



## Chapter 3, Monday, September 1, 8:35 AM: The Duck At Work and The Pig Decides

“She’s evil,” Mary Tilden said.

“She is not evil,” Andy Tilden said and adjusted his grip on his cell phone. “She’s bright and creative, possibly a genius.”

“An evil genius.” Mary’s voice hissed in his ear. The “she” under discussion was the couple’s daughter, Augusta. “I would never have imagined doing that, particularly not at six years of age.”

“That’s my point,” Andy said. “How many six-year-olds would know how?” The conversation, a carry-over from the conversation at breakfast—itself a carry-over and from the night before—concerned Augusta’s sabotage of her baby brother’s favorite bath toy, a rubber duck.

Sometime during the previous day, Augusta had pried out the duck’s squeaker, filled the duck with split shot from Andy’s tackle box, cemented the shot in place with Durham Rock Hard Water Putty from Andy’s workshop, and replaced the squeaker. The result had been a duck that wouldn’t float—much to Augusta’s delight—and a minor family tragedy.

“That’s what you get for letting her watch the Science Channel and Myth Busters,” Mary said. “She should be learning to dance by watching purple dinosaurs,

but *no* she's learning how to make mirrored death rays and shoot airplanes down with frozen chickens."

"She's a genius," Andy said again, to which Mary said that he had damn well better remember to bring home a new rubber ducky for Baby Boo, because if Baby Boo spent another bath-time screaming, the little genius's mother was apt to turn into a lush. Andy promised to remember the ducky and hung up.

He looked over the gray cubical tops, to see if anyone else was looking. The administration of the company he worked for, New American Standards Testing, Interpretation, and Evaluation Incorporated, NASTIE Corp, disapproved of even senior employees, like Andy, taking private phone calls during work time. Relieved to see that no one was paying attention, Andy opened his briefcase and took out Ducky Do, now quite heavy and solid. It would make a great paperweight. Augusta was a genius.



**Monday, September 1, 8:50 AM**



Forewarned of the reception Reverend Montana and his minions had planned for me, I took my briefcase from my room at the Inn and left the van parked at the motel. At the corner of Ninth and Pier Streets, I watched two brown-suited men in a tan Malibu slide away from the curb then signaled an empty cab. I asked the driver if the Chaos Café Bar and Grill had a back door.

"Sure they got a back door," the driver said while I slipped on the red, gold, and blue-striped tie I had tied earlier that morning and stored in my briefcase. "There's a loading dock and a little parking lot out back that some of the regulars use, but it won't be open now. Matter of fact, the Café don't open till 10." We turned onto Miles Street, and I saw a throng of people holding signs and milling on

the sidewalk in front of the Café, six blocks west. We were too far away for me to read the signs.

“Hey, something’s going on down there,” the cabby said.

“It’s a surprise party.”

“A party for who?”

“For me,” I said. “No use you getting caught up in this. Pull over and you can drop me here.” The cab pulled over and the driver looked me over carefully as I paid the fair.

“And are you surprised?” he asked.

“Endlessly,” I told him, “endlessly.”

As I approached, I heard the crowd singing a rather screeching version of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. They had reached the seldom-sung last verse in which God makes the world his footstool and the soul of wrong his slave. I wondered if they had skipped the verse before that suggests, “As he died to make men holy, let us live to make men free.”

The first sign I could read said, “God can drive a truck if he wants to.” Another said, “No Godless Pizza.” A third read, “Burn him at the stake. It’ll teach him a lesson.” The true spirit of Christian forgiveness. The crowd was mostly composed of women, mostly older with stringy, gray hair and hard, lined faces. The few men sprinkled in were young and dressed in slacks, dress shirts, and ties.

They started in on a cheerful new hymn with the words, “Sin, like a venomous disease, infects our vital blood.” I took a deep breath and pressed forward.

“Madness by nature reigns within. The passions burn and rage,” the singing continued.

“Have you come to join us?” asked a silver-haired woman in a tailored, white skirt, blouse and jacket. Her sign looked to have been professionally prepared. The

lettering “Blasphemers Have No Place In Our Town,” was neat and precise. The graphic, a rubber duck amid scorching flames, was artistically drawn. “Burn In Hell,” was printed underneath the flaming duck.

“It may be distasteful, but I have business inside,” I said and patted the briefcase, empty since I had removed my tie. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to review their liquor license.”

“Could they be shut down?” the woman asked with keen interest.

“I have my questions about this new man, Eider,” I said, and the woman nodded agreement.

“Most distasteful,” she said, and helped me push through the protesters, many of whom she called by name. I didn’t see the Reverend Montana, but I did see the black man who had saved me that morning. Looking out of place, overwhelmed and confused, he stood near the entrance and stared at the protestors. When I grabbed him by his sleeve, I saw that the nametag on his army fatigue shirt read, “Shepherd.”

