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THE DOUBLE CROSS OF BRIGID

by

Richard Walter Meredith

Chapter One

Apartment of Thatcher Porter

San Francisco, California

Present Day. The anxiety was building like a wave. The ragged breaths, disjointed thoughts, and trembling knees were too familiar. Steve Nguyen reached into his pocket for the comfort of his grandmother's 20-đồng coin as the emotional surge crested.

Leaning hard against the elevator wall, he clenched his teeth to tamp the panic seizing his lungs and racing his heart. It wasn't claustrophobia from the cramped, grating box; it was the crippling self-doubt brought on by every new case. Now, at least, therapy gave him some tools, but he only had seconds to put the skills to work before he reached the penthouse.

As the door groaned open, he squeezed the coin again, but it took a few more deep

breaths to calm the storm. Finally, with a teetering resolve, he ducked under the crime scene tape. It was time to play detective.

Squeezing into nitrile gloves, Nguyen watched silently as the criminalists hovered over the body, collecting fluids, threads, and infinitesimal grains of evidence. A flash blinded him for a moment as a camera recorded the scene from another intrusive angle.

Willa Burns, almost unrecognizable in a full Tyvek suit, reached to collect the lacy lavender bra cinched around the victim's neck. She looked up as Nguyen approached.

“Good that you could make it, detective. We're almost done in here.”

“Just got the call, Willa,” Nguyen said trying to suppress the jitters and thickened tongue her presence always induced. “You print her?”

“And a full set of photos.”

“Headin' back to the lab?”

“No.” She gestured to the man in an identical protective suit behind the detective. “He just got another call. I told him I'd wait for the morgue van.”

Nguyen turned to the medical examiner's investigator. “You get time of death?”

“Axial temperature puts it roughly between 11:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. The autopsy will get it closer.”

Nguyen's attention returned to the dead woman. Her long blond hair spilled over the pillows and her perfect face was forever frozen in an expression of disbelief. He stared into emerald eyes dulled like flawed gems. Death—tragic death at that—was nothing new to the detective. Yet his mind had trouble with the incongruous equation: young and beautiful shouldn't

equal dead. But he knew youth, health, and beauty were no shield from malice.

Nguyen turned back to Willa. “I’ll stick around and sign out the body. No sense both of us staying.”

She removed her mask, revealing a grateful grin. “Thanks. For that, I’ll fast-track the tests.”

He swallowed hard and pulled a pen and pad from his jacket and began his investigation of the scene.

After fifteen minutes, he paced slowly toward the living room of the Russian Hill apartment. A man, maybe fifty, sat on the edge of a taupe sofa, flanked by a young patrolman. Still in his robe, the man cradled his head in shaking hands. Behind him, a window framed the San Francisco skyline, gleaming pale red in the morning sun. Ten stories below, a cable car clanged its descent down Hyde Street.

Nguyen captured the man’s stare and held it until his gaze fell to the floor. As he entered the room, the paunchy senior patrolman approached.

“Hey Steve, almost didn’t recognize you without your uniform.”

“Hey Grant, it’s been two years since I left patrol. Whole new wardrobe. What ya got?”

With his back to the sofa, Grant spoke in low tones. “The guy is Thatcher Porter. He called 9-1-1 at 8:30 this morning and reported the body of...” Grant paused and peered at his notes, “of Ms. Christine Rachael Compton. We found this in her purse.” He passed a driver’s license in a clear evidence bag to Nguyen. “She is thirty-three years old, a resident of Sacramento where she is...was...employed as an attorney with the firm Bekins and Sims.”

Nguyen studied the license, peered over Grant's shoulder at the man, then walked to the sofa. "Mr. Porter, I'm Detective Steve Nguyen with the San Francisco Police Department. I work in the Homicide Division. Is this your apartment?"

"Yes, I've owned it for almost thirty years."

Nguyen looked down at the evidence bag. "Tell me about your relationship with Ms. Compton."

Porter's voice quavered, almost breaking. "We've been dating for the past few months. I...I can't believe she's dead."

Nguyen watched as Porter's fingers blanched from stilling his trembling knees. "Did you have any visitors last night? Did anyone have access to your apartment?"

"No, I mean I don't think so. I can't remember. It was just Christy and me."

"You have much to drink, any drugs?"

"A little wine, I think."

"Do you know what happened to Ms. Compton?"

Porter looked up at the detective and knuckled his wet eyes. "I...I...I just don't know. It's a blur. I woke up and..."

Nguyen nodded to the officers. "Mr. Porter, we need to secure your apartment, so I want to continue our interview at the station. You can change in the bathroom." Nguyen eyed the younger cop's name tag. "Officer Benson will help you."

Nguyen stared from across the room as Benson led Porter, slouched in despair, through

the hallway. The man's emotions seemed real. Whether from regret at getting caught or from losing his lover was Nguyen's dilemma. Evaluating evidence was light years easier than reading people.

"You see any signs of forced entry?"

Grant shook his head. "Nothing obvious."

The detective walked from the sofa toward the fireplace. A brass fender surrounded the firebox. Atop the simple mantle sat an antique assayer's scale and a rusted gold pan on display stands, but what drew the detective's attention was the oil painting above the mantle.

Nguyen turned to peer through the windows on the opposite wall at almost the same view. He turned back to the painting. In muted yellows, tans, and blues were the hills of San Francisco facing Yerba Buena Island and beyond to the East Bay as they appeared to the artist in 1850.

Grant ambled over. "You into art?"

"Not so much, but you know what this is?"

Grant's face pinched at the question. "I don't know, what, some landscape?"

"That is San Francisco during the Gold Rush." Nguyen gestured to the small brass plaque on the frame.

Grant blew a low whistle and edged in. "*The View of San Francisco, 1850*. There's almost nothing there. No trees, just dirt paths and shacks."

Nguyen shrugged. "Yeah, San Francisco was mostly huge shifting dunes. It's ironic, no gold was found here, but this is where fortunes were made."

“I guess we’ve seen a little improvement since then.”

“Have we?” Nguyen scoffed.

Across the room, the elevator door opened, and two morgue attendants entered the apartment dragging a rattling gurney.

Nguyen pointed. “The body’s in the bedroom.”

Nguyen and Grant walked toward the foyer where the senior patrolman elbowed Nguyen and smirked. “Must be your day.”

Nguyen scrunched his forehead.

With his thumbs wrapped under his bulging duty belt, Grant cocked his head. “Slam dunk. Even I could solve this one.”

Nguyen hitched a shoulder. “Yeah, lucky me.”

