



Chapter 1, Sunday, August 31, 6:30 PM: The Duck Sinks

Baby Boo loved Ducky Do. He loved the look of the plump, yellow duck bouncing among the suds in his baby tub while Mama rippled the warm water with her slender hands. Baby Boo smiled as he reached for blue-eyed Ducky Do, sitting in its place on the side of the tub. Baby Boo's pudgy, pink fingers pushed on the smooth plastic, and he smiled as Ducky Do tipped over the edge into the tub. Ducky Do hit the water with a soft "plunk" sound, and Baby Boo screamed. Ducky Do had vanished beneath the suds. He was gone!

Baby Boo's screaming roused Mary Tilden from her daydream of lounging on the sofa and sipping chilled martinis after the children were in bed. Puzzled, she stared at the yellow rubber duck that lay unexpectedly at the bottom of the small tub. Red-faced Baby Boo screamed again, and from the doorway behind Mary came her six-year-old daughter's laugh—a harsh cackle, composed of equal parts snigger and hiccup. As she tried to comfort Baby Boo, Mary thought that straight gin would be fine tonight and that sooner rather than later would be better.



Chapter 2, Monday, September 1, 7:15 AM: The Duck Song Stinks,

Most mornings, if I had thought of it at all, I would have awakened to the rather comfortable notion that the overwhelming majority of people in the United States—or the whole world for that matter—were ignorant of my very existence. They didn't like me; they didn't hate me. I was a cipher, and that was fine with them and with me.

Now I awoke to the certain knowledge that a fair segment of the population felt toward me an antipathy that ranged from mild disapproval to blood lust. And if I was recognized, not only Republican zombies, but some Democrats of faith, would—like pod people—point at me and howl, demanding my capture and reprogramming. I was in deep shit and having made a dinner of Fighting Cock bourbon had not improved my backstroke.

Still, as I stepped from my room at the Port Kenyon Road Master Inn, I had no idea anyone considered me suitable for target practice. I merely felt at loose ends, out of place and out of time—no that was Kristofferson and I wasn't that wasted. My long hair was gone; my beard was gone; my life was gone, but I had kept the moustache. And maybe I had a new job—"It's My Job," Jimmy Buffett, that was better. In my inner ear Jimmy sang, "It's my job to be cleaning up this mess . . ."

I looked across the empty, gray asphalt to the rear of lot where I had parked my trailer. “Matt’s Million Dollar Road Show,” was painted in yellow on the side above a picture of me, long-haired, bearded, smiling and waving. The night before, to make it harder for someone to break in, I had parked the trailer with its back door tight against the parking lot’s hurricane fence.

As I had unhooked the trailer, I had seen a thin, black man in an old, OD green fatigue shirt surveying the weeds at the back of the lot. It seemed a senseless shame, homeless vets from the current war mixing with those of the previous two. I had no idea whether this guy was a veteran of anything other than hunger, but he had a mild, helpless look to him. He didn’t approach to pan handle, so I called him over.

“Hey buddy,” I said and signaled to him. “Are you looking to stay out here tonight?”

“A man he walketh through dry places seeking rest,” he said. OK, so he sounded like a nut job. There were people thinking that of me too. His face was sad, and his short beard tinged with gray. I held out a twenty.

“I can’t give you enough for a room,” I said, “but this should get you something to eat. And if you’re here, I’d appreciate it if you kept an eye on my trailer. It costs me an arm and a leg every time a kid decides to put his tag over my face.” I opened the back of the van and took out a pair of old, wool blankets I had picked up at a yard sale to use as equipment pads. “You might want these. It can get cold at night this close to the ocean.”

“Your reward shall be great,” the man said.

“I’ll be happy if I’m not lynched,” I had said. He had looked at me strangely then turned to carry the blankets to a thicket of weeds growing along the fence a few yards further down.

In the bright morning, it looked like I'd made a good investment. The trailer sat as I had left it, with no new markings, and my blankets sat neatly folded on the front hitch. Hungry, I decided to leave them until after breakfast.

