

Chapter One

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The Ride along

The sun begins its descent into the western Pacific Ocean as Steinway lifts another bottle of beer to his mouth and takes a long drink. He sits under the palm frond roofed surf shack cemented into the sandstone rock just above the shoreline at Windansea Beach. The Mexican beer joins the rest of the six-pack in his stomach and settles in line to wind through his organs and get pissed out onto the rocks. He pulls out his old cell phone and taps on the screen a couple of times and the voice begins:

"Hello Mr. Steinway, this is Jennie, uh, I'm a PA and I work with Doctor Fisher. Your lab results just came back and, uh; your blood marker is still going in the wrong direction. Now it's a 1.7 and last year it was, uh, 1.1. I know she was talking to you about some more chemotherapy and so I'll let her discuss that with you when you come in next week. If you have any questions, um, give the office a call and I'll see you next week. O.K. Have a nice day."

He puts the phone in his pocket and sips some more beer and mumbles, "have a nice day." He lightly shakes his head and chuckles to himself. "Have a nice day." He stares out to the ocean and laughs louder and shakes his head several times.

Of course. This is his day. This is his one-day out of the year to get drunk. This is the ten-year anniversary of his wife dying with one hundred thirty-two other people on a

passenger jet crashing into a cornfield in Iowa. "Have a nice day." Another sip.

"Fudarudskie piece of dog crap!" He stopped with the usual profanities over twenty years ago when his then living wife said it was not becoming for a grown man with one young child. So now, "female black Belgian shepherd dog of poor repute" was part of his vocabulary. After a while he became accustomed to it. He even enjoyed it. It became a topic of conversation when he would hurl one of his creative expletives at his friends. Even strangers received it from him and most of them, the ones that had some command of the English language, would look at him in awe, or amusement. His wife, at the time, said it was good for him, for the longer it took for him to throw out the words, the more time his anger had to dissipate.

"Less anger, less damage, was how she put it. "LALD," is how she shortened it. And it worked. Most of the time.

The sun is gone, but its rays still play on the underbelly of the high clouds and Steinway slowly stands. To the west, several surfers are still riding the six-foot waves. He gathers three empty bottles and puts them next to their brethren in the cardboard carrying case that sits two feet back from one of the eucalyptus posts that hold up the rectangular shack. He moves up next to the post, unzips his trousers, pulls out his thing and relieves himself on the post. His water flows down the post and across the sandstone and into the sea adjacent to the rocks. He thinks, *like a dog leaving its mark.*

The pee is long, and when he finishes, he tucks himself in, zips his trousers up, leans down, picks up the carrier, and begins the short walk up the dirt hillside to where his car stands in the parking lot. He puts the package into it and looks around, thinking: *no need to drive. I can call Uber.*

He locks his car and pulls out his cell phone and starts to dial.

The closet in his house is dark. The full-length mirror adjacent to it has a small light shining on him as he inspects himself. Steinway looks clean. His hair is washed and combed. His eyes are focused. His face is cleaned and shaven. He is dressed in a white linen suit covering a starched white shirt fronted by a Jerry Garcia silver and blue gray happy birthday tie. He leans down and swipes off an invisible mark from his Ferragamo shoes. He leans back up, checks his look one more time in the mirror, and then turns and walks down the unlit hallway where he turns left into the dimly lighted kitchen. He opens up the refrigerator and reaches in and pulls out another six-pack cardboard beer bottle carrier. There are two beers left in it. He tucks it under his arm and goes out the front door of his house and into the night. He does not lock his front door.

The Village is dark. La Jolla always closes up early. Steinway moves west down Pearl Street and stops at the intersection with Girard Avenue. He presses the pedestrian button and waits for the white lighted "silhouetted man" sign to illuminate from across the street. There is no traffic at this time of the night and it changes quickly and he moves briskly across the street, the cardboard carrier tucked under his arm.

On the other side of Girard Avenue he walks past the closed Ferrari dealership until he reaches the alley that fronts the eastern wall of The Comedy Store. He looks north down the alley toward a dumpster and then slowly walks toward it along the western wall of the Ferrari dealership. It is a thirty-

foot walk and he stops beside the dumpster and softly calls out, "Robin. You here?"

No response. He moves slowly in the dark to the other side of the dumpster and then he leans down to a man sleeping soundly inside of a card board box. The man snores lightly as Steinway just watches him for many seconds. Steinway puts the carrier with two beers down next to the man and the bottles shift in the carrier and the man immediately wakens,

"Whaa? Who's there?"