“Shepherd,” I said gruffly, “you’d better come with me.”

The black man’s voice was very soft as he nodded and said, “I come seeking fruit.” My lady-in-white escort looked at us questioningly.

“It’s another matter,” I explained. I tried the double glass doors, but they were locked. I pounded on them with the palm of my hand. After a few moments, a brunette in jeans and a dark gray sweatshirt over a red-pinstriped blouse looked out at me.

“I have a nine o’clock appointment with Mr. Clinton.” I shouted to be heard over the protestors.

“Fools in their heart have said, there is no God of might; corrupt are they and base their deeds, in evil they

delight,” they sang. Whatever became of “We Shall Overcome?”

“Oh please let me in,” I shouted. The brunette looked at me for another long moment before turning a thumb latch and opening one door an inch.”

“Who’s Clinton?” she asked.

“Noble’s attorney,” I said. “Let me in before someone recognizes me. I might be torn to pieces.” The door opened enough for Shepherd and me to slide through. The brunette was in her mid-thirties, with dark green eyes and an elfin upturned nose. She smiled and I fought to breath calmly through my nose. There were opalescent sparks of fire deep in her eyes. She twisted a bar towel between her hands as she stared from me to Shepherd and back.

“I’m Matt Eider,” I said and held out my hand. She frowned but politely brought her hand up to take mine for the briefest of moments. Her fingers were cold. She wiped them on the towel when she finished.

“And you are?” she asked, looking at Shepherd.

“I am,” he started, but a shout from the protesters outside drowned out his next words. “Ood Shepherd” was all I heard. The brunette’s brows knit in concentration.

“Dagwood?” she asked. “Dagwood Shepherd?”

“As long as I am in the world,” Dagwood said.

“That name must have been lots of fun in high school,” the brunette said.

“I think he would like some fruit,” I said. “Is there anything available?”

“To beg I am ashamed,” Dagwood said.

“You don’t have to beg with me,” I said. “I’ll find you a job.”

“In fact he can have mine,” the brunette said and handed me her towel. “I quit.” She stalked past a greeter’s

stand with a blank “Daily Specials” dry-erase board, around a partition, and back into the café. Dagwood and I followed.

The main room was wide and deep with a long bar to the right. Something big on a stand at the center of the bar was covered by a sheet. I ignored it. A mixture of dark wooden tables and padded chairs sat on the left side of the room. Some of the tables were round and set for four to six. Others were long and rectangular. Roughly a dozen people, in clothes ranging from suits and ties to mechanics coveralls, sat singly or in pairs at a few of the tables near the bar.

I told Dagwood to have a seat somewhere while I found out what was going on. He nodded and drifted toward a round table near the rear of the room. The brunette had walked to the right side of the bar, five feet from the thing in the sheet. She stood with her back to the wooden bar, and the bartender stood behind her.

He was a beanpole, taller than my six feet, wearing a white shirt, a black tie, and a black eye patch over his right eye. He set a pint of beer on the bar, and the brunette turned to pick it up. It was early, but somehow a morning beer seemed appropriate to the environment.

“Could I have one of those?” I asked.

“Could have,” the bartender said, “but I just quit.” He had stiff black hair and a rectangular face. His complexion was too pale for a pirate. His face showed neither humor nor animosity. He watched me as he might some unknown kind of insect.

“Seems to be a lot of that going around,” I said. “How come?”

“We don’t like someone new coming in here, doesn’t know the place, doesn’t know the people, and starts making changes,” the brunette said.

“And you are?”

“Casey Wright, I was the general manager.”

“Noble spoke highly of you.”

“And he never told me about you at all,” she said.

“My office is on the second floor, just above the bar. That’s where you’ll find the books and the payroll accounts and vendor bills, and the utility bills, business license forms and the tax forms, etc. You’ll know how to handle all of those of course.”

“I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“And you’ll know how to mix all of our specialty drinks,” the bartender said. “We’re famous for our specialty drinks.”

“That’s Obama Bob from Alabama,” Casey said pointing her thumb up at the tall man, “Walking drink encyclopedia.”

“You make the flaming green lizards,” I said.

“Noble told me.”

“Those are easy,” Obama Bob said.

“And you won’t even poor me a beer?” I asked. He shook his head slowly. I stepped away from the bar thinking to walk around and get something for myself. I was stopped by an apparition in black who appeared as if from nowhere. She wore black high heels, and had dancer’s legs in black, net stockings. Her hair was red, cropped close at the sides, and piled high and curly on the top. A tight black cocktail waitress dress reached from mid-thigh to just above her nipples. She was holding a stack of menus.

