

## Chapter Seven

After lunch with Mick, I dropped by Carole's townhouse to see if there were any messages. The message light flashed on Carole's answering machine.

"Charlie, Joey here. Peter seems reluctant talk to you. He may meet with you tonight, but he wants you to get together with an associate, Benny, first. You'll need to call Peter at 675-1227 to set up the when and where. It sounds like you may have a late night, if all goes well, so talk to you tomorrow. Good luck."

I dialed the number.

A flat baritone male voice answered, "Hello."

"This is Charles Stone. I would like to make an appointment with Peter Marconi for this evening, if possible."

"He is expecting your call and asked that I make the arrangements. Peter asked that Benny meet you for the preliminaries and then, perhaps later this evening, Mr. Marconi will have time to visit briefly with you."

"That's fine." At this point anything would be welcome. I needed a feel for what Peter's boys felt of the lay of the land and a hint of direction. Even with an unknown like Benny.

“Are you familiar with No-Man’s Land just below Kenilworth on the lakeshore?”

“Yes.”

“There is a restaurant called Basil’s. Meet Benny there at 3:30 this afternoon.”

“A couple hours?”

“Correct.”

“Anything I should know about Benny?”

“No. He’ll have a table waiting for you at Basil’s. What sort of vehicle will you be driving?”

“A red 356 Porsche cabriolet. 1962.”

“Benny will find you.” He chuckled. “Good day, Mr. Stone.”

“Good bye.”

As I hung up the phone, I wondered at his chuckle and the hurdles set before me by Peter Marconi. When Joey’s Dad died and we’d discovered the subtle manner of the hit, Peter called an immediate Council meeting at his home in Glencoe. An hour after our initial conversation delineating the hit, Joey and I displayed the independent autopsy report and photos to the hastily gathered Dons.

It seemed China White on the streets did not generate the intense concern Joey initially thought. It couldn’t be a high priority if they planned on passing me up through the organization layers. Maybe Peter just happened to be out west and dropped in on Joey to feel him out on the possibilities.

Interesting, also, because this somewhat countered what I’d learned from Tommy and Mick. On the other hand, each layer would be an opportunity to learn a little more. Bits add up. Perhaps more leeway and time existed than we first thought.

As I looked at the different angles and started to relax, to enjoy the rush of being back on the street. Unexpectedly, I had some unforeseen room and suddenly the pressure was off the chase.

I decided to lay back a bit and enjoy the hunt.

On the kitchen island, I left a note for Carole.

“Meet with one of Peter’s men this afternoon. May see Peter tonight. Likely back late. Love, C.”

A block from the lake, Basil’s occupied a small flat roofed building of a commercial Tudor style. Off to the right, the lake side, an arbor of huge rough beams extended over an outdoor patio. Grape vines wound up the posts and onto the beams of the arbor shading the outdoor tables.

The restaurant sat close enough to the lake that the cooling from the nearby water would make outdoor eating enjoyable on all but the stillest, hottest days.

Only two cars were parked in front of the restaurant. American clone cars. I parked and walked through the double doors into the restaurant.

The exterior Tudor beamed motif carried inside. After a dark entry with a host station, the restaurant proper wound off to the left. A couple of French doors opened to the right on to the patio. Directly opposite was a darkened coat checkroom with an empty heavy wood counter in front.

“A quiet day at Basil’s,” I mumbled to myself as I looked into the main room and saw no one seated. All the tables had place settings. Maybe Basil’s catered to the early lunch crowd.

“I’m glad you could make it Mr. Stone.”

The voice came from behind. I remembered the darkened coat check area. I started to turn.

“Please remain facing away.” The voice was very firm. Used to commanding and being obeyed. “Move over to the host station.”

Slowly, I sidestepped over to the station, my back remaining toward the voice.

“Now, place one hand on each side of the lectern, spread your feet and move them away, so you are leaning on your hands. I believe this is called assuming the position.”

Again, albeit reluctantly, I followed the instructions. This was not exactly the reception I expected, but going along might still help.

“I’ve heard a bit about you and prefer not to have any accidents. So please move slowly and don’t make me nervous. I am very light on the trigger these days.”

Looking down at my feet as the hands started up, I saw two pairs of feet. One belonged to the fellow patting me down. The other a back up.

The man with the voice remained enough off that I couldn’t see his feet. There’s a point of vulnerability, as the person searching moves up, their head lies in a direct line with the elbow of the person being searched. Feeling fresh from the little spiff back home, instinctively, as the hands reached my upper thigh, I leaned heavily on my right arm bringing my left elbow down hard of the searcher’s head sending him sprawling.