"Robin. It's Rudy. If I didn't know better I'd swear you have a sixth sense for Mexican beer."

Robin sits up in his card board covering and squints through the darkness at Rudy. "Rudy, you dog, you old sly dog. Still looking after the Robin."

"Shatskie. Always."

Robin reaches into the carrier and pulls one of the bottles out and squints in the dark to read it.

"Pacifico. Mi amigo. Mucho gracias. And I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth, but what happened to the other four?"

"You know what happened there Robin. You know."

"I do. You wanna share these?"

"No. I'm dressed for something else."

"Kinda late to see the Judge, ain't it?"

"I'm going on a ride along with a cop."

"I probably know him."

"You probably do. Take care, my friend, take care."

Rudy stands up and starts retracing his footsteps up the alley,

"Thank you. Adios."

Steinway moves back to the sidewalk beside The Comedy Store and stands still for a minute. There are no pedestrians

walking past. In the next several minutes a couple of cars drive past him and then a quiet black and white, one of the new electric models that San Diego PD has recently purchased, quietly rolls up the street. Steinway meets eyes with the officer and waves him to a curbside stop. Like going with your Uber driver, he thinks. Except the journey really is the destination, the *raison d'être*, and anything and everything that might go along with it is just a bonus. Maybe some donuts and coffee with a side order of a stanced vagrant like Robin using his cardboard box as a bed and breakfast and urinal. The trip promises to be one of those Hollywood bus tours, gawking at the closed houses and speculating a story about what goes on inside the expansive walls.

"I know you, sir?" inquires the officer, at least half Steinway's age, as he opens the passenger door. Under the interior light, Steinway sees the driver has short cut black hair and a large nose that looks like it has taken several fists during the course of its life. The question is colored with the raspy voice of a man who is friends with the bottle and some smoke of undetermined substance. Steinway looks closely at him and now sees some broken blood vessels on his nose, indicating the man was, or still is, either a semiprofessional fighter or a professional drinker, or maybe both.

"You don't look familiar," Steinway says as he turns to shut the door and then he looks again at the officer. "I'm Rudy Steinway, and . . ." holding out his hand to the officer, "you are?"

"Murphy. John Murphy." He looks Steinway up and down, flashes a quick grin, releases his grip, and puts both hands on the wheel and starts gliding down the dark street. Murphy smiles as he studies Steinway's attire.

"This is a quiet car," remarks Steinway.

"Makes it easier to slip into a crime scene without detection." He looks over at Steinway and runs his eyes over the suit. "Why does a man like you want to go on a police ride along during the grave yard shift?"

"I'm having trouble sleeping and I figured this beats late night TV." Steinway makes no mention of the anniversary or of the tingling in his fingers and the dullness in his feet. He never volunteers this information.

"TV? Don't show your age. Everything is on the internet now."

"I know." *Seventy-one. My kid's almost as old as Murphy,* thinks Steinway.

"And if you want action, you should ride downtown. Not much happens in La Jolla after dark."

"I know." Steinway isn't looking for action; he is looking for something to lull him to sleep and into a first morning of three hundred sixty-four days of sobriety. Like when his kid was a newborn baby and he would cry all night so Steinway and his wife would swaddle him and push him around in the carriage at midnight. The kid was always asleep in fifteen minutes and Steinway and his wife were asleep in bed by twelve thirty. Worked like a charm.

"You didn't come along for the coffee and donuts, did you? Cuz you're overdressed for it. You might not get in the shop."

"Ha. I did think about that, but, no. I don't eat that stuff." He likes this Murphy, even though he is a cop. Murphy has a sense of humor, something that is requisite to keeping one's sanity in the law business.

Murphy glances his searching eyes over at Steinway:

"Good, cuz this town closes up after dark unless you like the high-end restaurants or the 24-hour taco stand down in Bird Rock. You like Mex?"

"Fish tacos with a corn tortilla and hot sauce," replies Steinway, studying the intonation Murphy used with his pronunciation of 'Mex.' It was too matter of fact to be racist, unless it was so inherent in Murphy that he never gave it a second thought.

Again, the cop glance. "Bueno. Put down some Modelo Especial with that and a man's gotta meal and then he can find a senorita for dessert."

