

Chapter Five

(EVENING, BOEING FIELD, SEATTLE, WA.)

We approached Seattle after sunset. A few clouds hung over the jumbled white mass of the Olympic Range across the Sound. The lights of the city were on, but you could still make out the details of the buildings, the people on the street and the landscape in the dusk. The clouds over the Olympics turned orange and illuminated the water as we circled north, across the city and settled below downtown into Boeing Field.

The whine of the helicopter's turbines wound down as we taxied, hovered, over the tarmac toward the south terminal. A Boeing landing is always a treat. The field sits just below downtown Seattle. The city lies right there, dropped on the edge of the improbably blue Puget Sound. Across the water, the Olympic's. On the mainland side, even taller mountains rise, individual Cascade volcanoes. Rainier, Baker, St. Helens. All rising singularly from rolling foothills. The Sound never looks better than landing at its edge. That night Baker and Rainier rose dark at their foot and the summits fully lit in a pink alpen glow.

After loading my single duffel into the limousine and seating me, the driver slid open the divider and asked, "Mr. Rico wishes to know if Le-

nore's would be all right for dinner?"

"That will be fine."

"Excellent."

The driver slid the partition closed and returned to his driving until we reached the unassuming storefront restaurant on the south edge of downtown. Stopping in front, he stepped around to the curbside of the limo to let me out.

"Mr. Rico mentioned you were staying at the Paramount. Would you like me to drop your bag off for you?"

"That would be great." I reached into my pocket to give him a tip.

Raising his hand, he stopped me. "Mr. Rico has taken care of everything. Enjoy your evening."

He nodded and walked back around to the driver's side.

The name of the restaurant was Lenore's, but for years everyone called it Mom's because Lenore invariably remembered and asked about your kids, your parents, and so on. As you recounted their status, Lenore dispensed wise and reasonable advice. By this time, Joey owned, several times over, a small round corner booth in the back corner. When he called ahead, it was reserved. One of the two or three reservations honored at Lenore's. The menu was serious Italian with a Staten Island accent. The wines all vintage Classicos, with a special imported estate bottled back cellar for regulars.

I was led back to the table where Joey waited with an opened bottle of wine, one half glass and two empty glasses. Gracefully, he slid across the far edge of middle age. When I first met him, he was a stereotypical wiry, wise-ass Italian. Five foot eight, not a quarter inch taller, he carried himself like a full six foot four first draft linebacker. As he aged, gathered wrinkles, laugh lines and gray at his temples, what once was wiry became defined muscles. What had been sassy, became deep-seated confidence. He wore khakis and a dark green short sleeved knit polo shirt. Even at this time of year, he seemed tan.

"I hope you don't mind. Margie's joining us. It's the only night we set

aside for a dinner out. After, she's going to a movie with a couple of girlfriends." Joey shrugged his shoulders. "Usually we do something together, but I begged off, with you being up here and claiming a bit of work to do, late."

"That's fine. I haven't seen either of you for, what, three years?"

"Maybe four? When was that race to the islands?"

"They alternate years, Vancouver and LA. This year was LA so it must have been five years ago."

"Too long."

"How are the girls?"

"Total babes. Total nightmares. My nightmares. They're great. Rachel started high school last year. Cheerleader. Had every guy on the basketball team eating out of her hand like trained chimps. Drives them up a wall. Won't date. Just wants to be friends." He threw his head back in a laugh.

"Lucky you."

"No shit. I have visions of sitting on the front steps with a shotgun waiting for guys to bring her home." He laughed his deep rolling laugh again. "So far I'm lucky." He took a sip of wine and, as he set the glass down, started to stand, "Here's Margie."

We both stood as Margie walked to the table. Roughly proportional to Joey, she aged in the same athletic way manner as Joey. Her hair just broke her shoulders. The blonde seemed a little sharper, but she still wore very little make-up. Years younger than Joey, she seemed the quintessential younger woman. Always the most beautiful and youngest one in the crowd.