As I finished the follow through, my arm was twisted up behind my back and I was lifted and slammed forward into the host station. The top edge drove in to my chest just below my sternum. As I doubled over to absorb the edge, the man holding me delivered two quick sharp jabs into the soft tissue of my lower back, each one driving me against the edge. I lost my breath. He reached up and running his hand from the nape of my neck into my hair grabbed a handful and pulled my head back hard twisting to the right.

Softly in my ear, as I tried to relax and not work against him, in a coarse voice from a once broken voice box, he whispered, “When I let you go, take your best shot pretty boy. It’ll be just like the pictures.”

He let go.

I stood off the heavy wood of the lectern, shook out my hands and came around ready to swing. As I started to straighten my arm, he fainted left and sank a left and a right into my mid-section throwing me back into the wood. As I hit the edge, he followed with three more body

shots exactly opposite the edge's position on my back driving it into my ribs.

I lost my breath again, doubling over. I tried to say, "Enough," but had nothing in my lungs. Motioning to stop, I slowly stood.

Perhaps 6 foot, in his mid-twenties, slicked back black hair, dressed in a light gray suit, his skin was a pale white from being indoors. Not unhealthy, just un-tanned. His red club tie still lay perfectly in place. He reached and adjusted it just to be sure.

Meeting my eyes, he opened his hands palm up. Questioning without speaking. Had enough?

I nodded and raised my hands.

Before I could react he delivered two more body shots driving me again into the host section. And, then, as I dropped forward, protecting myself, he came in with a right directly to my sternum that seemed to lift me off my feet. I fell on my left side, reaching with my arm to break my fall. Before I'd a chance to roll away, he found the little finger on my left hand and ground it into the carpet with the heel of his loafer.

I felt the finger give and, when he lifted his foot, pulled the hand to my stomach.

"Enough."

The command of the first voice stopped the man as he reached again for my head.

Scooting back on the floor, holding my left hand to my chest, I moved to put my back to wood while staying on the carpet. Once defensively settled, I looked at the three men.

The man with the first voice casually held a snub-nosed revolver. The rough voiced man straightened his tie again. The third man leaned smiling against the door jam, obviously enjoying the whole scene.

All three wore suits of varied gray shades. Judging from the strong build of each man and the fit, the suits were not off the rack.

My finger shot pain to my elbow. The shock of the body blows kept me without breath. Breathing actually hurt and I wondered if the edge

hitting my back cracked a couple of ribs. My chest felt like someone dropped a concrete block on it from two stories.

When I finally tried a deep breath, the hurt drove knife-like front and the back.

No one moved, letting me take inventory of the situation. When I tried to take a deep breath, I could feel the grind of one rib. Broken. Maybe two.

“Enough, Mr. Stone?”

I raised my right hand. “Enough.”

“If you agree to refrain from your absurd macho antics, I’ll have Victor and Mark assist you to a table and we can have our little talk.”

“Fine.” I paused. “Thanks for calling him off.”

“Are you carrying any weapons?”

“No.”

“Fine.” He motioned to Victor, the quick one, and Mark. “Help him to a table and have Basil send out a Brie with sun dried tomatoes, a roasted garlic and some bread.” He looked down at me. “Would you like something to drink?”

They moved to help me off the floor. “A. . .” He motioned with the pistol, stopping me, interrupting, “I’ll take an armanac. Charles here will have a St. James on the rocks with a splash and a lemon twist. Two glasses of water also. OK?”

“Fine.” Anything to deaden the growing pain.

Mark and Victor each put a hand on an elbow and lifted me off the floor. Obviously enjoying the situation, each with a single hand on my elbow, they carried me suspended with my feet a few inches off the floor to the second table in the dining room.

Smiling as they set me down, Victor with a nod of his head said, “Good to meet you, Mr. Stone.”

I shook my head in disbelief at the man. “I wish I could say the same.”

Taking the compliment, he smiled.

As the man with the pistol sat, I asked, “Benny?”

He merely nodded and sat waiting impassively for the hors d'oeuvres and drinks to arrive.

I remained silent, thinking. These guys were extremely serious. There was a point to what happened in the entry and I was not having a difficult time figuring out what the point might be. Someone was pissed.

Joey dealing?

What was up with this?

Could Joey be dealing?

Did they think I was back in too?