Like the trailer, my van had my picture and "Matt's Million Dollar Road Show" painted on both sides, so I left it where it was and walked north up the length of the Inn's line of rooms. Where I walked was shaded, but the sun was brightening the parking lot, and I convinced myself I could smell the tang of the Pacific from Kenyon Bay six or eight blocks ahead.

The Lumber Mill Restaurant—the closest thing to a sawmill still doing business in that section of California—sat across Eighth Street from the parking lot. Intent on breakfast, I walked within smelling range of three gray and graffiti dippy dumpsters that sat huddled behind a narrow shed a few feet past the Inn's main building.

A voice shouted, "Take heed and beware!"

I looked over my shoulder and saw the thin, black man in his army shirt and dirty jeans charging at me from the back corner of the shed. I pivoted to meet his attack, my right fist low by my hip. The black man plunged at me, and I swung my right into his face. His hips hit my waist in a cross-body block, and I heard the crack of a rifle as we went down in a tangle. Forgetting the black man, I rolled left toward the dumpsters.

A white Toyota Camry, a rifle muzzle poking out of the rear window, skidded to a stop. I rolled again. The muzzle puffed smoke, and a bullet splattered the asphalt near my head. Half rolling and half scrabbling along the ground like an over-sized lizard, I scuttled for the shelter of the far dumpster's edge. The rifle cracked three more times, once hitting the asphalt and twice the dumpster.

I rounded the edge of the farthest dumpster, putting myself out the Camry's sight, and I heard tires squeal and gravel scatter. I flattened myself and peeked back into the lot. The Camry's rear plates had been dobbed with mud. Nearly clipping a tan Chevy Malibu parked just left of the exit, the Camry continued out the far side of the lot, and joined the traffic on Ninth Street. The scent of soured garbage came sweet to my nose. I was alive to smell it.

I stood and brushed at the dust that clung to my slacks, blue shirt, and gray tweed jacket, the set of meeting clothes I wore about once a year. Nothing seemed torn. I looked for the black man, but he was nowhere in sight. I couldn't blame him.

If not for him, the first bullet would have done me, and for thanks, he got a solid right to the head. I guessed that—as the cliché says—no good deed goes unpunished. Cliché's don't get to be cliché's by being wrong.

I stood by the dumpsters, watched the parking lot, and debated my next move. The shooting, which had taken less than a minute, drew neither undue nor due attention, and without witnesses or a license plate for the Camry, filing a police report would be like training a porcupine to paint—painful, futile, and messy. I couldn't even suggest a suspect. Angry Christians had been known to off abortion doctors, but as a rallying cry, “Kill a folk singer for Christ,” lacked punch.

Nothing moved in the parking lot, and no white Camry's passed on the street again. I briefly considered returning to the safety of my motel room until I had a better idea who wanted to kill me. The problem was, by the time I figured something out, I might be known as the hermit of the Road Master Inn. Besides, the only food I could have delivered was pizza, and eating pizza three meals a day might soon lose its charm. Then too, I had a morning

appointment at the Chaos Café Bar and Grill, and it wouldn't wait. Logic, bravery, and hunger won out.

I took a shallow breath, since I was still beside the dumpsters, and with only mild hesitation stepped forward toward Eighth Street and breakfast at the Lumber Mill. I comforted myself with the knowledge that it had been years since anyone last took a shot at me. Up to now, it had been a low frequency event.

Neither the hostess—in her lumber jack costume of short jeans, a red plaid shirt and brown stocking cap—nor the similarly attired counter waitress, who poured my coffee, gave me the up and down look, so I guessed that I had succeeded in brushing off the worst of the evidence of my roll through the Inn's parking lot. That made me feel pretty-good, until, half-way through eating my hash browns, I heard a local newsmen on the TV above the counter announce that the station was about to play a youtube clip that had captured national attention—a youtube clip that had ruined my life.

“Hey, turn that up,” a customer in a tan canvass coat and gray-striped work shirt said.