Both waited by the elevator door until Porter and Officer Benson returned. Towering over the wiry detective, Porter stooped to enter the ancient elevator car.

As the door was about to close, the attendants rolled the gurney across the foyer.

Nguyen craned his neck and watched as Porter’s face turned ashen at the sight of the approaching black body bag.

In the next instant, Nguyen felt the full weight of Porter as he crumpled unconscious to the floor like an imploding skyscraper, his face slamming the steel handrail.

Nguyen knelt beside Porter’s contorted body. A coppery tang filled his nostrils as he lowered his head to Porter’s bleeding face. He snapped a look up at the confused patrolmen.

“Radio dispatch. 10-52. Get medics to the lobby ASAP.” Nguyen jabbed the elevator button, and the asthmatic elevator doors wheezed shut.

The EMTs and the Fire Department were at the building in seven minutes. In another ten, Porter—his neck braced, face bandaged, and a stream of IV fluids surging through his veins—was lifted into the ambulance.

The three cops stood silent at the curb watching as the flashing lights disappeared through the tangle of traffic.

“Hmm,” Officer Grant uttered, almost under his breath.

Nguyen caught his smug smile.

Grant rolled back on his heels. “Like I said, your day. You may have just saved the city the cost of a trial.”

“Yeah, lucky me.” But the bile searing his gut told a different story— it’s never this easy.

Chapter Two

Aboard the Derrick Barge *D/V Poulter*

Sacramento Delta near Chipps Island, California

Six Months Earlier. Sweat streamed from Jilly Hale's brow as she struggled to stabilize herself. Even thirty feet below the surface, the roiling Sacramento River current threatened to hurtle her to the Pacific. The exertion was sapping her reserves and slowly fogging her dive helmet. Had she calculated wrong? The fifty-pound weight belt was barely enough to steady her on the churning riverbed. One thing she knew for sure, she could show no distress; the guys on the dive team would never let her hear the end of it.

"How ya doin', Jill?" asked dive master Bobby-Ray Delgado, his Oklahoma drawl thin and tinny through Jilly's helmet speaker.

“Well, I’m cold, tired of wrestling the current, and can’t see nothing six inches away through this muck—perfect working conditions. Tell you this, put me in a deep ocean rig anytime. This river work sucks.”

“Yeah, hard to believe the river is clean snowmelt a hundred miles upstream. Here it’s just a slurry of mud but not to worry, Snake’s gettin’ ready to relieve you. Seein’ anything at all? Sonar says you’re right over the pipeline.”

“Nothing, but let’s give it another shot.” She braced the six-inch-diameter water jet under her right armpit. “Make it hot,” she said over her helmet microphone.

Topside, a dive tender opened a valve and sent a blast of water through the high velocity nozzle, emulsifying the river bottom into a viscous brew of water and sediments. A tee in the tube sent an equal shot of high-pressure water behind Jilly to keep the hydraulic force from tumbling her backward.

“Make it cold,” Jilly instructed after two minutes. The flow stopped but the plume hung thick around her. “I’ve jetted two pits at least three feet deep but nothing here.”

“Give it another half-hour. I just want to be sure we’re on station,” Delgado replied. “The suits in Sacramento only gave us ninety days. Migrating salmon are on their way and if we don’t get our equipment out, they’ll throw a hissy fit.”

“Copy that, chief.” Jilly kneeled on the bottom and scraped her gloved hands across the pit. Eyes were useless; her helmet light, all 50,000 lumens, couldn’t penetrate the sediment storm. She just hoped for the touch of something harder than brown mud as she sunk her hand deeper into nothingness.

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Back at the dive trailer, Delgado gnawed the end of his tobacco-stained pipe and blew a long gray sinew of smoke as he studied the monitors. According to the hydrographic maps, Jilly was on the pipe. But the accuracy of the surveys frustrated the veteran dive contractor. The pipelines were never where they were supposed to be.

The trailer door opened with a loud creak. Delgado turned and caught the cocky glare of Snake Pierce.

“She find it?”

“Not yet.”

Snake scoffed. “Figures.”

“Huh?”

“No experience in rivers, different from the ocean.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Not to worry, boss. Snake’s got it. Always does.” Delgado’s lead diver slammed the door as he left along with his super-size ego.

Jilly’s voice squeaked through the monitor. “Hey, Bobby-Ray, you still there?”

“Now, where am I gonna go? Somebody’s got to make sure you’re still breathing.”

“Well, I found something, but it’s kinda square, like a box, not the pipeline.”

“What’d ya think it is?”

“No idea. Could be anything down here. But it’s too heavy to lift. Still pretty buried.

What’s my depth?”

Delgado peered over to the console. “Fathometer has you at thirty-seven feet. It’s probably some old construction debris. Put a strobe on it and maybe we can haul it up before you surface. Now, find me a pipeline, will ya?”

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After another thirty minutes, Delgado’s voice echoed through Jilly’s helmet.

“Time to surface, Jilly.”

“Roger that. You want me to strap-up that debris?”

“Yeah, go ahead. You got enough gear?”

“I’ll make do.”

In the beam of her helmet light, a school of small fish congregated in hypnotic awe of the flashing strobe in the distance—almost like an old-time film reel as the light froze the motion of the fish between pulses. Jilly realized these were the first living things she’d seen so far. Not that fish and other creatures weren’t everywhere, it was just that she couldn’t see a damn thing.

She approached the partially buried box. “I’m on the target.”

“Good. See if you can get that thing topside.”

Jilly aimed the jet tube. “Make it hot.” In seconds, the high-pressure stream of water churned the sediments around the box. After a few minutes, she stopped and repositioned herself on the opposite side. She again ordered the flow until the box was exposed.

The nylon slings around the box looked like a Christmas gift wrapped by a hurried longshoreman.

“I got it. Lift ‘er up.”

Jilly watched as the slack in the thick nylon line slowly vanished and the line strained taut. Finally, the box shot up wildly three feet above the riverbed.

“It’s free,” she shouted.

With her attention focused on the box, Jilly barely felt the rub against her leg the first time. But the line was free at the second. She took a quick look to her right. Even in the murky depth something big passed her. Her light caught the ghostly shadow disappearing from sight. She drew a breath and spun her head for a better view. Nothing.