Wiggling the little finger on my left hand, I wondered if it broke under Victor's heel or if the give had been the joint dislocating. Laying still it throbbed. Moving the finger shot pain again to my elbow. I felt the grind of bone against bone. Broken. I looked at it and saw the swelling, already growing discolored, yellow and deep blue, pressing against the skin like a bruised Vienna sausage.

As the hors d'oeuvres arrived, I realized time had run out. Instead of having no pressure, I suddenly understood that the pressure was dangerously intense. I wondered what they would offer us to get out of the trade and then shook my head at my thoughts.

We were not in the trade.

Or rather, I was not in the trade.

With the garlic finished and most of the Brie, Benny sat back in his chair looking over at me. He beckoned to Mark. "We'll take another drink and then you can leave us alone."

"All right, Benny."

Mark delivered the drinks and left with Victor.

Once alone, Benny looked me over again.

"We are not real happy that Joey's back in the market. And even less happy to find you are back in with him."

"I'm not."

"So why do you want to talk to Mr. Marconi on Joey's behalf?"

"Joey asked me to find out who was peddling the China White. Peter's

a logical place to start. He approached Joey about the White. That was the first Joey knew of it.”

Benny laughed. “You know I’d heard stories about you from your days of running with Joey. One tough smart cookie. So much for tough. And so much for smart.” Laughing sarcastically, he stood. “I’ll call and see what time the Council will meet with you. Sit tight.”

As he walked off, I wondered where he’d put the pistol. I couldn’t find the push of a holster against his suit. I wondered about my meeting with Peter suddenly becoming a meeting of the Council. My finger was killing me. It hurt to take a breath.

And I wanted to be back in the Gorge again.

Now. Home.

Benny sat back at the table. “Want another drink. You have ‘til eight tonight.”

“Just water. Can I get my book out of the car?”

“No.” He shook his head. “You stay seated right here. Victor will get it.”

“Thanks.” And again I wondered at the seriousness of their action.

In the wait, I had difficulty concentrating on Kem Nunn’s last book, Tijuana Straight, and kept ranging back to the conversations I had with Mick and Tommy.

The evening was warm and, even with the top down, I didn’t feel chilled. The stars blurred, hazed by the lights, the humidity and the heat. I missed the sharpness of the stars and chill nights in the Gorge.

Victor drove the Porsche north along Sheridan Drive. We moved out of the pocket of high rises on the lakeshore and into the area of lake front



mansions stretching north through Kenilworth to Glencoe and Highland Park.

Leaning against the passenger door, half watching Victor drive, I mulled the specifics of the street talk on Joey's dealing. Mick and Tommy were positive Joey was behind the China White. Mick referred to Vice putting the "whole" picture together and coming up with Joey implying not just one item, but an aggregate of items pointed to Joey.

Peter always maintained close internal contacts in the force, so when they figured it out, Peter was pulled into the loop. In a very real way it was his problem, too. Or maybe Peter pulled them in after he figured it out. Anything to drop Joey from the picture. The White jeopardized the livelihood of several layers of Peter's organization. And the well established order of the Family.

A multi-state task force to deal with the White indicated Vice was fairly positive of Joey's involvement and intended to waste no time stringing him up. If that happened, I fully expected them string me right along with him.

Peter Marconi stepped into the position of the Senior Don with the death of Joey's father, Mario Rico. I first met him at a picnic hosted by Joey's father. Peter came across as an individual who prefers to deal with issues in a straightforward manner.

We did not become good friends, but remained comfortable together. In the Family environment of political maneuverings and backstabbing, he prided himself in dealing straight on with problems as they arose. Everyone thought of him as fair.

And everyone knew him as ruthlessly hard. His line was a razor's edge. Step off and you were gone.

Period.

Obviously, I'd stepped off, never even seeing the line.

I wanted to talk to Peter because he would give me straight answers to my questions, and he had a vested interest in stopping the China White.

If Joey started dealing again, I suddenly had a vested interest, although

from a different angle, in getting Joey out of dealing.

If Joey was not dealing, Peter, Joey and I shared an interest in finding who ever was spreading the White around.

None of the options looked good.

Joey dealing was suddenly a front-runner.

But why?

Margie and Joey had no problems I'd ever seen. Three great daughters. His investments worth a bundle. All he ever put into were start-up companies that went public a couple years later. He was set.

Why deal?

Once before I visited Peter at his home on the lake. The week after Joey's father's death. Joey and I called a meeting of the Dons who worked under his father. Our limo had not even paused at the gate to the estate. That particular day, our minds had been so occupied, I hadn't noticed the neighborhood we traveled through.