“*No! No!*” I wanted to scream, but I only lowered my head closer to my plate as the screen flickered my image—long-haired, bearded, and dressed in jeans and a blue and black checked flannel shirt. I didn't look up as I heard myself singing:

Hear the man shout'in "You gotta do what I say,
Or you'll be on fire come judgment day.
Halleluiah, Halleluiah send your money to me!
There's just one door to heaven, and I've got the key!
Believe God made the world in six days flat,
Or you'll fry in hell like sizzling fat.”

If you buy all his crap, then you're out of luck,
Cause God is a rubber duck, my friend, God is a rubber duck.

The rubber duck, the eggplant, and the garlic toast,
Drift on top of the universe, quiet as a ghost.
He doesn't hate gays, and he doesn't drive a truck,
Cause God is a rubber duck, my friend, God is a rubber duck.*

“Secretly recorded during a performance at the Frogshead Brewery in Hopland California, this song is a work in progress according to the singer, itinerate musician Matthew Eider,” the newsman continued. “A former FBI agent and private investigator, Mr. Eider has spent the last ten years splitting his time between performing a country music and comedy act, billed as ‘Matt’s Million Dollar Road Show,’ at county fairs nationwide and giving solo performances of original songs and folk music covers in bars and restaurants. He is also a new resident of Port Kenyon.

“In a K-Dick exclusive, K-D-I-K TV Port Kenyon, has learned that Mr. Eider has recently inherited Port Kenyon’s landmark Chaos Café Bar and Grill from Noble Dain, the famous Banzai Journalist. A longtime local resident, Mr. Dain’s apparent suicide is still under investigation, and his relationship with Mr. Eider is uncertain.

“Also uncertain is the fate of the Chaos Café Bar and Grill. Sources close to Mr. Eider have told K-Dick News that the singer plans to keep the Chaos Café name but turn the establishment into a family pizza buffet and party room. This planned change and Mr. Eider’s religious views are bringing out local demonstrators led by members

* *See Appendix A for the complete lyrics.*

of Reverend Magnus Montana's Universal Church of the Assumption."

In a voice-over, the announcer described Reverend Montana as a local televangelist with a national following. He was also a prominent spiritual adviser to both the current US President, George B. Boxwood, and to the Republican Presidential Nominee, Vice President Elmer Macduff. The camera showed Reverend Montana to be tall and broad shouldered, with a distinctly wide rear end. His black hair rolled like a wave on his forehead, and his heavy, black eyebrows sat on the crest of a wide brow. He was dressed in a cream-colored suit and matching tie over a white shirt.

"The goodly and God-fearing people of Port Kenyon are outraged," Montana said, looking confidently into the camera, "outraged that this outsider, this heretic, this blasphemer, should walk among us, should do business among us, should live among us. Amen. The Old Testament would have him stoned. Deuteronomy, Chapter 12, Verse 10 'Thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die, because he hath sought to thrust thee away from the Lord thy God.' Amen. We, however, come not with stones but with signs and voices raised in rightful, righteous protest and a demand for repentance. Amen.

"How can this man, with this filth in his heart, think to open a family oriented business to fill our children's minds with lies and bile and fill their stomachs with excess fats and cholesterol. Amen. We shall drive him to embrace the true path of nutrition and religion, or we shall drive him out of business. Amen."

With that, the camera turned back to the announcer who said, "So there you have it, a situation that is, if not explosive, at least likely to be noisy. We can only await developments as rubber-duck-worshiper meets the voices

of an outraged population. K-Dick TV News will update this story as the situation develops.”

“Serves him right,” the customer in the canvas coat said and slurped from his coffee cup. “I thought we were done with hippies and folk singers. I bet he’s one of those anti-war types too. Wants to invite the terrorists right on in and let them have their way.” He looked down the counter at me and the three other men hunched over breakfast plates.

I told myself not to say anything. It wouldn’t help. I sighed.

“Yeah,” I said, “I bet he doesn’t understand how lucky he is to live in a country where he’s free to agree with whoever’s in power. Free to go along with whoever yells the loudest. Free to believe what everyone else believes. He doesn’t know how good he has it.” The man in the canvas coat had a gray complexion and a long jaw with lines running down on either side of his mouth. Creases pinched in the corners of his hard eyes.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you’ve heard a little something on the news, and you’re making things up in your head. You don’t know that Eider is anti-war or how he feels about terrorists. And you don’t know why he might feel the way he does.” Canvas coat stared at me for a long moment and gritted his teeth.