As she lifted her jet tube from the bottom, two eyes pierced the plume and headed at her. The familiar shape slowly revealed itself and the crescent dorsal fin cleaved the water. In less than three seconds, an eight-foot-long mass of gray and white passed within feet of Jilly and disappeared again. Frozen with fear, her heart spasmed. She’d seen sharks before but in the ocean and never in the river. *Is it even possible?*

Just as Jilly felt a tinge of relief, the creature turned and approached even closer, rubbing again against Jilly leg as if sampling the foreign fare. Her eyes widened as the shark’s mouth, gaping with rows of ripping teeth, filled her face mask. Then the eyes, rolling back as its snout nudged her arm. The adrenaline storm peaked and a black fear shrouded her. The shark swam off and circled back. In Jilly’s mind, this was it; the kill shot.

Instead of the lazy sweeps of its steep tail fin on the first two approaches, it now lashed

with fury, accelerating the twenty feet between them. Ten feet and approaching fast, Jilly raised the jet pipe and aimed it directly at the shark's face. "Make it hot," she shouted to the dive tender. In the last second, she shoved the tube into the shark's maw just as the high-pressure flow blasted from the nozzle. The shot propelled the shark five feet backward. It shook its head violently. Confused with this unknown force, it tried to regain equilibrium. Jilly went on the offense, moving toward the shark and jetting the water closer and closer to the menace. Each time it retreated further. In its primitive brain, it deduced this meal was not worth the effort. Jilly exhaled deep as the tail fin disappeared.

"Hey, what's going on down there? Why'd you turn on the jet? Your sensors are pegging the meters," Delgado asked.

"You ever see sharks here in the river?"

"Not me, personally, but some migrate into the bay. Why?"

"I think we have an immigrant. Get me out of here."

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The barge rocked against the strong current as two tenders hoisted Jilly from the brown froth. Exhausted, she leaned against a stanchion for support and slipped from her loose dry suit, revealing unflattering long johns and wool socks.

Delgado crept across a rat's nest of mooring lines and tossed her a towel. A smile was partly hidden beneath his pipe. "You okay after your little scare?"

Jilly shot him a killer glare. "Little? I may need to clean my dry suit."

Delgado shrugged. "Okay, well, this will cheer you up."

Jilly followed Delgado to the rusted box covered in sediments and encrustations. Constructed of riveted iron plates, the box was hinged on the back with a hasp and an ancient padlock on the front.

She cast him a quizzical glance as he grabbed a hose and sprayed sand and silt from the dented box, revealing a nameplate with the words *Wells Fargo* engraved in bronze.

Delgado could not contain his amusement. “Now that’s what I call Catch of the Day.”

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Jilly and Delgado headed to the dive trailer after dinner.

Delgado queued the video downloaded from Jilly’s helmet cam.

“I’ll be damned.” Delgado’s eyebrows arched as he paused the video. On the monitor, the shark’s mouth filled the screen.

Jilly leaned over his shoulder for a better look. “What is it?”

He shook his head in amazement. “I’m bettin’ it’s a bull shark. They find them in freshwater sometimes. They like chasing after salmon.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“Well, let’s put it this way, they’re in the same family as the great white shark.”

Delgado turned to see Jill’s pale face as she struggled to speak.

“So, *I* was almost catch of the day?”

Chapter Three

Argonaut State Bank Building

Sacramento, California

Six Months Earlier. Tall and imperious, Thatcher Porter stood crossed-armed before the glass windows encasing his twenty-fourth-story suite. He gazed down the mall towards the cast iron dome atop the state capitol. A half-smile crossed his face as he remembered the time a century before when no building could exceed the height of the white marble edifice. Change is the only constant, he reminded himself.

The intercom interrupted his daydream. “Mr. Porter, the representatives from Foothill Development have arrived.”

Porter strode to his desk and depressed the intercom button, “Please show them in.”

Moments later, the door swung open, and his secretary escorted the guests to Porter's polished conference table.

He greeted the three, taking extra time with Christy Compton, the attractive attorney Foothill made sure always attended these meetings. Their intent was pretty obvious to Porter, but appreciated, nonetheless.

Porter remained standing at the head of the table smoothing the lapels of his impeccable dark gray suit as the others shuffled briefcases, papers, and laptops. "So, who wants to start?"

Short, slightly pudgy with a smooth scalp of olive skin, Samar Parsi, the president of Foothill, tapped his pen on his notepad, and cleared his throat. "Thanks for seeing us, Thatch. We just wanted to update you on our progress." He paused and turned in Compton's direction. "Our attorneys and consultants have initiated our due diligence. It will be a few months before all the studies are completed. It will take another year before the county can certify the environmental reports, but I am assured there are no county obstacles in our path to approve the development. I have not heard back from the Granite Ridge Water District and hope you could assist us. We still have the issue of the rights-of-way through the state's property."

Porter half laughed. "Samar..."

"Thatch, we're almost partners now. Call me Sam."

"Sure, Sam. The water district will not be a problem. My family maintains a majority on the board. They, too, will benefit from the project—another five thousand homes and businesses to supply and I have a plan to assuage the state's concerns. They've been threatening to condemn lands along the Granite Ridge Reservoir for public access and a marina. If they allow us to widen and improve our road through state property, we will sell them some shoreline for the marina

without forcing an expensive eminent domain lawsuit. An improved road would serve both our interests.”

Porter leaned into the table; an expression of concern crossed his face. “However, I am troubled by the land appraisals. I realize you must low-ball me at this stage—I know the steps to this dance—but I look at the land not only in dollars and cents but as a family legacy. So, these three thousand acres have more than just economic value.”

Porter cast an eye at Compton for affirmation. “What’s the term, intangibles? And remember, you are buying a good piece of lakefront property. You know what a premium this is in California.”

Compton leafed through a few pages before her fingers fell on the lines she sought. “Mr. Porter, if I may.

“We used three teams of experienced appraisers. They considered existing land uses, access, infrastructure, comp sales, water, and mineral rights—a very thorough analysis. We didn’t take the low value; we averaged all three. It’s a reasonable estimate.”

Parsi jutted his chin and fingered the knot of his tie. “I’m sure we can find what we both need. Can you just consider this figure and get back to us?”

“I will, Sam but it’s a bit insulting to base the appraisal on rangeland. Surely highest and best use would be recreation, a much higher per-acre value. But I will run this by the family and see what shakes out. Remember, when this goes through, we’ll be neighbors. Good neighbors, I hope.”

“One more thing, Thatch. It’s not that critical, more a curiosity, but why do you insist on

retaining mineral rights? The gold's been scraped clean a century ago, our geological survey confirmed that, and there is no oil, and you already have the water rights." Parsi snickered.

"What, you want a granite quarry?"

Porter laughed. "Sam, I wouldn't expect you to understand. It was these minerals that brought my family here during the gold rush. Call it sentimental, but it is important to me. It won't affect development at all."