Dinner talk was catch-up stories, jokes and who's hitting on who. A serious ration of grief about Carole and I still seeing each other and the difficulties of long distance relationships. A gratuitous comment on the use of the Skype for gratification.

Joey told stories about the hazards of coaching girls' soccer. Hazards from the girls and stories of parents making the classic Little League

stories seem positively civil.

As we ordered after-dinner drinks and espresso, Margie excused herself.

“I’m meeting a couple friends and we’re seeing a chick flick you two wouldn’t be caught dead at. I’ll see you at home.” She gave Joey a peck on the cheek. “Where you staying Charlie? With us?”

“The Paramount, here downtown. I’ll be around for a couple days. Maybe dinner again tomorrow night?”

“That would be great. We’re free. Come on over to our place.”

“I’ll try.”

She kissed Joey again and left the restaurant. Not speaking, we watched her leave the restaurant.

“You’re a lucky guy Joey.”

“Don’t I know it.” He shook his head in mock disbelief.

There was a pause. A gap. We dined. We wined. Now, we would talk business.

“So, Joey, who’d you talk to?”

Joey looked down at his snifter as he swirled the Armagnac almost to the rim.

“Oh, you know. The guys my Dad ran with and their kids. They grunted at me. So, I went to a couple of friends down the ladder a bit, in the bookie end of things. They said the word on the street was, I was playing. Playing big.”

“Why do you say you aren’t calling any markers on this one?”

He took a sip as he looked me straight on.

I answered for him.

“You think this may not be simple and you want to give me an out, if it gets complex.”

“That’s part. The other part,” he paused, looking into his glass and then at me, “We’ve both worked hard for our bucks and have clean, legit lives. Shit, I have a beautiful wife and three great daughters. Finding, or even asking about, a smack dealer is not something a family-minded business

guy does. And ones with skeletons in the closet, want to keep that door closed, barred and padlocked.” He took another drink. “Charlie, you and I will always be too close to the old days to try to find someone peddling drugs without risking what we’ve built.”

“If you go rolling in the barnyard, some of the shit’s going to stick, even if it’s only one roll.”

“Right. There are still people who would love to have our necks. I’ll always be the son of a Don, no matter how straight I play. You may not have been an obvious part of the scene out there, but enough people know a little about your days in Nam and the street rumors in town. By stepping back onto the street, we risk every bit of distance built over the past thrity and some years.”

“So why bother”

“To preserve the distance we’ve built. I need to know where the word’s coming from and stop it before it gets any more out of hand. Someone’s put my name on the street in a very big way and it’s starting to mess things up. I want it to end, but I don’t want to it mess you, too.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.” I laughed.

He smiled, lifted his glass to me and downed the remainder.

“No problem, bud.” Beckoning to waiter, Joey motioned for another round.

”So really, who’d you talk to?”

“In New York, I have a real cousin who is still working with the family. He told me about the white hitting there. And, my CFO has a friend, a new social acquaintance. That’s Ken’s way of saying, politely, a woman he’s dating.

“So anyway, this social acquaintance has a brother on the force and she ran a couple of questions by him and it came back I was back playing. And my two bookie friends. That’s it.”

“When did this start?”

“Today is Wednesday.” He hesitated, “It started a week ago, the night before last. Monday.”

“The white hit Monday?”

“No. Peter came by the club and took me aside. Since then I’ve done the little digging I’ve done.”

“When did the white hit the street?”

“It’s been coming in for about eleven months. Will ya look around a bit for me?”

“Sure. I’ll need you to call one person for me, the others I’ll do on my own.”

“Who?”

“Peter.”

“You want the moon.”

“No. Just that one guy. Can you do it?”

“Sure. He’s pissed at me over this deal, but you’re a different matter. They still owe you. I’ll set it up. When do you want to go?”

–”Anytime tomorrow after lunch. I’ll take a red eye tonight.”

