



Prologue

He shot the naked woman at nine thirty in the morning; the naked man was in his sights at nine forty-five.

Three more shots: the front door and address, the woman's car nestled in the shadows of an Acacia tree, the man's car parked in front of the house - as subtle a statement as a dog pissing to mark its territory. The camera started to whir. Archer decided he had enough to satisfy his client that the missus wasn't exactly waiting with bated breath for him to high tail it home.

Archer reloaded and stashed the exposed film in his pocket then let his head fall back against the Hummer's seat. Cradling the camera in his lap, Archer felt his body go heavy as his eyes closed. He was tired to the bone and not because he had another couple of hours to wait before Don Juan decided to pack up his piece and take his leave. This tired was in Archer's soul; this tired crept way deep into that heart muscle and made it hard to pump enough blood to keep him going.

He moved in the seat, put one leg up and tried to stretch it out. There wasn't a comfortable place for a man his size even in this hunk of Hummer metal; there wasn't a comfortable place in his mind for the thoughts that had been dogging him for days.

He hated this gig, spying on wayward wives. No self-respecting cop would be doing this kind of work even if the wronged husband were paying big bucks. But then Archer wasn't a self-respecting cop anymore. He was a part-time photographer, a retired detective, a freelance investigator and a man who was running on empty when it came to making ends meet this month. And then there was the anniversary.

He didn't want to think about that either, but it was impossible to clear his mind when California autumn had come again, a carbon copy of a day Archer would just as soon not remember. It had been sunny like today: bright sky blue up high, navy in the deep sea. A nip in the day air. Cold at night. Lexi, his wife, was sick. And then there was Tim. God, he hated thinking about it. But on a day like this, with too much time on his hands, it couldn't be helped.

Archer stirred and held the camera in the crook of one arm like a child. His other one was bent against the door so he could rest his head in his upturned hand. He moved

his mind like he moved his body, adjusting, settling in with another thought until he found a good place where it could rest.

Josie.

Always Josie. The woman who saved him from insanity after Lexi died. They'd hit a little rough patch lately but even that didn't keep the thought of her from putting his mind in a good place. Sleep was coming. What was happening in the house was just a job. The other was just a memory. Josie was real. Josie was . . .

Archer didn't have the next second to put a word to what Josie meant to him. The door of the Hummer was ripped open, almost off its hinges. Archer fell out first, the camera right after. Off balance already, he was defenseless against the huge hands that grappled and grasped at his shoulders and the ferocity of the man who threw him onto the asphalt and knelt on his back.

"Jesus Christ. . ." Archer barked just before the breath was knocked out of him.

"Shut up." The man atop him growled, dug his knee into Archer's back, and took hold of his hair.

Archer grunted. Shit, he was getting old. The guy in the house not only made him, he got the drop on him. Archer ran through what he knew: the guy was a suit, one seventy tops, didn't work out. He should be able to flick this little shit off with a deep breath.

Hands flat on the ground, Archer tried to do just that but as he pushed himself off the pavement he had another surprise. It wasn't the guy in the house at all. The man on his back was big, he was heavy and he wasn't alone. There were two of them.

While the first ground Archer's face into the blacktop, the second found a home for the toe of his boot in Archer's midsection. Archer bellowed. He curled. He tried to roll but that opened him up and this time that boot clipped the side of his face, catching the corner of his eye. The blow sent him into the arms of the first man who embraced him with an arm around his throat. Archer's eyes rolled back in his head. Jesus that hurt. His eyelids fluttered. One still worked right. He looked up and stopped struggling.

The guy who had him in a headlock knew what he was doing. If Archer moved another inch and the man adjusted his grip, Archer's neck would snap. As it was, the guy was doing a fine job of making sure Archer was finding it damn hard to breathe.

His eyes rolled again as a pain shot straight through his temple and embedded itself behind his ear. He tried to focus, needing to see at least one of them if he was going to identify them when - if - he got out of this mess. They could have the car. No car was worth dying for. But he couldn't tell them to take it if he couldn't speak and he couldn't identify them if he could barely see. There was just the vaguest impression of blue eyes, a clean-shaven face, and a checked shirt. Archer's thoughts undulated with each new wave of pain. Connections were made then broken and made again like a faulty wire. The one that stuck made sense: these guys didn't want his car but they sure as hell wanted something. Just as the chokehold king tightened his grip, and his friend took another swipe at Archer's ribs, one of them offered a clue.

"You asshole. Thought you got away with it, didn't you?"

That was not a helpful hint.

Roger McEntyre took the call at ten thirty-five without benefit of a secretary. Didn't need one; didn't want one. The kind of work he did wasn't dependent on memos and

messages. He kept important information in his head. If he shared that information, it was because he wanted to. If Roger wasn't in his office, couldn't be raised on his cell, had not told his colleagues where to contact him then he meant not to be found. That's what a company guy did. He delivered what the company needed and was rewarded with the knowledge that he was the best in the business. Everyone had tried to hire him away: Disneyland, Magic Mountain, Knott's Berry Farm but a company man was loyal. Roger was loyal to Pacific Park, the oldest amusement park in California, loyal to the man who had given his father a job when no one else would, loyal to the man who treated him like a son.

Now he was about to deliver a piece of good news the company needed bad. He was delivering it before schedule and that made him proud, though it was difficult to tell. Roger's smile was hidden by the walrus mustache he had grown the minute he left the service. That was a pity because he actually had a nice, almost boyish grin when he thought to use it.

So he left his office - a small, spare space off a long corridor - and passed the two offices where his colleagues worked. One ex-FBI, the other a product of New York's finest. Roger, himself, was Special Forces. Honorable discharge. Fine training.