Parsi shrugged. "Again, no deal breaker, for sure."

Porter sat back in his chair after the Foothill group left. He raked his fingers through his thick white hair, thinking it fitting to celebrate with a forty-year-old scotch, but it was too early. He couldn't believe his good fortune. The land valuation was spot on, more actually, than he expected. His real money would be made financing the project on his terms and with his bank. Then there was the water sale. He needed the money. Business hadn't been too good recently and he worried about his holdings. The words of his grandfather still echoed in his mind, "If ya got the land, you've got all you need."

Chapter Four

Apartment of Thatcher Porter

San Francisco, California

Present Day. After the ambulance left, Nguyen had the apartment to himself. He was captured in its views; nothing he'd seen before, almost like a movie. To his left, the bright orange of the Golden Gate Bridge contrasted against the cobalt ocean. To his right, the Bay Bridge spanned the distance from Oakland. Below, Lombard Street serpentine between Hyde and Leavenworth. And beyond, a labyrinth of streets climbed and descended the glimmering white city.

The buzz disrupted his tour. He walked to the elevator and unbolted the lock on the thick steel door. A man slid the ancient scissor gate open.

“The officer said you wanted to see me.”

Nguyen cocked his head.

“I’m Carl Dawson, the building manager.”

“Yeah, okay. I have a few questions.” Nguyen pointed to the dining room table. “Have a seat, Carl.”

“How’s Mr. Porter doin’? He didn’t look so good.”

Nguyen began jotting on his pad. “Don’t know. He’s at the hospital. I should get a report soon. Tell me about Mr. Porter. Known him long?”

“Oh yeah. Good guy. He was here when I got the job. I think he was on the panel that hired me fifteen years ago. Standup guy. Wasn’t stuck-up like some of the ... Well, never any hassles, never any complaints from Mr. Porter.”

“Did you know Ms. Compton, his girlfriend?”

“So sad. Such a beautiful woman and so young. I don’t think we were actually introduced, but I saw them together a few times. He has had a few friends since his wife died.”

“Overnight type friends?”

“Yup.”

“Ever hear any problems? Noise, commotions, arguments?”

“Nothing in front of me.”

“Anything out of the ordinary you notice last night or this morning.”

“No.”

“Carl, tell me about building security. You have a doorman, security cameras, guards?”

Dawson leaned forward placing his forearms on the table and holding Nguyen in his focus. “Well, let’s see, we have only two entrances, the front door onto Hyde and a garage entrance behind the building off Greenwich. There’s a security camera in the lobby and one at the entrance to the garage.”

“Any in the elevators?”

“No. The building’s co-op board voted the idea down. Our tenants value their privacy. They didn’t want cameras spying into their apartments when the elevator doors opened. And, no, we don’t have a doorman. A security company monitors the alarms at the apartments, but we don’t have anyone patrolling the floors.”

“Why is that?”

“There isn’t much to patrol. You see, each floor is a separate apartment owned by the tenant. They access their units from either the front elevator or the service elevator from the garage. The tenants on the second and third floors often use the stairwell. Other than the lobby and sub-basements, there are no common areas.”

“Explain ingress.”

“There is a keypad to open the front door, but it can also be opened with a key. Once in the lobby, guests and tenants enter the elevator or the main stairwell. The doors are keyed from outside of each apartment. When guests arrive, they are buzzed in through the front door, take the elevator or the stairs to the floor, and the tenant must open the door from the inside. Like you

did for me.”

“How about the service elevator?”

“The tenants or visitors must punch a keypad to open the garage door. Each floor has a unique code so we can determine who entered or who authorized entry. Once in the garage, the tenants have two marked spaces, the rest are for visitors and vendors. A couple of our tenants order their groceries online. The truck enters the garage, and the bags are left by the elevator. Sometimes the vendors may bring the package up to the floor, depending on the tenant.”

“So, you don’t need a key to enter the elevator?”

“Correct, but you can’t enter an apartment without one.”

“And you have video coverage of the elevators?”

Dawson paused and his gaze lifted to the ceiling. Nguyen imagined the man visualizing the video screen in his office. “You can see part of the front elevator and the stairwell door from the camera, but the main view is of those entering the lobby and walking toward the elevator. There is no camera on the service elevator. We get people entering and exiting from the garage camera.”

“Ever have any break-ins, front or back?”

“Someone threw a brick at the front door after the Presidential election protests a few years ago—of course San Francisco had to join the fun—but you saw the door. You can’t get through the wrought iron grillwork without a cutting torch. Someone tried to jimmy the garage door once, but the alarm scared them off. Used to be the worst we’d get was graffiti and trash left by tourists waiting to walk down Lombard. Now, we’ve got a homeless camp across the street in

the park. I spend an extra five hundred bucks a month clearing the sidewalk and alley of needles, shit, and puke. I call the damn police...oh, sorry...well, you know what they say?" Dawson gestured an air quote with both hands, "That it's just a 'lifestyle' choice. Choice, my ass, it's a disgrace."

"Tell me about the building, you mentioned subbasements?"

"Yeah, the building has ten apartments, one on each floor. There are two subfloors. The garage is the lowest level. Half is parking stalls, and the other half is tenant storage units and utilities—electrical main, furnace, water lines. The first subfloor is the laundry room and a series of small apartments—that's where I live. Back in 1925 when the building was constructed, many tenants had servants and they lived on S-1. Not too many now, most residents use the rooms for extra storage."

"Thanks, Carl. I may have a few more questions a little later. I'm heading to the hospital to check on Mr. Porter."

"Give him my best wishes, would ya? And here." The manager reached into his pocket and handed Nguyen a thumb drive. "The officers said you'd want this. It's the video feeds from the two cameras for the past twenty-four hours. I didn't see anything, but I downloaded it quickly. I can go further back if you need it. We keep videos for about a month."

"This is helpful. Also, can I get a master key or code to access the subfloors and roof?"

"No problem. If you need to interview any of the tenants, I've got a contact list. Wanna follow me to my office?"

"Number one on my bucket list, Carl."

Chapter Five

Aboard the D/V Poulter

Sacramento Delta near Chipps Island, California

Six Months Earlier. The morning broke still. Even the constant chorus of tree frogs finally settled. In the distance, a blue heron's wings swooped in slow-motion against an amber horizon. The calm surface of the Sacramento River hid its raging currents below just as time has obscured its tumultuous history. While it circulates the lifeblood of modern California, sating the most productive agricultural lands on the planet, the birthing of the economic dynamo wasn't without its cost.