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know,” he said and tossed two crumpled dollar bills by his plate. “Guess I’m through here.” He pushed himself off the stool and started down the counter toward the cash register a few feet to my right. He reached me and paused. I tensed. He didn’t look up.

“I know all I need to,” he said, and continued down to where our waitress stood at the register. I sipped

carefully at my black coffee. I too was done. I waited until canvas coat had paid and left before walking to the register.

I had enough cash to pay for the meal. Instead, I handed the waitress, a slender girl with red hair plastered flat under her uniform brown stocking cap, my VISA card. She was half-way through the transaction before my name registered. She looked up at me hesitantly, a little fear in her blue eyes.

“You’re him?” She handed me the slip to sign. “Please, we don’t want any trouble here.” I smiled.

“Not here in River City,” I said, trying to sound playful as I added a twenty percent tip and handed back the slip. The girl’s eyes were puzzled. “Because that starts with T.” The puzzled look deepened. The girl’s eyes were blue marbles. “And that rhymes with P.” Not a glimmer of recognition. “And that stands for pool.”

With a trained, tight-faced smile, the girl told me to have a nice day. I thought it was already too late for that, and too late for America’s heritage. Professor Harold Hill, where are you when we need you?



I had met Noble Dain at a roadhouse on a crossroads between Highway 33 and Pony Express Lake in DeKalb County Missouri. I was driving to the lake to kill time between “Million Dollar Road Show” sets at the Maysville Country Harvest, and Dain was trying to get himself killed by three members of the Missouri Rat-Bastards Motorcycle gang.

The green clapboard roadhouse had red, antique gas pumps out front and a gravel parking lot with more dirt showing than gravel and canyon-sized potholes. When I saw three Harley Choppers and one black, BMW touring

bike lined up near the entrance, I almost decided to move on, no matter how good a beer would taste. Then I looked at the BMW and thought about the Paisley County Fair in Oklahoma, where the throaty crescendo of motorcycles roaring into the parking lot announced the panic-provoking arrival of the Wrangling Riders Square Dance Club. Not a one of them was under 55.

Thinking of that group of gingham and string-tied terrors, I pushed into the moist darkness of the one-room bar. Eight feet ahead, past a scattering of round tables and cheap metal-framed chairs strewn across the red-and-white-checked linoleum floor, two bikers—one on each arm—held a lean, gray-haired man in khakis, a white t-shirt and a black leather jacket, spread-eagled with his back against the bar.

The man holding gray-hair's left arm was squat, blond and barrel-shaped. The man holding his right arm was bald but had a full, black beard. Both wore sleeveless, denim jackets with, "Missouri Rat-Bastards MC" and a picture of a cartoon rat embroidered on the back. A thin man in a green t-shirt and jeans hit the gray-haired man a backhanded blow to the stomach with a two-pound, ball peen hammer.

Gray-hair grunted air, groaned, and would have fallen loose-kneed to the ground if the other two hadn't pushed up harder on his arms. Behind the bar, the bartender had a pasty, baby-fat face, and wide, black eyes. The man with the ball peen hammer raised it back over his shoulder, like he was about to serve an ace using gray-hair's head as the ball. The old man's brains were going to splatter against the back mirror.

I stomped my right foot loudly, smacking it against the floor, and shouted, "Freeze or I'll blow you out of your shoes." The man with the hammer froze, and his two

friends looked up at me curiously. My .41 caliber, snub-nosed revolver was safely packed at the bottom of my trunk back at the motel. I didn't think they would let me go get it.

The black-bearded man matched my six-feet, and his nose had been broken and badly set at least twice. Hairless lines showed old scars in his eyebrows, the kind that come from bare-knuckle fights—or maybe he fell on his face a lot. He grinned and asked, “How you going to blow anybody away Bud?” The man with the hammer turned.

“Yeah? How?” he asked.