“You still have a car there or do you want to borrow one of mine? I still have a place in Chicago and a couple cars.”

“What do you have that you can spare?”

“An old, beat up Porsche.”

“Right. Last year? Or the year before?”

“Old. I’ll have it dropped off at... you staying at Carole’s?”

“I suppose. I’ll call her and tell her I’m coming in on her heels.”

“So, I’ll have it dropped off at eight or so. OK?”

“Make it ten.”

Joey laughed.

“This is in and out for me, OK? One bit of direction and I’m history.”

“Charlie, that’s fine. I just need an arrow, not a whole game plan.”

I stood, “Let’s go. I have a feeling I’m not going to get a lot of sleep.”

Joey pushed himself up from the table

“Come on. I’ll give you a ride.”

Chapter Six

(CHICAGO)

The morning after dinner with Joey and our late night talk, Carole and I continued the routine we established the prior weeks she'd been in the Gorge. Well, not exactly. I didn't get my sit or my walk. Carole picked me up on the "Arrivals" curb at O'Hare a little after seven. I'd slept some on the plane, but carried the overnight travel buzz from a cramped red-eye night.

Once at her townhouse, I ground and made the coffee. She started the shower. After showering together, we drank coffee, ate a bagel with butter, discussed the conversation with Joey and read the papers.

At ten, I was pulled to the door by a horn honking in the street. Leon leaned into an immaculate red bathtub Porsche 356 convertible, tweaking the horn. "Joey said you needed the beater for a couple of days."

Leon hadn't changed one bit since the evening I met him at the opening of the Blu Flamingo. Casual, in shape, and at ease in a tux or a pair of running shorts, a T-shirt and track shoes, he was a large black man standing casually next to a very small red car.

Laughing.

“Beater, my ass.”

Carole was laughing behind me. “Leon, you make that thing look like a toy.”

“Yeah,” he smiled, “You want a laugh, you ought to see me driving. Now that’s a sight. I look like a Shriner clown. So, Charlie, how long you in town?”

“Through the weekend. Not much longer. I didn’t know you still worked with Joey.”

“We set up a sports licensing deal. We’re partners. I put together events. He puts together money. And, every once in a while, I deliver cars.” He laughed again. “When he told me you were back for a couple of days, I had to bring it over.”

“Charlie, quit being rude. Invite Leon in for coffee.”

“Come on in. The second pot’s about ready.”

He took the steps two at a time and dropped the keys in my hand as he reached me. “You’re gonna love that little thing.”

“Old beat up Porsche, my ass.”

Parking the Porsche a couple of blocks north of the weathered gray stone fountain in Lincoln Park, on the city side, I walked well past and back again looking for watchers. A concrete spider web of walkways split the park running out from the rhythmic splashing of the water spilling down the levels of the fountain.

As I wandered, looking, I thought of growing up in Chicago and, early one morning just as the sun was breaking the lake waters, Mick and I tossed our dates into the fountain. Jumping in after them, we laughed, carefree, as the sun rose and dried sitting on the riprap lakeshore. Mick

married his date of that night. I have no clue what-so-ever what happened to Beth.

I shook my head at the difference in our lives and looked around again. The park seemed clean.

Tommy Paget leaned in the same spot, maybe in the same clothes, watching the boats. The day was similar to the day Joey introduced us, more than thirty years earlier. A good breeze beat the lake and everyone who could possibly play hooky was out sailing or at least walking along the shore.

“Hi, Tommy.” I sat next to him on the fountain’s edge.

He looked over, “Hi, Charlie,” without a touch of surprise in his voice. “You’re looking fit.”

“Thanks. You don’t look half bad yourself.”

He smiled. “I’m great.”

We watched the boats without talking. A fleet of Lasers were making practice starts just off the beach with the starts and the post-start critiques given by a coach with a megaphone in a center counsel Boston Whaler banging back and forth in the short wind chop.

“So, what’s up? You haven’t been around for a while. Still in Breckenridge?” He continued watching the Lasers tacking off the beach.