Bobby-Ray Delgado stared at the box. Bolt cutters would make easy work of the ancient padlock, but something—that annoying inner voice—resisted.

The trailer door squeaked on rusting hinges and Jilly stood at the threshold, stretching her slim five-ten frame to full height and drawing her first fresh breath of the day. While she hated overnights in the crew's quarters, she loved waking to the salty delta air.

Delgado looked up. "Well, the princess awakens. Shall I summon the ladies-in-waiting?"

"Princess my ass. I'll get my own coffee. You?"

"Please."

Jilly returned with two mugs. "What about the box. You decided yet?" She swept a hank of hair from her face and straddled the chair beside him.

"You know me, I want to pry that sucker open, but my better angels are winning."

"So?"

"I don't know. I'll ask one of the state boys when they inspect us again."

"Hell Bobby-Ray, isn't it salvage?"

"Normally, yes. But our permit says we turn over any archeological or historic finds."

"Well, if that's your answer, boss, I'm gonna suit up. We got more pipe to pull today. You're assigning a second diver, right? A shark look out?"

"As you wish, princess."

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The next morning, Jilly leaned against a bulkhead and watched as Dr. Chester Welds, the curator of the Gold Rush Collection at the California State Museum, circled the box for a third lap, this time adjusting his glasses for a closer look.

In a reverent tone he whispered, “Whew, that’s amazing. How deep was it buried?”

“About two feet,” Jilly said. “I thought it was debris from the pipeline construction.”

“You know about where you found it?”

“I got the coordinates in the trailer in 3D, down to the centimeter,” Delgado said. “You got any idea what it is?”

Welds stroke his chin. “Given its condition and construction, it’s old. I’m guessing late nineteenth century, but I’ll take it to my lab for a closer inspection.”

What the heck is this?” Jilly asked pointing to the thick black joint around the lid.

Welds knelt beside the box and rubbed his fingers across the joint, scraping some material under a nail. He sniffed. “I think it’s oakum.”

“Huh?”

“It’s what they used in the old days to seal the joints between planks on boats. It’s hemp rope dipped in hot pitch.”

Delgado wrinkled his forehead. “How long’s this gonna take? We gotta a schedule here.”

“I’ll take it today. Can you help me load it?” Welds asked.

Jilly kneeled beside Welds and locked on his eyes. “What about salvage rights? I kinda have dibs on it.”

Welds stood. “That’s complicated. Everything below the high tide level is owned by the state and you’re working in these waters under a state permit. Also, the box clearly was or is the property of Wells Fargo, so, we’ll just have to wait and see.”

Jilly cast a stink eye at Delgado. "Bobby-Ray, I told you to shut-up."

Chapter Six

San Francisco General Hospital

San Francisco, California

Present Day. Nguyen squirmed to find a comfortable position, but the hard plastic seat was unyielding. The shuffling of hurried footsteps, the cryptic PA announcements, and the waiting room's saturated atmosphere of disinfectants triggered not-so-warm memories of his weeks in the burn unit a year ago.

Officer Benson approached from the elevator. "Here you go, detective. Black with two sugars. Didn't have much in the way of snacks."

“Thanks, Andy, what do I owe you?”

“On the house, detective.”

“Look Andy, we may be here for the long haul. How about calling me Steve; I only left patrol a couple of years ago. So, they tell you anything before I got here?”

Benson took a long sip and furrowed his forehead. “Not much that I understood. Something about his brain bleeding, and they needed to get him into surgery. He sure hit the wall harder than I thought.”

“Maybe he had a stroke.”

“I thought he passed out seeing the body bag. Think we’ll ever know?”

Nguyen shrugged. “I’m gonna check. Save my seat.”

The detective rose and paced to the counter, looping his lanyard around his neck, making sure the badge faced forward.

He knocked on the window. The clerk opened the sliding glass.

“How can I help you, officer?”

“Hi, Ms. Landers. I’m Steve Nguyen with San Francisco Police Department. I’m checking on Mr. Thatcher Porter who was brought in for surgery. What can you tell me?”

The woman swiveled to the large video screen behind the counter that displayed the progress of each patient from pre-op, to the operating suite, and the recovery room. “He’s in surgery now. Dr. McGiff is operating. He’s a neurosurgeon. Will you be waiting?”

Nguyen nodded.

“I’ll post a message for the doctor to speak with you after surgery. Are you here with Mr. Porter’s family?”

“Thanks. No, we’re still trying to locate them. I’ll be in the waiting area.”

Officer Benson looked up. “Any news?”

“He’s in surgery. The doc will brief us when he’s done. You want to head back to the station?”

A wide smile beamed across Benson face. “What, and get stuck with the report? No, best the sarge gets it. I’m perfectly comfortable, you mind?”

Nguyen returned a knowing smile.

It was another hour before Dr. McGiff walked through the double doors still in scrubs under a white lab coat to convey the appropriate gravitas, but mostly to cover any surgical residue.

He looked down at Nguyen and Benson through half-frame reading glasses. “You here about Mr. Porter?”

“We are.”

“Can you tell me what happened, the report from the ER was sketchy.”

“We were escorting Mr. Porter from his apartment when he passed out in the elevator. His face slammed the steel rail,” Nguyen replied.

McGiff wrinkled his face. “Fell, huh?”

Nguyen sensed the skepticism in the surgeon’s tone. “Yes. Fell. What about his

condition?”

“Mr. Porter suffered a subdural hematoma from his *fall*. We were able to relieve the pressure on the brain from the bleed but won’t know much for a few days. I have him in an induced coma until all the swelling subsides.”

“Where is he now?”

“Recovery. He’ll be transferred to ICU soon.” McGiff glanced at his watch. “Got another surgery. Call ICU for updates.”

After the doctor left, Nguyen turned to Benson. “Quite the bedside manner.”

“Oh yeah, another defunder I’ll bet. All safe and secure in his gated community.”

“This is a curious situation, Andy. We never arrested Porter. He’s only a person-of-interest at this point. I’m gonna call an audible. You mind staying here for a while? I don’t think Porter will be running out soon, but maybe he’ll have some visitors or something.”

“No problem, Steve. Let the sarge know, will ya? I may have to get some long overdue reading in. I’ll call if anything breaks.”

“Yeah, and avoid Doctor Charming if he’s wielding a scalpel.”

#

Back at the station, Nguyen placed the thumb drive, the tenant contact list, and the building’s floor plan into an accordion file. He dropped the file on his desk and waited. It wouldn’t take long.