“And you are Hillary Cantrell,” I said.

“You know me?” she asked in a whiskey voice that would curl the toes on a brass Buddha.

“Head of wait staff, Noble said you were unmistakable.”

“Well, make no mistake about it,” she said. “I’m quitting.”

“I understand,” I said, “but I’m working on an album of Phil Ochs covers, mostly his anti-war stuff. Have you ever considered performing duets?”

“Honey, you’re not only not my type, you’re not even the right gender.”

“I was talking about singing.”

“Sure you were,” she said, and handed me the menus. She drifted back to the bar, where Obama Bob was already mixing her a cocktail.

I decided there was no need to wait for the final shoe to drop. Looking toward the rear of the room, I saw the in and out doors for the kitchen. I walked back and pushed into a room hung with bright stainless pots and equipped with state-of-the-art, stainless ovens and refrigerators. A middle-aged man, with two-days of beard stubble and a hair net covering the curly hair at the sides of his bald head, had a spotless apron on over his jeans and yellow checked shirt. He was leaning against a gleaming, stainless prep counter. Next to him, smoking an illegal cigarette, stood a short woman with steel gray hair under her hair net. She wore an old-fashioned, white, starched uniform dress, white stockings, and white shoes under a white apron. Her face was pinched and mean. I pointed at the man.

“Barack Newton,” I said, “sous-chef, dishwasher, and odd-job man.” The man nodded. I looked at the woman. “Jeremiah Jacobs, head chef. Noble told me about both of you. I’m Matt Eider. Do you want to come out and resign, so we can get this over with?” Barack Newton nodded. Jeremiah Jacobs—who Noble has said could be called Jeri, once you had known her for a couple years—picked a small, black cast iron skillet off the counter.

“Maybe I should break some eggs,” she said and smacked the back of the skillet hard against the palm of her hand. “Break some eggs.”

“Only if you’re on the payroll,” I said, turned and walked out. I heard the kitchen door creek and swing back as Barack and Jeremiah followed me. Casey Wright and Hillary Cantrell stood side by side facing out from the bar. Obama Bob’s neck and head was clearly visible behind them. He had already poured a pint of beer and what looked like half a highball glass of whiskey and set them on the bar. Facing the bar, I stopped, and Barack Newton and Jeremiah Jacobs walked past me.

Jeremiah swung the back of the cast iron skillet into the palm of her other hand with a loud whack as she passed, and said, “We quit.” She walked to the bar, picked up the glass of whiskey, and downed half of it.

Casey Wright—”Indispensible,” Noble called her, not saying that she was breath taking as well—Hillary Cantrell, Obama Bob from Alabama, the misnamed Jeremiah Jacobs, and Barack Newton, I knew them all from Noble’s stories. There was little he loved better than his family at the Chaos Café Bar and Grill. I looked at them and waited for one of them to say something.

“Pizza!” Jeremiah finally snapped. “You want me to make only pizza for the little ones? Pizza and a salad bar only. I would go mad.” She smacked the little skillet into the palm of her hand again. “I break your eggs!”

“Whoa!” I said. “Is that what this is all about?”

“Yes! Turning the Café into a Pizza Buffet?” Casey said. “Whatever are you thinking/ Can you see Hillary working the kid’s party room? Maybe Obama Bob could hand out the soft drinks. It’s . . .It’s . . .”

“Absurd,” I finished for her. “Listen, I don’t know where the news got that, but not from me. I worked a kids’

pizza party once, and I never will again. Those little buggers are biters. I've still got scars on my ankles to prove it. I called the ASPCA on the whole group when I left."

"Bang, Bang, Bang," came from the front door, and a deep voice shouted, "You will let us in. We demand admittance." Casey looked at me and I looked at her. The door banged three more times.

"Can I get you to do the honors?" I asked.

"What happened?" Casey asked.

"Happened?"

"When you called the ASPCA?"

"They rounded them all up and had them spayed and neutered. Most, I heard, found good homes, but some of the parents were too old for adoption. They had to be put down. It was for the best."

"I'll get the door," Casey said and walked away from the bar. I walked to it. Bottles of domestic beer lay in a tray of crushed ice beneath the bar's top. I reached over and grabbed a Bud. Obama Bob glared at me but said nothing. I leaned against the bar, looked at Hillary and gestured at the occupied tables with my beer.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"That one at the first table near the front of the bar," Hillary pointed to a wide-shouldered man with sandy, crew cut. "That's William Bush, he runs a stamp shop out of a two-room suite on the second floor. Noble used to have an office up there too, but it's empty now."

"He's a philatelist?"

"I know he's a body builder, other than that I couldn't say. The rest are just regulars we sometimes let in early. We get to know our regulars pretty well. You mind if I go see if any of them need anything?"