“Not much. Moved to the Columbia River Gorge a few years ago. Hood River.” I hesitated, thinking to myself, well here goes. “I need a favor. I’m trying to find something out for a friend. Information. Simple information. I heard Joey Rico’s playing again. Is that true?”

“Isn’t he a friend of yours? And your old partner? Why don’t you ask him?”

“It’s a little complicated, but I’d rather not.”

“Joey’s playing. Playing big. Trying to corner the market with this incredible China White. Just like you guys delivered in the late 60’s, early ‘70’s or when ever that was. Same shit. Exactly. Set up a whole new distribution system. The works. It looks like he’s going for turf. There are some pissed people walking around right now.”

“How so?”

“He didn’t talk. Just, out of the blue, started in again.”

“Family’s pissed?”

“Man, you gotta believe it. The word I heard, they figured it was him a couple weeks ago. Went out to Vancouver, BC or Seattle, or where ever he lives, and talked to him Monday. He played dumb, but everyone knows he’s playing.”

“Why?”

“When Joey quit, he kept some of his Dad’s guys around. The word is, they’re the ones who set everything up. It’s going through these guys, straight to the street. No one else in town touches it. One stop. And the street.”

“Is there any way it isn’t Joey?”

“I’d say no.”

“Can you look into it a bit? Say it isn’t Joey, who would it be?”

“I couldn’t say. You guys were the Chinese Twins for a long time. No one’s filled those shoes since. ‘Till now.” He looked over at me. Questioning.

“Look a bit for me, OK?”

“You don’t think it’s Joey?”

“I think Joey’s clean. It’s a gut deal. I want to know for sure. That’s the head deal. You know?”

He nodded. “Drop back tomorrow. Late in the afternoon. Maybe just before sundown. Let’s see what I dig up.”

“Thanks.” I handed Tommy a business card from The Grill. “On the back’s my number here in town, my home number in the Gorge and my cell number. If I miss you tonight, give me a call, OK? If you come up with anything, even a couple weeks down the line, let me know.”

“Yeah. I will. Later.”

“If you ever want a break, come on out. It’s nice country.”

“Not likely. I’m pretty fine right here.”

We shook hands and I walked back up the park, heading into the wind.

Tommy remained as I found him, leaning on the stone rim of the fountain in the center of a web of walks. Relaxed, he watched the Lasers making start after start in the building breeze with just a hint of white-caps breaking the tops of the waves.

Across the street from Lincoln Park, up a bit from where I parked the Porsche, was a pay phone. Perhaps one of the few remaining in all of Chicago. I dodged a couple of cars running across the traffic to it. Somehow, I pulled Mick Cooper's number out of my memory and called him.

"Detectives."

"Mick Cooper, please."

"Who's calling?"

"Charlie."

"Last name?"

"Charlie's fine. I'm an old friend trying to catch up with him. Only in town for a couple of days."

Long ago, Mick and I established I never left my last name. He could not risk being connected with me in the early days and the habit carried over after I moved to Breckenridge.

"I'll see if he's here. Please hold."

Mick and I went to high school together. Double dated half the time and always ended up on the beach watching the sunrise with our dates the morning after Prom. He went to a couple of years of college and then to Nam. I went after I finished school.

Back stateside, our lives diverged radically. He finished school at night after joining the Chicago Police Department. Back a year, he married his

high school sweetheart and started popping out kids in a fine traditional Catholic fashion. The first three were girls, so they kept trying.

Once in the mid 70's and then about 1980, I helped him with some specific personnel and talent information. Both cases, highly politically charged murders, needed quick resolutions. Every angle he tried hit brick walls. Mick approached me because he knew I had been involved in "intelligence" in the service. He wanted information not available through their normal channels. On both occasions, I discovered a key, letting homicide, at least appear, to wrap the cases.

"So, Charlie Won't-Leave-A-Last-Name, what are you doing in town? Perhaps, more to the point, are you even in town?"