No matter how he tried to exorcize it, the demon always returned—the questioning, the

raging self-doubt. His cursory search of the apartment yielded little. No signs of forced entry or a struggle, the disheveled bed looked no different than his own after a restless sleep, and nothing on the surveillance videos.

Like the sarge said, it was an easy one, but Porter's behavior, his attitude, and his carriage were at odds with the evidence. In the yin and yang of his investigations—brains against gut—instinct almost always won and the churning in his belly was a tell. The ME and crime lab wouldn't have reports on Compton's death for at least a couple of days, but he needed something to sate the beast, at least for a while. And now, who knows if he'd ever get to question Porter.

He couldn't just wait around—wasn't in his DNA.

Chapter Seven

California State Museum
Sacramento, California

Six Months Earlier. “Well, Ms. Hale, I’m so glad you made it. I know your boss really wanted you here for this,” Weld said in an authoritative baritone capable of holding the sleepest audience spellbound.

The rugged wind-burnt complexion of the tall forty-three-year-old anthropologist didn’t miss the approving eyes of Jilly. Nor did his thick graying blond hair and easy smile. “I’m really excited. I’ve never found anything like this. It’s like out of a movie or something.”

“This is very exciting for me, too. We occasionally recover artifacts from the rivers, but usually more mundane items; tin cans, dinner plates, bottles, a buckle, but this, well, like I said,

exciting. I've spent twenty years studying the California Gold Rush, but this is special."

"Are you stuck in this lab all the time?"

Welds laughed. "No Ms. Hale. For me it's full immersion. Most weekends, I drag my friends and family through the old foothill trails, scouring abandoned mines, scrounging through tailings and mine camp ruins. I've even tried my hand at panning the motherlode streams and even staked a few claims on expired leases. It's only on weekdays that I'm stuck here poring over histories, maps, and biographies. But today is my lucky day."

"Please call me Jilly and, to be honest, I'm pretty pumped about it."

Welds motioned her toward the lab.

Two technicians lifted the strongbox onto the slate-topped lab bench. One began measuring the dimensions while the other photographed it from every conceivable angle.

Welds turned to Jilly. "Shall we begin?" He snapped on a pair of latex gloves and began pulling and twisting the lock. "Very secure."

He inserted a thin steel wire into the keyway. It jammed. "We won't be picking this lock."

He reached over for the small hacksaw. "I hate to do this, but we'll preserve all the fragments."

With care he drew the saw blade across one side of the shackle etching a shallow furrow in the brass. He repeated the motion until he had a deep groove and began sawing. The soft metal gave after a few minutes. Welds twisted the lock and the shackle separated. He removed it from the hasp and placed it on a clean gauze pad. "Bag and label, please," he said to a technician.

Welds towed his hands and grasped the hasp. "Wish me luck." He pulled upward,

straining hard and finally releasing. “The hinges are rusted tight.”

He grabbed a scalpel and began slicing the oakum seal around the lid. When finished, he reached for a stiff putty knife and forced it into the slit. He wiggled the blade back and forth and pulled the blade around the slit until he was back to his original spot. He tried prying with the blade and the top moved a fraction.

“I’m going to need a little help.” He handed putty knives to his assistants, and they attacked the front and sides. “On three, lift together. Okay, one, two, three.”

The three pushed down on the putty knives simultaneously and the top lifted a quarter inch.

Welds called to a technician. “Hand me the pry bar.”

He wedged the thick steel lever into the opening and with both hands, pressed down with his full weight. The heavy iron lid creaked in protest, but the frozen hinges surrendered.

Jilly edged closer to Welds, her eyes hooded and lips tight as she gazed into the nearly empty box. “This is disappointing.”

Welds issued a dismissive chuckle. “Yeah, no treasure. Sorry.” He reached inside the box and grasped a weathered leather pouch and placed it on the lab table. He shrugged. “It was sure watertight. The oakum was pretty effective.”

A puzzled look crossed Jilly’s face as she moved her head closer to the open box. “How’d that sand get in but no water?”

“Well, it was there when the box was sealed, I’m guessing.” Welds dragged his hand across the bottom and picked up enough grains to cover his fingertips. He rubbed his index

finger against his thumb, brought his hand to his nose and sniffed. “Nothing.”

“Could it be gold dust?” Jilly asked.

“I don’t see any flecks, not even any pyrite, ahh, fool’s gold,” Welds said. “Probably just river sand. I’ll send it to our lab. Let’s look at the pouch.”

He untied the knot in the rawhide straps and lifted the flap. Inside was an inch-thick stack of yellowed papers. With surgical forceps, Welds extracted the first paper. It was an unstamped envelope addressed to Mrs. Mary Henley, General Delivery, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Welds grasped the next paper. It was an opened envelope, this one addressed to Mr. Caleb Henley, General Delivery, San Francisco, California.

The next three papers were also letters sent to Caleb Henley. It was the final document that raised eyebrows. With careful movements, Welds unfolded the paper to reveal a crude hand-drawn map with faint writing at the margins. He turned the page sideways and brought his face within inches of the lab table to better read the inscription.

“Well, Ms. Hale, seems you found a gold mine.”

Chapter Eight

County Morgue

San Francisco, California

Present Day. Nguyen entered the morgue with halting steps. It seemed the scent of death is not forgotten. No matter how repressed, it worms through the cavities of memory, wrenching both gut and soul. And for the detective, the recoil was too familiar.

“Hey, Steve, your case, huh?” Dr. Vince Stanyon leaned over the mortal remains of Christine Compton, still covered by the white plastic sheet used to protect the body in the morgue refrigerator.

“Glad you called when you did, I was about to start an hour ago.”

“Thanks, Doc. I guilted myself.”

“How’s that?”

“I was just gonna wait for your report, same with the crime lab, but the nagging thing in the back of my head said I should be here. I really should be questioning my chief suspect, but he just had brain surgery.”

“I welcome the company. Gets a little lonely in here.” Stanyon nodded to the corpse on the table. “Conversation is limited. No shit, brain surgery? Why?”

“He passed-out in the elevator on the way to the station and slammed his head against the handrail. What a shit storm.”

Stanyon’s laugh had a sardonic edge. “I guess you’ll have Internal Affairs on you again. What did you get last time, a three-week vacation?”

“Yeah, real fun. Even Disneyland is better than suspension, and I hate crowds. But this time, two cops and your guys saw everything.”

Stanyon harrumphed. “Like IA is going to believe anyone, right?”

Nguyen looked down at Christine Compton’s body. “So?”