"I thought you quit."

“Honey,” Hillary said, “no one is going to make me do what I don’t want to do. I’m working for the customers, not you.” I shrugged. Why argue when you get what you want?

“This isn’t a public meeting!” I heard Casey say loud and firmly from the door.

“Casey Wright!” said another female voice, louder and sharper. “You know I am not the public.”

“And I am here to represent both the public interest and Mrs. Dain, who is one of my parishioners,” said a deep familiar voice I couldn’t place. “We are all here for the same purpose.” I heard Casey grunt and let out an exasperated sigh.

With a hip-rolling swagger reminiscent of a wide-bottomed John Wayne, the Reverend Magnus Montana walked around the front partition, stood in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips, and beamed rays of goodness at us.

The man who walked in to stand at the Reverend’s left hip was a Looney Tunes cartoon bulldog brought to life. An inch or two shorter than Montana’s 6’ 4”, he had a round face with jowls and a nose you had no choice but look directly into—stiff black nose hairs in profusion. He had a massive chest, hard, bulky biceps, and a long, hard stomach. His waist seemed set too low and his legs too short. He didn’t need them longer; he didn’t seem the type to run from anything. He wore a gray and taupe-striped suit over a black shirt and black tie. The suit was almost well tailored enough to hide the holster under his right shoulder. The Universal Church of the Assumption, I thought, must have a very rigid tithing policy. You coughed up your ten percent or else.

“I was hoping Mr. Eider would be here,” Montana said. His tone said he expected an explanation at once.

Before I could speak, we were joined by Snow White, three brush-apes, and a red-haired Charlie Chaplin.

“Well where is he?” Snow White demanded of the room in general. She had raven black hair that set off her alabaster skin and deep blue eyes, and she wore the traditional yellow dress but with a yellow suit jacket and no red ribbon. Her stride and hand movements were quick and jerky, and although she had a small straight nose, there was something of the predatory bird in her manner. She had a hunter’s eyes. From Noble’s description of his third wife, I recognized Snow White as Noleta, Letty, Dain.

“When we were dating,” Noble had often complained, halfway through a bottle of Macallan Scotch, “Letty leta anyone do anything they liked and as often as they wanted. That prenupe should have been no problem. I figured by the time we had been married six months, she would be banging the neighbor and his dog. I should have paid more attention to her name. Now that we’re married, she noleta me do this, noleta me do that, she noleta me do anything at anytime. And she’s developed the sexual appetite of a statue of St. Fiacre, patron saint of venereal disease.” Noble had not been happy with Noleta.

And if Snow White was Noleta, that meant the three brush-apes—as Noble had called them—were her three, younger brothers. According to Noble, the three Dobson boys had been raised by their father, Adair Dobson, in some miniscule town buried in Northern California’s brushy, logged-over coastal mountains and were proof that Bigfoot didn’t exist. If he had once existed, the three Dobsons would have killed and eaten him.

The three were, in fact, virtually indistinguishable. Each stood within a thumb’s width of 5’10”; each had dark brown hair that cascaded out from under their grubby, ball caps to cover their ears; slack, full lips; a rounded chin; and

deep-set, cunning, brown eyes. For distinguishing features, one had a mullet, one had cowboy boots rather than high-topped hunting boots, and one wore a leather bomber's jacket rather than a brown camouflage, hunting coat.

This group was followed by a small man in a bowler hat and baggy black suit. Sparse red hair hung beneath his hat, and thick red hair made a short, Charlie-Chaplin-style moustache. All he needed was a thin, hooked cane to finish the costume. He carried a worn, soft-sided, leather briefcase instead.

"Let's get us some whiskey," the mullet-headed Dobson said and tried to walk past Reverend Montana's taupe-striped bulldog. Instinctively, the big man reached out with his left and laid his hand on the Dobson's right shoulder. The bulldog didn't seem to be squeezing, but the Dobson winced and stopped.

"We're not here for that," Montana said. He turned to look at the Dobsons and beamed authority at them.

"And what are you all standing around for?" Noleta asked, looking at Casey and the rest. "Don't you have jobs to do?"

"Noleta," Casey said, "we all quit."

"Then why are you here? You can all clear off my property!"

"I think it's my property," I said.

"Your property?" Noleta shrilled.

"And I would like them to stay," I finished and looked at Casey Wright, Jeremiah, and the others. Obama Bob and Barack Newton both nodded gravely.

"And what makes you think you can claim this property?" Noleta asked.

"Inherit, I believe is the word."

"You're him? You're Eider?"

“I’m afraid I don’t have any choice,” I said. “That’s who I woke up as this morning.” There was a pounding at the front door again, and Casey left the bar to answer it.

