the stalk of a plant (stalk lodging) or the entire plant (root lodging)

While World War II engulfs every nation on the globe, Rebecca and her high school friend Sarah can only dream of escaping a dreary, wind-blown existence in western Kansas, until their boring, stodgy old hometown fills with handsome young men learning to fly Army Air Corps bombers known as Liberators, and their lives are suddenly filled with temptation and, perhaps, true love.

Also by M.T. Bass



[In the Black Page on Amazon](#)

Kansas City, 1965 — Y.T. Erp, Jr. can't wait to leave for college at the University of California, Berkeley to escape not only the work, but especially all the phlegm-brained idiots at his father's aerospace company. Leaving behind a pregnant auburn-haired cheerleader, a sensuous red-headed siren plotting to usurp his familial ties, and his two best friends — one who ends up in Vietnam and the other in the Weather Underground — his "trip" on the wild side of the Generation Gap takes him from the psychedelic scene of Haight-Ashbury to the F.B.I.'s Ten Most Wanted list. Meanwhile his father is consumed by the task of managing his unmanageable team in the quest to help fulfill a President's challenge to "land a man on the moon."

Also by M.T. Bass



[Crossroads Page on Amazon](#)

Cleveland, 1977 — Grappling with a foreign policy crisis, the U.S. Government targets a hapless rock-'n'-roller as a Russian spy in a classic case of mistaken identity for an innocent, 'Wrong Man' hero...*or is he?*

Think of an unholy fictional union between the Rolling Stones and Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*.

Unlike any novel you have ever read, this one has a soundtrack. After all, a story whose characters are musicians should have...well...*music*. Right?

About the Author



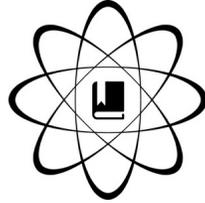
M.T. Bass lives, writes, flies and makes music in Mudcat Falls, U.S.A.

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For my mom



Electron Alley Corporation
732 Broadway Avenue
Lorain, OH 44053

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