“Death by hypoxia—lack of oxygen—secondary to strangulation. Look over there.”

Stanyon stepped to the video monitor mounted on the wall opposite the door and pointed to an x-ray on the screen. “You see this little bone right here? It’s the hyoid,” Stanyon traced the horseshoe-shaped bone with his finger on the screen. “This long projection, it’s the right greater cornu.” Stanyon turned to Nguyen. “See this separation—the dark streak—it’s fractured.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Well, that, along with the ligature marks, indicate strangulation.” Stanyon walked back to the autopsy table. “And these little pinprick marks on the skin...”

“Petechia?”

Stanyon’s chest heaved in satisfaction. “I’ll make a medical examiner out of you yet. Yes. Also see the same pinpricks on the conjunctiva here in her eyes. Both are signs of strangulation. If you stick around, maybe we’ll find muscle hemorrhage on internal exam.”

Stanyon leaned in closer to the body. “I want you to see these ligature marks...what was used, a bra? The skin furrows are deep, meaning a great deal of force was applied. But one thing is missing.”

“What’s that?”

“When one is being choked, the immediate reflex is to try to pull the object from their neck. Almost always there are broken fingernails and scratch marks. None here.”

“And...”

“I’m guessing the victim was unconscious. Were there signs of a struggle at the scene?”

“Nothing definitive and no one heard any screams.” Even under the doctor’s face shield, Nguyen read his concern.

“It’s apparent she couldn’t fight back. I think she was strangled from the front,” Stanyon said.

“How’s that?”

“The ligature marks are only on the anterior...front of her neck. Also, see this bruising on

her forearms?”

Nguyen leaned in, squinting at the bluish spots on each arm. “Yes.”

The assailant was on top, straddling her, using his legs—I’m assuming it’s a guy—to restrain her. Also...” Stanyon raised the woman’s right hand then left. “No ligature marks at all, no defensive wounds. Also, no skin or tissue under her nails.”

“Was she knocked out?”

“Not by physical force. Maybe drugged, but we’ll have to wait on the lab results. Were you able to examine the suspect? I’m sure applying enough force to strangle someone is going to bruise and abrade his hands,” Stanyon said.

“I’ll check the crime scene photos. What about sex? Choking her with her own bra certainly has connotations.”

“I’m no psychiatrist but manner of death sure seems like sexual rage, yet no signs of vaginal, anal, or oral penetration. No semen. Her panties were in place, not ripped. Have you checked the suspect for lipstick or saliva yet?”

Nguyen offered a coy smile. “I gotta wait for the white coats to finish, but I have connections. Maybe I can get a little preview.”

“You’re not talking about Willa?”

“My lips are sealed.”

Chapter Nine

County Morgue

San Francisco, California

Present Day. Nguyen knocked on the window of Dr. Stanyon's office door. The ME looked up from his computer screen and signaled him in.

"I got your message, doc. What's the big deal?"

"No need to sit, Steve. Let's take a little stroll down the hall."

Walking backward a few steps, Stanyon turned to face Nguyen. "I found something on Ms. Compton's body after you left. It gave me pause and I wanted to run it by you."

They entered one of the morgue's cold rooms. A bank of refrigerators six wide and three

high lined one wall. Stanyon nodded to the attendant who opened Unit Three and pulled the gurney out on its steel rails. He then uncovered the head of Christine Compton.

“Here, put these on,” Stanyon said handing Nguyen a pair of yellow-tinted goggles. The attendant passed the doctor a small lamp then turned off the overhead light.

Stanyon brought the light to the side of Compton’s neck. The bright blue glow illuminated a discolored patch.

Nguyen leaned in closer to the magnifying lens on the lamp. “What’s that?”

“That, my friend, is what we call a transdermal hemorrhage—blood under the skin. Not enough to cause a visible skin bruise but indicative of ruptured capillaries. As you can see, only visible using ALS, alternative light source. In this case, ultra-violet.”

Stanyon then traced a finger down to the middle of the discolored area. A thinner line glowed much brighter. “This is the ligature mark from the bra. It caused much greater tissue damage.”

“I don’t get it,” Nguyen said.

“The bra ligature is superimposed on the transdermal bleed, so it occurred later. Why, I don’t know, but I have a guess.”

“Are you saying the bra didn’t strangle the victim?”

“No, Steve. It was certainly the cause of death. But I asked myself, why the earlier bruise? I’m guessing the woman was attacked from behind and placed in a rear chokehold.” The ME placed his left fist in his right elbow crotch. “You see the width of contact on my fist? That’s about the same as on the victim’s neck.”

“But why?” Nguyen asked.

“To incapacitate her. After a few seconds of carotid compression, she’d be unconscious. It is then that our killer finishes her off with the bra. It would also explain why I found nothing under her nails. In a typical air-choke strangulation, the victim fights back hard, kicking, pounding, and scratching until she passes out in a couple of minutes. In a rear choke hold, it happens too fast plus the arms and hands have limited range of motion against the attacker. One other thing, it takes much less force to apply a chokehold. A smaller person can easily bring down a much larger individual. You’ve watched mixed martial arts, right?”

“How about the murderer? Could there be any signs on him...or her?”

Stanyon tilted his head in concentration. “I doubt there’d be visible bruising on the assailant’s arms but, intradermal damage? Maybe.”

“How’s this figure in your report?”

Stanyon peered over his reading glasses to catch Nguyen’s eyes. “Steve, I don’t think this was lover’s rage. Too calm, too planned. Not impulsive. And, like I said before, no signs of sexual battery at all. I think somebody wanted us to think that. It was staged perfectly.”

Nguyen responded. “Yeah, too perfect.”

Chapter Ten

Homicide Division

San Francisco Police Headquarters

Present Day. “Well, Stevie, what have you got for me?” Lieutenant Joe Morris, the homicide chief queried his junior detective.

Nguyen hated the hot seat, especially with so little information. “Well, not a bunch yet. The victim died from strangulation, but Stanyon thinks she was choked out first. The strangulation-by-underwear was the *coup de-grâce*.”

“Sexual assault?”

“Nope.”

“Strange. And your suspect is still in a coma?”

“He is. I pulled the security detail. He isn’t going anywhere, and, really, he’s just a suspect at this point.”

Morris wiped a fine dew of sweat from his bald scalp. “What do you hear from his doctor?”

“Radio silence. I’ve left several messages, but it seems the esteemed surgeon is operating 24/7.”

“The brush-off. I get it. Why don’t you ask Dr. Stanyon to give him a call? Professional courtesy and all that.”