"I'm in town. You don't think I'd call on my nickel if I was out, do you?"

"No collect calls from Won't-Leave-A-Names. You have to put out either a name or the cash. What's up?"

"Are you booked for lunch? It's almost that time and it's my turn to buy."

"Let me check." Papers rustled. "Humm." Mick paused. "I have a post-mortem at one. Other than that, I'm off. No murders scheduled for this afternoon that I know of. And you're buying? Where do you want to go?"

"I'm open. You pick."

"I can't remember the name of it, but how 'bout that greasy spoon you used to drag me into down by the park. Is it still there?"

"Yeah. Fay's. Long and narrow with red Formica counters?"

"Right. It's 11:30. I'll be there in fifteen minutes or so."

"Fine. See you then."

I walked downwind the block and a half to Fay's. In spite of the breeze off the lake, the heat of the day was building. While not the summer, a hint of the summer's omnipresent Midwestern humidity level brought back unpleasant memories. Afternoons of swimming and wondering how one could dry in that sort of air. The humidity hitting a level that makes a bath of ice water seem simply dry.

I felt a sudden strong urge to be back in the Gorge. Now. Not so much the weather, though that was part, but the simplicity.

This was becoming increasingly complicated.

Fay's is a diner. A true diner. One long room with the counter on one side, in front of the grills, and tables scattered down the wall opposite. In the front, five four-tops sit in the windowed storefront. Along the wall opposite the counter, all the tables are deuces.

In the years I've eaten at Fay's, I don't think a thing has changed, just faded with wear. In front of each counter seat and on the corners of the tables, the red Formica has worn through to the white below. Floor tiles in the traffic areas have no pattern left.

And every surface is spotless. Perfectly spotless.

Before you sit, they wipe the table, the chairs, the salt and pepper shakers, the ketchup, the mustard and each piece of the silverware as they put it down.

The menu appears standard, but a cut well above any run-of-the-mill diner. Fay buys the best. And she charges for it, too. The burgers she grinds in the back. The soups she builds daily from scratch. All her veggies come from farmers she knows and cultivated for years. Fay invented vertically integrated quality control. The Japanese merely studied her methods and copied them.

The early lunch crowd was starting. I grabbed the next to last deuce down the wall.

"Coffee?"

"Sure. I've got someone joining me in a few minutes and he'll take some, too."

I glanced at the menu. Unchanged.

Mick showed up looking essentially the same as when he got out of the service except his cropped hair was now fully gray. Still pushed and sprung off his toes as he walked. He carried a casual awareness of everything around. Loosely aware. Always moving.

As Detective, he wore a coat and tie. Unlike most Chicago cops, Mick

had taste in clothes and his wife had even more. If GQ ever did an issue on cops at work, Mick would be one.

As he sat, the waitress arrived, "Know what you want?"

"Mick, you go first."

"I'll have a Milwaukee Burger, the one with kraut, a small milk and a half order of fries."

"And you?"

"The Blue By You with onion rings instead of fries. Just coffee to drink."

"Water?"

"Please."

She left and I turned to Mick. "So, how are you doing? Long time."

"I was trying to think when I last saw you. Maybe after the playoff game in 2006 when we lost to the Panthers. I ran into you at Stoney's."

"I'd forgotten that. How's Marleen and your harem?"

"Fine. Two left in college. Lizzie here in town and Becca at Yale. She got an athletic scholarship for running. Took State in the mile and the half-mile last year. I guess the coach is looking to the Olympics for her. She's really good." He shook his head in half disbelief. "Meg's in grad school at UC Santa Barbara and Jill is a reporter for a small town paper in Indiana. It just doesn't seem like it's been that long."

"Yeah. I know."

After lunch, Mick and I walked along the edge of the park back toward the precinct house.

"Charlie, don't tell me this was totally social."

"No. I just wanted to get out before we talked."

"So what's up?"