“I think Noleta was surprised by your appearance,” Montana said. “You look quite different than you did on television.”

“I’m a man of property now. Stan Clinton said I only needed to meet him here to sign a couple papers.”

“There may be more to it than that, and you may wish to reconsider,” Montana said, his voice deep and grave.

“You’d better reconsider,” bomber-jacket Dobson said with a sneer-spoiling lisp.

“I hear you’re prone to accidents in parking lots,” mullet-head Dobson added.

“Next time I may be prone to shooting back,” I said.

“No need for talk like that here,” the redheaded Charlie Chaplin said. His voice was precise with a hint of Scottish accent.

“You listen to him, he’s my attorney!” Noleta insisted.

“And I have a judicial order here.” He started to reach into his soft-sided brief case.

“Which isn’t worth the ink and paper,” said a man with round, owl-like glasses. Dressed in a light tan suit and a knit, green-plaid tie, he was young, round bodied and round faced. He bounced confidently past the red-haired lawyer and offered me his hand.

“Stan Clinton,” he said as we shook. “I was Noble’s attorney and now I suppose I am yours.” I shrugged and nodded. He nodded and turned back to face the Noleta and the others. “I know everyone else.” He made a dismissive wave of fingers at them. “And I can tell you that I have already run Noble’s will past State Supreme Court Judge

Claudius, and he finds it all perfectly legal. Either you quash your judicial order or Claudius will.” He spoke with a confident, eager manner.

“Claudius,” Noleta’s voice could have shattered glass, “he and Noble were old drinking buddies. He—”

“He made his finding quite objectively I assure you,” Clinton said in his eager-beaver voice. He lowered his tone a little and added, “Anyone who questions Claudius’s objectivity, may find things quite difficult.”

“We’ll see about this.” the redheaded lawyer was closing his briefcase.

“Oh please don’t,” Clinton said. “It will just be annoying.”

“And what if the son-of-a-bitch isn’t dead?” Noleta asked, a question that had occurred to me as well.

“Without a body, it is impossible to be absolutely sure,” Clinton said. He looked at Casey Wright, Jeremiah, and the others and asked me if we should continue in private. I shook my head and said that Noble’s friends had decisions of their own to make. Obama Bob, Barack and the rest nodded. Clinton shrugged and continued.

“Wednesday of last week, I received a package from Noble that had been mailed from Fort Bragg on Monday. His suicide note was inside, along with his new will and some other papers, all properly drawn by a competent attorney of my acquaintance.

“On reading the note, I immediately called the police in Fort Bragg. They drove out to Glass Beach and found Noble’s Hummer parked near the headlands. Inside, they found his clothes, including soiled underwear and socks, tossed haphazardly in the back seat along with his keys, wallet and watch. They also found one empty and one nearly empty bottle of Macallan Scotch.”

“How old?” I asked.

“Twenty-one, fine oak.”

“At least he went out with the best.”

“There’s 30-year-old.”

“At \$750 a bottle?” I said. “And not live to tell about it?”

“Good point,” Clinton said. “Not even Noble was that crazy. The police found one of Noble’s shoes at the top of a cliff that drops 30 feet straight into waves that smash onto the rocks. Not even Acapulco cliff divers would jump there if they wanted to live. If Noble jumped or fell, he’s gone.

“Of course, the Coast Guard did make a search, but with all the time that’s passed, the currents in that area make it impossible to predict where Noble’s body could be. Our best hope is that it will wash ashore somewhere to the south and that no tourist takes it home as a souvenir.”

“Can we have him declared dead then?” Noleta asked.

“Even under these conditions,” Clinton said, as though giving a lecture, “with Noble’s history of dropping out of sight, I’m afraid any judge would expect us to wait a certain period of time.”

“Then the will is not in force, and as Noble’s wife, I own the Café.” Noleta sounded triumphant.

“Noble owned the Café before you married, and under the terms of your prenuptial agreement, he retains full ownership unless you divorce him based on evidence of his infidelity. And to cover the time period prior to the will’s being probated, Noble signed an arrangement, like a power of attorney, that effectively transfers the Café over to Mr. Eider under the same conditions that apply under the will.”

“What do you mean conditions?” Mullet-head asked.

“Mr. Dain autographed one, first-edition copy of each of his first five books, and he gave one of these books to five of his closest friends.”

“He didn’t give me one,” Cowboy-boots Dobson said.

“You could knock me over with a feather,” Clinton said.

“I ain’t got a feather,” Cowboy-boots said.

“Maybe next time.” Clinton shook his head to clear it then looked at me. “Each friend holding one of these books is entitled to approach you with a task that you must then complete. Upon completion, the friend will give you the book, and once you have the complete set, or in ten years, the Chaos Café Bar and Grill is yours without further obligation.