Nguyen nodded.

“You think he did it?” Morris asked.

“Hard to tell, but I’m trying to rule-out an intruder.” Nguyen explained about the limited access to the apartment.

“Seems like pretty tight security,” Morris said. “Did the manager say anything about a fire escape?”

“Yes.” Nguyen rolled out the building plan. “Here, on the east side. It goes down to the parking lot in the driveway. It’s integrated into the balconies on each floor.”

“How secure is it?”

“The hatch on each floor has a spring bolt and can only be opened from the top of the balcony. That way people evacuating can go down, but someone trying to reach a higher floor

can't lift the hatch."

"I had this cat burglar case once. He hopped between buildings. What about roof access?"

Nguyen pointed to the aging and frayed blueprint. "You can get there from the main stairwell and a narrow access stairway from Mr. Porter's top-floor apartment."

"Any common walls?"

"There's a fifteen-story building abutting the south and an eight-story apartment house on the north."

Morris scowled. "A break-in seems like a long shot. But too early to rule out anything, I guess. He paused and swiveled in his chair. "Steve, I have a bit of troubling information. Somehow the unconscious patient contacted your good friends in IA about the nature of his injury."

Nguyen leaned in and blew an exasperated sigh. "No shit. How is that possible? Internal Affairs, again? Boss, there were two patrolmen and two techs from the coroner's office right there when he collapsed. No one touched him. Who'd make a report so soon?"

Morris gave his best conspiratorial smirk. "Seems like a preemptive strike to me. If he's got an attorney, maybe he's trying to muddy the waters for his client. You got any ideas?"

Nguyen drew a face. "Well, his doctor copped an attitude. God, I hate dealing with IA. It's just such a time suck, chief."

Morris laughed. "Lucky for me you're salaried and not hourly."

Nguyen dialed the ME on his way out of the chief's office.

“Stanyon here.”

“Hey, doc, it’s Nguyen. Got a favor to ask.”

“Shoot.”

“I’ve been trying to get information from the surgeon who operated on my suspect, Thatcher Porter, but the guy won’t return my calls. I checked on Porter and asked to see the doc. All I get is ‘he’s in surgery.’ Any chance you could call him? The County ME has more clout than a junior cop.”

“Give me his number, let me work my charm.”

Chapter Eleven

Office of Carol Rosenthal, Ph.D.

San Francisco, California

Present Day. Nguyen's daily schedule could be mistaken for a random number generator. There was usually no rhyme or reason as to when or where he'd show up. Even Lieutenant Morris relied mostly on texts to corral him. But it was Morris, after all, who told him, "You ain't gonna find any clues in the squad room."

His appointments with Dr. Rosenthal, however, were tamper-proof. One of the disciplines she imposed was a frequent and regular session; one that fit her schedule, not his—every other Tuesday at 9:00 a.m. On this Tuesday, only five minutes after his session, he stood outside the office entrance gathering his thoughts after the grueling encounter. It was never easy

confronting one's frailties and vulnerabilities, but it helped, and he knew it. She challenged him, always finding new ways to lessen his anxiety, forestalling the panic. It was hard—so much harder than simply closing himself off from everyone. But now, he felt alive, experiencing life as never before. The demons were mostly at bay; some joy had returned. Even better, there was a semblance of a normal life. But it was still hard. Yet, every day, he remained grateful that his cousin, Tina, had forced him into therapy. She was more guardian angel than kin and he didn't deserve her. But there was no way he would ever let her know that.

“Anything new that you want to talk about, Steve? You seem a little out-there today”

Nguyen looked down at his trousers and brushed a nit of lint with his hand. “Yeah, I got a bit of bad news and I don't really know how to process it.”

“Is it work, you sure have enough hurdles there.”

“No, it's personal. You know Jenn. You've met her at Tina's house. It's no secret we've been seeing each other for the past year after the Russian spy case was closed. That's how I met her. She was working for the Glass Foundation.”

“I do remember her. It was evident to everyone that there was real chemistry there. What happened?”

“She hasn't really found a good job since then and was so betrayed by the foundation. She's been disillusioned with San Francisco of late as well. Long story short, she's put her apartment on the market. She's going to move, I just don't know where.”

“Is there any friction between you?”

“Not really, but for most of the time we've been together, it was her lifting my spirits. I

feel helpless that I can't do the same for her."

"Has she said anything about breaking off your relationship?"

"No, not really, but I sense a tension. We still laugh and have a great time together. I know I love her but, I don't know. I can't put my finger on it. I guess a distance maybe."

"Have you told her how you feel about her? Does she know you're in love with her?"

"You know I'm not that good at expressing emotions. I save that for you and Tina. She must know."

"I'm sure she does, but it never hurts to remind people how much you love and care for them. Why don't you try?"

Nguyen nodded in ascent.

"How about your anxiety. Any other triggers lately? Have you been doing your exercises?"

"The same little things, like new cases or meeting new people. I feel it building, but I've been able to control the panic. I have an inkling about a recent case. I can't go into detail, but Internal Affairs has me under a microscope and I can't figure out why."

"Well, Steve, you know the routine. Keep up with the tools and we'll meet next week. But call if you need me. Say hi to Tina, will ya?"

Nguyen stepped from the building. After a pause for deep breathing and a fingering of his grandmother's coin, the young detective—shoulders squared and arsenal replenished—felt buoyed to face the day. His breaths drew in the sweet spice of the California bay shrub standing sentry at the building's entrance.

Delicate memories cascaded of long gracious meals at Vincenzo's with Jenn, where bay leaves were used unsparingly. But the tree's true grace was its gentling of the city's sour fumes.

Life on the street had shifted into third gear since he had entered the building. Shops were beginning to fill, and the pace of pedestrians quickened. Nguyen set his course for his parking spot around the corner. Never, in all his sessions, had a convenient spot opened up near the building.

The steady drone of traffic, blare of pissed-off horns, occasional growl of a Gulliver diesel trapped in Lilliputian traffic, enveloped him. There must have been conversations, but it was hard to tell.

A throaty roar, amped up with each wrist-jerk on the throttle, cut through the soundscape like a chainsaw. Harleys were not uncommon on the streets, and always commanded attention. Nguyen often imagined how emboldening it must feel in a vehicle with 100 horses wedged between your knees. The power trip of instant acceleration and notice. But not all that practical in Nguyen's lifestyle. Maybe someday.

The motorcycle pegged the noise meter as it neared. When the din crested, it drew a backwards glance from the detective. But all he saw was the glint off a steel barrel and a lightning flash. And then, the blast.