Steinway doesn't respond to the dessert remark as he watches the cruiser pull onto La Jolla Boulevard and move up to the thirty-five miles per hour speed limit as it heads south along the western edge of the town. He decides that Murphy is as Murphy does and Irish is as Irish does and the cop is twenty-five, thirty years old and probably suffers from concussions gathered in high school football games. The Pacific Ocean is a half-mile over the adjacent homes to the west. The police radio is silent and then Murphy begins to lightly scratch the fingers of his right hand on the steering wheel. The speed of the car inches up and the scratching becomes louder and finally Murphy looks over at him and says:

"That's a strange cologne you wear."

"Some ladies like it." Murphy smiles, and then says,

"I know you, yeah, I know you. You were a lawyer."

"Still am."

"Yeah." Murphy pauses a beat. "You're the Jew lawyer."

Casually back to him: "You got one of those right."

Pushing the words at Steinway: "You're Steinway, the piano playing Jew lawyer."

"Now you got two right. Batting six six seven. You're better than Tony Gwynn. You must have been on the Padres in a previous lifetime."

"You got my uncle removed from the force." The car moves quicker. Steinway's peripheral neuropathy joins the insignificant things in his current perceptions.

"Does he look like you?" Steinway studies the driver's profile.

"Who?" Serious eye contact before Murphy looks back at the roadway.

"Your Uncle. Does he look like you?"

"Hez dead." Adjacent houses blur in the dark speed.

"Sorry to hear that." Steinway pauses his words for several beats then starts again. "Did he look like you?" Steinway can't place the profile with some man in his past.

"That question's got nothing to do with anything and I'm not dead, but we all die in the end and for the life of me I cannot figure out how you're not dead?" Murphy looks long at Steinway.

"Just my luck, I guess. But unless you drive a car with your peripheral vision I think we both might be dead pretty soon."

Murphy looks back at the roadway and watches an oncoming car go past them. "You're not going to pull a reverse Gibson on me, are ya?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The drunk Hollywood actor and the Jewish sheriff up in Malibu several years back, only I'm the goy cop, and you're the Jew ride-along and I think you might be the drunk." Murphy is proud of his factual inversion of the Malibu parties.

"Why don't you take me back to where this ride started and let's pretend it never happened. O.K.?" Steinway's heart skips a beat.

"I'd like to pretend my Uncle isn't dead."

"Did you do a drug bust before you picked me up and get some of the contraband up your nose?" Steinway never crawls away from a fight. He stays until the lights are out.

"You better watch it or things might happen?"

"You got your body cam on?"

"Ohhhh, boy-----"

The police radio breaks silence:

"10-18. All units in the vicinity of La Jolla! Call from the Coast Guard. They need assistance with some small craft landing 5800 block of Camino de la Costa right along the coast. All Units. There are suspects in the boat and on the beach. Possible drug transportation. Maybe weapons."

"I will deal with you later Old Man. You stay in the car when we get there."

"What happened to 'sir'?" Murphy sneers at him and slows down and rips squealing tires into a hard-right turn onto a Spanish motif street named La Canada. They rush west between large houses and Torrey Pine trees and keep the Spanish motif when they merge into Camino de la Costa, where he barrels down the coast street underneath palm trees and breaks more rubber from his tires into another ninety-degree right turn, jarring north between shadowed McMansions disclosed by dim street lights, modern torches required by the City to minimize washing out the night sky so as not to disrupt the local mountain telescopes.

"Chandler would love this," Steinway says, eyes wide, heart beating quickly and irregularly. "This beats his movies on TV anytime."

"Who is that?" Murphy keeps his orbs on the road ahead.

"We just passed Raymond Chandler's house. He was a writer last century. Wrote about murder and detectives and . . ."

"Screw Chandler. This is real, not made up. Don't talk now. Only if you see something, some people, some lights, whatever."

They run two hundred yards north of Chandler's house when a large

BOOM!

Behind them causes Murphy to break the car to a screeching halt, leaving further tread on the pavement. Steinway wonders how this lite electro Glide would move on four flat tires.

"What the hell?" Murphy speaks quietly as he slowly turns the car around facing south and shuts off the lights. "If you want out you can go now," and he slows to a stop.

"I'm in for the duration." Steinway isn't going out into the cold dark night for a walk home. Not now, not with his beer buzz, not with his health issues, not with his adrenalin ready for whatever. Thirty years past he would have accepted the invitation and walked through the lighted beach houses, north to his residence. But now the houses have been usurped with two storied, bloated structures built as monuments to crassness. Cold castles surrounded by moats of adorned cement. Lightless lifeless trophies of the super-rich that have bought into La Jolla with their ill got gains.