“Those persons with the books may not ask you to commit a felony, and if you are not able to complete a task for some good reason—say you are asked to find the remains of Amelia Earhart—I am empowered to determine that you have made an adequate, good-faith effort and award you the book.”

“How will you determine if I have made an adequate, good-faith effort?”

“Like Justice Stewart said of hard-core pornography, ‘it’s hard to define, but I know it when I see it,’” Clinton said. His round face beamed. “Unlike pornography, I won’t want to see more of it.”

“And that’s all? I don’t have to jump any tall building in a single bound, catch bullets in my teeth, or go around with a lantern and find an honest Republican?”

“You might have to settle for one that wouldn’t steal the lantern,” Clinton said. “For now, all you have to do is sign a few papers, and except for being able to sell it, the Café is yours.”

“And what if he doesn’t sign? What if he doesn’t even try to complete the tasks?” Noleta asked. Clinton looked taken aback by the thought.

“Why then I . . . er . . . I suppose that, in time, the Café would be yours.”

“Good!” Noleta turned away from Clinton as if he no longer existed. Like a hungry hawk, she turned her bright eyes on me. “I’ll give you ten thousand dollars if you give up your claim on the Café.” I stepped back from her. She leaned forward. “Twenty thousand dollars.”

“Really,” I said, “I would need to look at the books, before—”

“What’s a book going to tell you?” Mullet-Head asked.

“It better be a first aid book,” lisped Bomber-Jacket.

“Heck, Letty would let you take all the books you wanted,” Cowboy-Boots said and waved his hands in the air excitedly. “She’s not interested in books.”

“I can believe that,” I said.

“Thirty thousand,” Noleta said, “and that’s final. You look at the books and let me know. It’ll be years before you could earn that here.”

“Charming and generous too,” I said. “Noble had you all wrong.”

“Now that he’s dead,” Noleta said, “there is no wrong way to have me. I could sweeten the pot if you like. I could have fun with you. I’ll wait on your call, but I won’t wait long.” She made a twirling gesture with her hand, and the three Dobsons and the red-haired lawyer turned. Letty led the way out. Casey Wright followed to relock the door.

“An utterly amazing woman,” Montana said, watching her leave, “and a truly devoted Christian.”

“She sounded very giving, now that her she thinks her prenup is no longer a problem,” I said.

“Each of my flock gives in the way most suited to them,” Montana said.

“You might want to suggest to Letty,” I said, “that if Noble is still alive, the conditions of the prenup are still in effect. Infidelity lets Noble cut Letty free with almost no settlement or alimony.” Why should she return to her old ways just because Noble was gone. Let her stay celibate.

“You make Letty sound like a loose woman,” Montana tried to sound insulted, “but I will pass along your concern in a way that minimizes any insult.” Montana paused and looked at Obama Bob, Jeremiah Jacobs, and Barack Newton who were watching him closely. Hillary Cantrell walked over to listen, and the regulars leaned forward in their chairs. He gestured for me to come closer.

“Perhaps we could step over here for a little more privacy?” he suggested leaning down closer to my face. I shrugged, and we walked forward to an unoccupied space. Montana’s taupe-striped bulldog stayed where he was, and Montana leaned down close. His breath smelled of pine. Did he gargle with floor cleaner?

“You’d be well advised to accept Mrs. Dain’s offer,” Montana said. His voice was warm and fatherly. “I know you will never make that much working here, and you don’t want to get dragged into national politics. You know, I’ve worked with people at the national level, and it can get messy, very messy.”

“National politics?” I asked. Where did that come from? Montana shook his head.

“It’s better to stay clear altogether,” he said. His hand was on my shoulder now. “And I know you’re having booking problems.”

I nodded. I had worked two days of a three-day booking at the Lake County Fair before I played “God is a Rubber Duck” at the end of a set at the Frogshhead Brewery.

While I slept, the video hit youtube.com, and by the time I got up Sunday morning, my last performances at the fair had been canceled. I called my booking agent in Santa Rosa to check the dates for my next gig and was coldly informed that every booking for the season had been canceled and that the booking agency was dropping me.

“I can get you back to work,” Montana assured me. “If you take Letty’s offer, I will arrange a little conversion for you. We’ll do something on the news where you say you’ve seen the light, and if you could write a Christian folk song to go with it, that would be great. I’ll get my television congregation to ask for your Road Show at their local fairs. Add a couple gospel covers to your act, and you’ll be bigger than ever.”

“But I wouldn’t actually have to convert?” I said. Montana’s hand patted my shoulder. I wondered if I needed disinfectant or if a shower and change of clothes would do.

“Hell son, that’s up to you,” he said.