"I need a some information. Department talk type stuff. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No." There was a slight hesitation in his answer.

"Is Joey Rico dealing again?"

Mick stopped and looked at me. "Where're you comin' from?"

“I’m just trying to find out a little something for a friend.”

We started walking back up the park again.

“Charlie, I’ll tell you what I know and if you find out any more you let me know. I share. You Share. OK? Deal?”

“Deal.”

“OK. About 11 months ago, maybe a little more, someone new started peddling smack. China White. The same stuff pushed around ‘till the late-seventies and then it just sort of phased itself out. Back then, the word was, you and Joey were pretty tight and the guys behind the stuff, but vice could never get a handle on either one of you.”

He stops and looks at me. “You know, I always had a problem with that and we never talked about it. I just shut up about it.”

I shrugged and said nothing.

He continued down the sidewalk, not looking at me. “It first showed up in Vancouver, BC. Hit here a couple months later. Ever since it hit the streets, the guys in Vice have been working overtime trying to figure out where this shit is coming from. For once, a lot of people on the street are willing to help.

“It’s not going through normal channels. Someone set up a whole new network and cut out a bunch of very well established folks. In the middle of last week, one of the guys pulled a bunch of info together and came up with Joey Rico.

“It fits. The only rumored name with the stuff is an old guard from Joey’s Family. Joey was heavy into the White thirty years ago and the supply of Mexican shit has been pretty sporadic. It’s low quality and shitty for reliability the last few years.

“When that shit happened in Afghanistan. The Taliban burned the poppy crops under their control leaving only the crops in the north and in Pakistan. The coin of the refugees for the first months of the war was opium paste and then it ran out.

“When we went in with the Northern Alliance, we opened the door for crops across the country. And there was an opening for a connected

steady supplier. The UN reports put Afghani poppies at about 13% of the world supply in 2001, before we invaded. In 2012, the Afghani's supplied over 90% of the world's paste and that didn't include the stockpiles they held back from the market.

"So we've set up a stoolie government that is getting rich off selling poppies and heroin back to us. We're pulling out and it's only going to get worse. Somehow Obama's really fucked the dog on this one."

"But Bush was the one who invaded and started the whole thing."

"Yeah. Right. But Obama's the one who got us in this mess. He's way off base now. So back to your buddy Joey. The word is, Joey has major commercial contacts in that area of the world. He's in it neck deep."

"So, he's dealing."

"Well, let's put it this way. It's been fifteen, twenty years since your names popped up in a Vice meeting and Joey's came up last week. There are a couple of guys nearing retirement who would love to rip off either of your scalps. They have long memories. They still say Joey and Charlie in the same breath. I don't know if you were involved back then. I don't know if you're involved now. As a friend, I'm telling you, I'd keep an eye peeled behind. If they're looking at Joey, they're looking at you."

"I'm totally clean. I own and run a bar in the Gorge."

"Right. I know. You told me that night at Stoney's. And I believe it, but there are people who never will. And those are the people still want your head. And Joey's."

"What's the deal on the streets with this stuff?"

"Whole new distribution. Set up, literally, overnight. One day, everyone is doing Mex and the next day every junkie has a tasty spoon full of China White. Just ka-boom. My understanding is, now they figured it's Joey, we aren't the only ones going after him. The Family's pissed, too."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"What else?"

"Nothing, that's it."

"Talk to Joey yet?"

“Not really. Just socially.”

“Well, stay in touch, OK?”

“I may head back to Hood River and keep a low profile.”

“Not a bad idea.”

“Give Marleen my best. We’ll get together next time for dinner or something, OK?”

As we shook hands, he gripped my shoulder looking me square in the eyes. “Charlie, seriously, don’t get close to this. If you’re out, stay out. Don’t get mixed up with Joey again. There’s an informal task force already and serious talk of setting up a formal inter-agency multi-state group to get this rolling fast. Head back to your gin mill.”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks again for lunch.” Mick walked off, up the park toward the station.