He walked through the reception area of building three and gave the girl at the desk an almost imperceptible nod as he passed. She was a cute kid and Roger doubted she knew his name. Given her expression, he imagined she wasn't even sure he worked there. That's the kind of man he was. He walked like he knew where he was going and didn't mess where he wasn't supposed to. If he had been another kind of man that little girl would have been open season. She didn't know how lucky she was.

Roger pushed through the smoke glass doors and snapped his sunglasses on before the first ray of light had a chance to make him wince. Thanks to the year 'round school schedules the park was still busy even at the end of October. Halloween decorations were everywhere. On the 31st the park would be wall-to-wall kids causing all sorts of problems. Today there were none.

Roger dodged a couple of teenagers who weren't looking where they were going, stopped long enough to oblige a woman who asked him to take a picture of her family, and noted that the paint was peeling on the door of the men's bathroom near the park entrance.

He took a sharp right, ducked under a velvet rope and walked through a real door hidden in a fake rock. The air-conditioning hit him hard with an annoyingly prickly cold. Isaac liked it that way. That was strange for an old guy. Usually old guys liked things warm. Down a small hallway he went, through another glass door, across another reception area and into the executive suite. The receptionist there was of a different caliber all together. She was slick. Expensive haircut. Older. Had too much style to be stuck behind the scenes.

"Mary." Roger nodded as he went by her.

"He's waiting," she said.

"Yes."

Roger opened one of the double doors just far enough to slip through then stood inside the office, arms at his side, posture perfect as always. Isaac's office was nice. Very adult, very sophisticated considering the kind of business they were in.

The silver haired man behind the mahogany desk was on the phone. That call wasn't as important as Roger. The receiver went to the cradle, and Isaac Hawkins' hand held onto it as if he were bracing for bad news. Roger's mustache twitched. He didn't want to get the old man's hopes up so he made his report without elaboration.

“They got him. Everything’s moving forward.”

“Then it was true.”

Isaac’s shoulders slumped ever so slightly in his relief. Roger moved closer to the desk just in case he was needed. Isaac looked ten years younger than his years but even that would have been old.

“The District Attorney made the decision,” Roger answered as Isaac got up from his desk. “We just gave them what we had.”

Isaac Hawkins walked up to Roger. He took him by the shoulders, looked into his face and then drew him forward.

“Your father would have been proud. Thank you, Roger.”

“Don’t worry, Isaac.”

“I’m glad we did the right thing,” the old man said before he sat down again. “Let me know how it goes. You’ll do that, won’t you?”

“I will.”

Roger turned away; satisfied he had done his work well. At least that was one monkey off the old guy’s back – one that should never have been there in the first place. Not after all these years.

Of the five attorneys, five secretaries, two paralegals, receptionist, mailroom boy, suite of offices in Brentwood and shark tank, Jude Getts was proudest of the shark tank. It was a cliché, sure, but in his case it was a cliché that worked. Getts & Associates was not the largest law firm but it was the leanest, most voracious personal injury firm in Los Angeles. Lose a leg? A lung? A life? Jude’s associates put a price tag on everything and collected with amazing regularity. They didn’t as much negotiate with defendants as hold them hostage until they coughed up the big bucks; they didn’t try a case as much as flay it, peeling back the skin of it slowly, painfully, exquisitely. And, of all the attorneys in the firm, Jude Getts was the best.

Bright eyed, boyish, his blond tipped hair waved back from a wide, clear brow. Jude was tall but not too tall, dramatic without being theatrical, a master of the touch, the look, the smile. He had timing whether it was offered during closing arguments or a rare intimate moment with a woman chosen for the length of her legs or the look of her face. But what made Jude a really, really good personal injury attorney was that he loved a challenge more than anything else. He rejoiced in it. A challenge made his heart flutter, made him smile wider, laugh heartier, and made his work even more impeccable. What he was hearing on the radio as he drove to meet his client was making that heart of his feel like an aviary just before an earthquake.

Jude passed the keys to his car to the valet and said ‘keep it close’ before he bounded into the foyer of the Napa Valley Grill, past the hostess who was gorgeous but rated only his most radiant, thoughtless, everyday smile. He gave his drink order to his favorite waiter with a touch to the man’s arm, a tip of his head that indicated Jude really didn’t think of him as a waiter at all but as a friend. The drink arrived at the table just as Jude was sliding onto the chair, giving his very best professional smile to the man across the table.

“Colin,” Jude said as he snapped the heavy white napkin and laid it across his lap.

“Jude,” the other man nodded. He already had a drink. It was almost gone.

“They make a good drink here, Colin. Damn good drink.”

"I've had two," the client noted.

Colin Wren was not a man who really enjoyed life, and insisting he take time to smell the roses, gave Jude an unprecedented kick in the ass. But while he was laughing on the inside, the outside was always respectful. Colin was, after all, the client.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting but something came to my attention. It's definitely going to change the course of our business, Colin."

"I don't want anything to change the course of our business," Colin said quietly and finished his second drink. "I've waited too long."

The eyes that looked at Jude from behind wire rim glasses were soft brown, gentle looking. They were the eyes of a priest. Colin Wren was not a priest, nor was he particularly kindly or likeable. An opportunity brought him to Jude, but every once in a while Jude had the sneaking suspicion the matter at hand was more than business.

"Well, Colin, I'm not sure you've got a choice. It seems our friends at Pacific Park have made a brilliant move." Jude took a drink, put his glass down and crossed his arms on the table. "They handed the problem off to the district attorney and suddenly we're talking a criminal matter here. Until John Cooper does what he's going to do, we don't have a snowball's chance in hell of collecting on a civil action." Jude picked up his glass again. "How's that for a surprise, Colin?"

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