“I’d be a born again hypocrite?”

“What do you think Vice President Macduff is? You think he spends time contemplating the gospels? Politics is marketing, and marketing is packaging boy. All marketing is packaging.”

I nodded and straightened. I gave him my hand to squeeze. He took it in both his. I gave him a sincere look and told him I would let him know.

“I’ll be looking forward to your call,” he said. He made a “follow me” motion with his hand, and as if Montana had shouted heel, the taupe-striped bulldog followed him. I walked behind the two of them, turned the thumb latch, and let them out. I walked back to find the Chaos Café staff and Stan Clinton all lined up at the bar. The regulars watched from their seats.

“What did he want?” Obama Bob asked.

“For me to sell Noble and the rest of you out and pretend to find Jesus like a good neocon.”

“And?” Casey asked. I looked at them all: Jeremiah and Wright, Hillary and Clinton, Barak and Obama Bob. I knew them from Noble’s stories, but looking at them lined up, I had the eerie feeling I had known them before—that they were shades from, some strange parallel universe.

“The Reverend Montana bids 30 coins of silver,” I said. “The question is do you want me to take it? Or do you want to trust me and go back to work?”

“There’s only one way to answer a question like that at the Chaos Café Bar and Grill,” Casey said. She walked over to the mysterious something covered with a sheet at the center of the bar. I had been ignoring it since I entered the room, and as she pulled the sheet off, I was glad I had.

Warty and hairy, it was the back half of a pig standing against a wheel of fortune, as though a pig had stepped halfway through the wheel. The wheel had an arrow at the top and numbers randomly painted in wedges around the edge. Casey pointed at it with an upturned hand and announced, “The Pig of Fate!”

“Noble bought it for the Chaos Café,” Hillary said. It must have been since the last time I saw Noble.

“Slap the pig, spin the wheel, and take the ride!” Obama Bob said. Several of the regulars rose from their chairs as I edged closer to the ugly butt of the pig.

“For Challenge Drinks?” Barack asked.

“For what else,” Casey Wright said. She looked at me and said, “Slap it.” I gave the pig butt a tap with the ends of my fingers. Nothing.

“Slap it!” Casey yelled. I gave the pig butt a full-body, tennis-forehand slap.

“Oui-oui-oui-oui.” from hidden speakers came the shill sound of a pig in pain, and the wheel of fortune spun wildly. The regulars crowded in closer to see. Obama Bob pulled a printed list from under the bar, and not knowing what a good result was, I watched the wheel spinning under the arrow. Finally, it began to slow. I could read the numbers as they passed: 21, 17, 4, 12, 9. It seemed to hang on 19 but then clicked over to 31.

“Thirty-one!” Jeremiah exclaimed. Her small pinched face had a triumphant look.

“Thirty-one,” Barack confirmed.

“Thirty-one?” I asked.

“Everyone remembers number thirty-one,” Obama Bob said and showed me the list. It was a list of Challenge Drinks. Number 30 was “Fish House Punch.” Number 31 was “Flaming Green Lizard.”

“I heard about those from Noble,” I said. “You don’t drink them; they claw their way down your throat.”

“Just about,” Obama Bob said. He looked at Casey.

“I’ll demonstrate,” Casey said. I looked at her unturned nose and wanted to crawl down her throat. I nodded my agreement. Obama Bob nodded and turned to the wall of bottles behind the bar. The cocktail was simple. He grabbed only two or three bottles. He set a short, thick-walled glass on the bar. Inside was a pale green liquid. Obama held a long-necked, butane lighter over it.

“Do it!” Casey said. Obama lit the lighter, and the drink sprouted a blue-green alcohol flame. Casey reached out slowly, lowered her palm on the glass extinguishing the flame, slid her hand around to hold the glass, and lifted the drink to her lips. She downed the whole drink, and said, “That’s all there is to it.” Stan Clinton made a choking sound, but the regulars murmured approval. All eyes were on me. I sneered.

“Mix two,” I said. Obama Bob looked at me quizzically. I said, “Two.” He turned around to his wall of bottles, and soon set two of the short, thick glasses of pale green liquor in front of me on the bar. He held the butane lighter over the glass on my right.

“Light ‘em,” I said.

“Both of them?”

Both,” I said. Obama Bob lit the one on my right first then the one on my left. I let them burn for a second. I slowly stretched out both hands. I lowered my right palm over the first glass and my left palm over the second, killing the flames. The glass rims were warm on my palms. I scooped up the glass up in my right and downed it. I kept my face still but wanted to wince from the taste. Drinking 110 proof, green chartreuse was like swallowing a mouthful of molten grass. I lifted the second drink and downed it. Stan Clinton made a gulping sound, but the regulars applauded.