This second evening in the area, I noticed the high walls broken by wrought iron gates every few hundred feet. Houses so far from the road, most were not visible.

Not the sort of neighborhood you hopped the fence and ran next door to borrow a cup of sugar.

Peter's place was even more discreet. An opening in a high white washed wall with three numbers on one corner.

The opening was a walled lane leading toward the lake. We turned down the lane and followed as it curved left. As it curved, it narrowed until barred by two wooden plank entry gates with hammered iron hinges. At the gate the lane narrowed to only slightly more than the width of a full sized car. With the gate blocking our progress, I realized the entry was defensive. Once started down, because of the left curve, it would be hard to back out at any rate of speed and no doubt there was some sort of a stopper behind us on the drive. At the gate, the walls were so close, getting out of a car any bigger than Joey's Porsche would be a real trick.

Two cameras viewed the area directly in front of the gate.

Victor pushed the button on the intercom.

The same flat toned voice that set up the meet responded.

“Good evening, Victor. Mr. Stone. Thank you for coming. Victor, please continue to the house.”

The gates swung open. Victor drove through and continued down a tree-lined drive. The headlights showed little lanes leading off occasionally on either side. The main house was a large 1920's era beam and stucco mansion built just back from a darkness that must have been the rust colored bluffs dropping down to Lake Michigan. Lights in a couple of upper rooms were lit and the whole first floor blazed.

Leading to the double front doors, the flagstone entry stairway was lit by the insets cut into the stone risers between the steps.

Centered in the wide expanse of the doorway, Peter stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

We stopped and I stepped out of the car.

Peter greeted me in a formal, yet friendly fashion, “Well, Charlie, it's good to see you, although these are not the best of conditions. When this deal's over, we'll dine socially, OK? We haven't for a long time.”

He motioned for me to come up, laughed and said, “I would like to hear what you have been doing these past years. Victor will park your car in the Carriage House and retrieve it when you leave. Come on in. Please. I asked a couple of friends to join us. I hope you don't mind.”

“Not at all.” I reached the top step and he shook my hand.

Peter looks and acts like your favorite Uncle. He is a little shorter than I, maybe five-ten. I have never seen a picture of him with more than a fringe of hair over his ears. He never tried to hide his baldness. The rim of gray hair is kept short and unobtrusive.

When you are a member of his group of friends, he firmly grips your right hand and, with his left, either grips your arm a little higher up or gives you a playful shot to the shoulder. I got a shoulder shot, jarring my ribs causing me to suck in my breath and make my ribs hurt even more.

Peter pointedly ignored my wincing. “Come in. Come in. We are in the library. Follow me.” He turned to the left and walked briskly just ahead of me down the hall.

The floors of the house were wide oak with dark cherry plugs. The heels of his shoes clicked on the floor. My Teva’s squeaked like the first quarter on a parquet basketball court.

In the library, three men, all in their late sixties or early seventies, stood leaning against overstuffed leather chairs and the dark paneled wall off to the right around the pool table.

One man, about to shoot when we walked in, stood up and looked at us. I remembered Louis from the last meeting. One of the youngest invited to join the council, he might now be 50, but I doubted it.

Carl walked from the bar on the left with a new round of drinks. “Mr. Stone, I took the liberty of preparing a St. James with a twist for you.”

“Thanks, Carl. You’ve a great memory.” And I knew where Benny picked up his memory.

“You’re welcome.” He placed my drink on a tall table on the close side of the pool table.

I wondered what I walked into. I wanted to talk to Peter, not precipitate a full Council meeting. If my meeting with Benny was preliminary, the follow up was not looking to be much more fun.

After Carl passed out the drinks, he looked to Peter and asked, “Is that is all?”

“That will be fine, Carl. Thank you.”

Carl walked to the tall doors, turned and closed them as he left us in the library.

Peter motioned to the men around the room.

“You know everyone, right? Tony. Roland. Nicky. Louis. You play?”

“A little.”

These were the Dons Joey and I met with over the death/murder/hit of his father. Everyone.

“Let’s start a new game. Louis, rack ‘em. Charlie, you’re my partner.

House rules run a little different here. It's Eight Ball. Call your shot. Even on the break. No slop. If it's not called, it comes out to the spot. As long as you make your shot, you keep on shooting. So, if you're stripes, and don't have a shot, you can put in a solid and keep shooting. No restrictions on combo's either."

"A combination of straight and Eight Ball?"

"Correct. One other quirk to add a touch of calculated risk. Eight needn't go in last. You can shoot it at any point, if you run the rest of your balls after you put it in. If you don't run 'em, it's an eight ball scratch. You've lost. OK?"