“I thought I'd huff and I'd puff and I'd blow you all down.” I was thinking that, if I could reach one of the metal chairs at one of the tables, I could whip it into the man with the hammer and probably break something. If.

“I got something you can blow.” The blond, barrel-shaped man grabbed his crotch suggestively and let go of the gray-haired man who slid down the front of the bar to the floor.

“Shit!” I thought. “Bad choice of words.” I took a long audible breath, puffed out my cheeks, looked at the three men and said, “Pooo,” puffing air through my lips.

The bearded man and the barrel stepped forward. I turned right and grabbed for one of the chairs. A loud, ratcheting sound came from behind the bar. I looked up and saw the baby-faced bartender leveling a Mossberg, pistol-gripped 12 gauge at the room. His fat hands covered the grip and the slide.

“You know my hands aren't empty boys,” his voice was high and squeaked, but it stopped the man with the hammer and his two friends. The gray-haired man was crawling forward toward me. I released the chair. The bartender's eyes locked on mine.

“Holly shit!” he said in his high voice. “That was positively, absolutely, without a fucking doubt, the dumbest damned thing I have ever seen in my life. These guys don’t call themselves Rat Bastards for nothin’ you know.” The gray-haired man had crawled to one of the chairs and was laboriously pulling himself up.

“Sir,” he said as he slowly rose to his feet, “as I was explaining to these gentlemen. I worked with rats in the laboratory when I was at Harvard. The males drag their testicles on the ground as they walk and leave a trail of urine and dung pellets wherever they go. They are not vicious, merely low, despicable and mean.” In contrast to the bartender, the gray-haired man had a full sonorous voice with a cultured accent.

“And if you’d kept your damn mouth shut, you’d still be drinking beer,” the bartender said and gestured with the shotgun’s barrel. “Now get out. I’ll hold these guys awhile, but you’ll be moving right along if you know what’s good for you.”

“You have our thanks,” the gray-haired man said, and walked stiffly to the door. Once outside I started for my van, and he turned to the big BMW bike.

“Hold on there,” he said and motioned for me to join him while he fiddled with a storage area behind the seat.

“Here take this,” he said and handed me a Ruger .44 magnum. “Point it at the door.”

“I don’t think—”

“I dare say you don’t,” he said, “which is a good thing for me.” He straddled his bike, started it, backed it up, and coasted in a near circle until he sat eight feet back from the other bikes. In his right hand he held an automatic the size of a howitzer, which, without a word, he began to unload into the other three bikes. Tires jumped; engines

sparked; bikes fell crashing into one another, and gas began leaking.

He fired seven times before a bearded face appeared at the door. I cocked and pointed the .44, and the face disappeared. The gray-haired man snapped in a fresh clip, and fired seven more times, leaving the other bikes little more than a pile of rubble.

“Now they can’t catch us on the road, unless they run much faster than would seem probable,” the gray-haired guy said as he idled his bike in an arc until he faced the exit. “Keep the Ruger. I’ll get it from you later.” He hit the gas, scattered gravel and was gone. I heard yelling behind me as I sprinted for my van. I didn’t look back.

Having traced me by the name on the side of my Van, the gray-haired man appeared, bearing a case of 12-year-old Glenlivet, at the end of my last evening show. He identified himself as Noble Dain, and I realized that, although I had read three of his books, I had never seen his picture. That was the start of a very long night and a sporadic friendship. He tended to look me up only when he dropped out of sight to escape his third wife, Noleta the terrible, to whom he was bound by a badly conceived, but tightly written, prenupt.

Noble thoroughly understood and agreed with my leaving the bureaucracy of the FBI, but after attending a number of both my Road Show performances and my folk-singing gigs, he thought I was wasting my true talent as an investigator in order to become a second-rate singer-songwriter.

“Take me for example,” he said. “I began working as a journalist with the sole intent of staying with it only so long as it took me to sell my first novel. It turns out, I am a first rate Banzai journalist, but I simply do not have the mind of a novelist. Had I persisted at novel writing, I would

never have been a real success and would never have developed into my present self, warped as that may be.”

I had been shocked to hear that Noble had committed suicide. He seemed much too fond of himself for that.