“That’s ugly,” Obama Bob said. I looked at the rest of the staff.

“I don’t know what kind of deal you all had with Noble. I know I can’t replace him, but I can promise not to make any changes unless I am forced to. So how about going back to work?” I looked from face to face, waiting.

“I’ll work with you,” Jeremiah said, a grin on her small round face. The regulars applauded again. “Two green lizards at once, fuck it.”

“You got it,” Hillary said. I looked at Casey Wright.

“It’s a grim choice,” she said, “but I’ll go along for now.” Standing behind her, Barack and Obama Bob nodded.

“Noble had deep pockets,” Casey said. “How long can you keep us open with those demonstrators chasing off customers?”

“About three and a half minutes,” I said, “but I do have a plan.” I asked Bob if he had beer on draft that he needed to get rid of, something that wasn’t selling.

“I got talked into taking four kegs of Loose Toe Lager. It tastes like old gym socks and soda.”

“Get it ready,” I said and turned to face Hillary. “Tell your regulars that Loose Toe Lager is free for as long as there are demonstrators outside. Tell them they are welcome to call their friends. Do you have appetizer menus?”

“Ones that sit on little stands on the table?” she asked. I nodded. She said they had the stands but didn’t use them.

“If you have to write the menus by hand, get them on the stands and get them on the tables. That should help pay for the beer.” I looked at Jeremiah and asked if I could use Barack for a while. She nodded.

“He’s no use in the kitchen anyway.”

“Great,” I said, “and can you take him a big bowl of fruit or fruit salad?” I pointed to Dagwood at a back table reading from a thin white-covered book and paying no attention to anything else.

“He will be satisfied,” Jeremiah said and walked back to the kitchen like a sergeant marching to war. I asked Barack to help Hillary with the menus then turned to face, Clinton, who had followed all these developments with a conspiratorial smile.

“Let’s sign those papers,” I said. The round, owl-eyed man nodded.

“What about Letty and Reverend Montana? I have to tell you, Montana is a formidable man in this town,” Clinton said. “Beyond his fame as a televangelist and his political connections in Washington, he has this town wired

through his congregation. Locally we call it the Montana Mafia.

“If he wants to know what you had for breakfast, he’ll reach out to his congregation, and if your waitress isn’t a member, someone in the congregation will be her aunt or her best friend. If he wanted to find a dime lost on Cheese Street, someone in his congregation would find it. If he and Letty want to give you a hard time—”

“Like Ed Bruce sang, ‘your fate is in your hands, stand pat or draw it’s your to choose, luck don’t have a thing to do with how you play the game,’ I didn’t come here to lose,” I said. Clinton looked at me, shifted in his seat, looked at the table sighed and looked at me again.

“OK,” he said, “I give up. What was that from?”

“The Theme to Bret Maverick.”

“Ah,” Clinton said, “you can always spot a truly great mind by its instinctive tendency to reach back to the classics.” He carried his briefcase to an unoccupied table and brought out a manila folder. He asked if I wanted to read everything.

“Is there anything underhanded in there?”

“No,” he said.

“And if there was, would I spot it?”

“No,” he said again.

I signed the papers, handed them back, and asked, “How much money is missing?”

“Money?” Clinton tried to look like he had never heard the word before.

“From the estate?”

“Noble kept numbered of accounts in Switzerland, Panama, the Caymans, and maybe elsewhere,” Clinton said. “I may never have had all of his numbers.”

“You don’t know how much is missing,” I said. Clinton nodded.

“No idea.”

“You do know he’s alive,” I said. Clinton shook his head. I nodded.

“If Noble was going to commit suicide, he would buy flowers, run a hose from his Hummer’s exhaust in through a window, lock himself in, take off all his clothes, and start the engine. We would find him cherry red and naked with a rose in his teeth.”

“Maybe,” Clinton said.

“So what happens to me if Noble shows up in nine years and eleven months, or after I have completed four of the tasks but haven’t heard from the fifth book holder?”

“Good works are their own reward?” Clinton said.

“I’m fucked,” I said. Clinton nodded. “Fucking Noble,” I thought. Maybe someday I could go back on the county fair circuit—maybe—but not now. I had to make this work. I said, “That’s just fucking Noble.”

“Maybe even princely,” Clinton said. “But you do realize that giving away free beer won’t breakup the demonstration outside.” From where we were sitting we could hear the demonstrators screeching their way through the Battle Hymn of the Republic again.

“Then the least I can do is give them something new to sing,” I said. Clinton shrugged and rose. I followed him to the front. I unlocked both doors and held one for him. He offered me his hand.

“You know, you are a very odd man,” Clinton said as we shook. “Noble chose well.” I watched him bounce out into the crowd.