"Sure thing, partner."

As Peter was explaining the rules, I picked a cue, a perfectly straight two-piece 18. Louis pulled the balls from the slit leather pockets and racked.

Hanging the rack next to the cues, Louis turned to me, "Lag or flip for break?"

"Lag. A couple of practice shots to get the feel of the table?"

"Sure. Whatever you need."

The rack sat sequenced and tight.

Leaning over the table, I gently placed my left hand on the felt with as minimal pressure as possible on my finger. Bending over without my ribs hurting was impossible. Gritting myself for a painful game of pool, I banked the cue off the right rail next to the triangle of balls, into the back rail and off the left rail clearing the rack on all sides. I made the same shot from the other direction. The roll was fast and even. The rails firm and springy.

"Nice table. I'm set."

I set the cue on the second diamond and put a touch of high English on the ball. It ran to the far rail and back, stopping five inches or so from the front rail.

Louis placed a block of chalk on the side rail to mark the spot.

Roland shot and came up a few inches further away.

The chalk stayed.

Peter lagged and came half a ball closer to the rail.

Louis moved the chalk.

Louis lagged the ball within an inch of the rail, shrugged and said, "Luck."

I knew better. Nothing seemed to be dropping my way this day.

Placing the ball just behind the diamonds to the right side, he said, "I'll do the fifteen one rail down here."

He shot firmly, taking the fifteen off the corner of the rack, into the back rail and back down into the corner pocket breaking up the rack at the same time. He dropped four more balls, two of each, before missing.

After his last shot, he stood looking at the table, looked at Roland who nodded his assent and Louis said, "We'll take stripes."

Peter motioned for me to shoot.

"No. You were closer to the rail. You go."

He dropped a couple of balls and as he was walking to the other side of the table asked, "So what did you want to talk to me about?" Peter stared intently at the lie of the balls on the table. The other four stared at me.

"Joey Rico."

"That's what we thought." He found a bank shot, dropped it, then moved to the other end of the table. "What about Joey?"

"He says you think he's dealing again."

"He is."

"Joey says he's clean."

Nicki snorted, took a long pull off his drink. "I'll tell you something, if you came out here to convince us that Joey is not dealing, you can save your breath. He's..."

Peter broke in, quietly, "Joey is dealing large amounts of China White, like you two used to bring in. He opened first in Vancouver, BC, then in Seattle, then in Chicago and most recently in New York. We don't know where he's going next, but we want it stopped. Now. That is the only reason you are here tonight. That, and our very serious concern, you

may be back in with him.”

“Why do you think Joey is dealing? Just because it’s China White?”

The five men stood still for a second, looking from one another, and after reaching a silent consensus, Nicky broke the silence.

He put the butt of his cue on the floor grasping the top with both hands. Looking over the blue tip directly into my eyes, he started, “I have a bunch of guys that do work for me down on the South Side. Before the stuff hit the street, a couple of them got real scarce. Like disappeared. Then, they showed up again and they were putting the shit on the street direct, without going through me.”

Peter had not taken his next shot. He stood letting Nicky talk uninterrupted.

Louis took over the conversation. “Three guys left me to put the White out. Same deal. Split for a few days and came back working for someone else.”

“So why are you pinning this on Joey?”

Peter leaned on his stick and looked at me for a second before he answered. “All the people involved in the China White were part of Mario’s operations. Some just small time, way down the line guys, but all tied to Mario’s old operations.”

“What’s the Vancouver connection?”

“You two live in the Northwest. It first landed in your home territory. We never tied down the exact location of your lab, but it was, is, in Hong Kong. The triads came into Vancouver big time with the exodus just before China took over the island. And a lot of money moved into Vancouver at the same time. Joey has a couple of companies in India and Pakistan. At least one in Hong Kong. He’s centered in Seattle.” He points to me. “The CIA and their contractors have been in Afghanistan for years. With the invasion, poppy growth exploded. Now Obama is out. Army. Marines. CIA. Contractors and all. With your connections and Joey’s business contacts, we think you’re not letting all that great paste go to waste.

“Perfect timing. It’s logical. Filling the vacuum. A profitable combination of old and new channels.”

“What’s the New York connection?”

“A year after Mario’s death, two of his senior men moved to Manhattan and retired. We haven’t told any one in the New York Family yet, but they are the ones connected with the white in the Apple. We all would like to take care of this here, quietly.”

I motioned to Peter. “Take your shot.”