Murphy gives him a quick glance and picks up the car microphone, and whispers, "This is SD8787. I'm at Camino de la Costa on the Coast Guard call and a loud explosion just went off. 10-80. We need more units." He hangs up the microphone and turns a switch that kills all lights in the vehicle.

The electro glide slowly begins rolling south back toward Chandler, sans lights, sans engine sounds, sans wind pushing

from the crawling car. The sounds and smells of the ocean waves slip over the western walled tombs of the opulent and fog over the police cruiser, laying a cataract sheet of salted moisture on its windshield.

BOOM!

A second explosion emits from the same area and a quick flash of brilliant light reflects to their left off the windows of a two-story home on the eastern side of the street. Murphy pushes his speed up to fifteen miles an hour and sticks his head out of the driver window to get a clear picture of the scene.

Murphy whispers to himself, "What the hell?" He pulls his head into the car and glances at Steinway: "Buckle up, Steinway, this isn't gonna be one of your TV shows." Steinway sits quietly. Murphy again sticks his head out the window and maneuvers the car down the street. They reach the Chandler House and roll fifty yards straight past the ninety degree turn to the east, coming to a stop several feet short of a concrete curb that runs ten feet to the south where it is bordered by a five-foot-high white horizontal fence. The backside of the fence overlooks a cliff that drops twenty feet down to the rocks and pounding Pacific Ocean. The fence is topped with two-foot wide hardwood. The moon is visible now and lunar rays lightly illuminate the darkness, showing objects on the ocean's surface as glittering dimmed silhouettes. There is neither person, nor dog, nor cat nor bird, nor anything of life to be seen on the streets. The houses surrounding them have nine-foot walls with small lights posted on them; but their light pattern is only four or five feet in diameter on the gray concrete sidewalks, not enough to illuminate anything on the streets. But the smell, the acrid

smell of gunpowder in the warm night air still lingers in the damp sea breeze.

Murphy slowly opens his door with no interior lights flicking on. He unbuckles his pistol from his holster and carries it in his right hand as he steps onto the black top. He doesn't see Steinway unbuckle his belt, a violation of a direct police order. Murphy moves south over to, and steps onto, the sidewalk overlooking the ocean. He moves to the white fence and looks around and out to sea. About a half mile out to the west he can see a Coast Guard ship with two searchlights crossing back and forth over the water, not fixing on anything. Then he unbuckles his flashlight and pulls it out with his left hand and shines it across the sea, in small circles, toward the ship. No response for many seconds and suddenly he shines the light below the other side of the fence, where his eyes caught some movement, but the lamp only reveals dark colored sea weed, being pushed by the tide against rocks stacked against the footings of a seawall that scales up the cliff to the base of the white fence. He plays the light against the rocks and plant life and water, and then the light casts on a quickly moving leg.

"Hey! Stop!" cries Murphy, but the leg is gone and when he shifts his light in the direction the leg is headed, there is only wet sand rock in the beam's circle.

A shadow moves quickly past Steinway's open window and immediately a man tackles Murphy, taking him against the fence, without his flashlight or pistol, as the former falls down to the sea, and the latter whiplashes back onto the darkness of the street with a light scraping of metal on asphalt sound. Murphy is stronger than his attacker, and he braces against the wood fence, slowly grappling the man

downward. It is too dark for Steinway to discern the looks of the assailant.

"Hombre!" the man cries out toward the pavement and then a second man appears from the sidewalk darkness and throws his locked clenched fists against Murphy's neck. The blow stuns Murphy, and he starts to crater, loosening his grip on the first man. Steinway watches this from the car and slips out of the door and his eyes immediately start searching the pavement where the pistol has disappeared onto the tarry black asphalt. The second man throws another well-aimed blow against Murphy's nose and the unleashed blood starts running out of Murphy's nostrils, dropping to the sidewalk where Murphy soon follows.

Struggling against the weak blows of Murphy, trying to lift him up and over the wall, the dos Amigos do not see Steinway kneeling on the darkened street where he soils his linen trousers, dirties his Garcia tie, and scratches his Ferragamo shoes, as he searches quietly and quickly for the discarded pistol.

They have Murphy near to the top of the fence, folded up like an old twin sized mattress, grounded solid by his tenuous grip of the hardwood. Another skilled blow takes the hand off the fence and he is free to fall as they slide him onto the hardwood, only to be stymied by Murphy's desperate grip on the neck of the first assailant. The second man, the second assailant, opens his mouth and latches his teeth onto Murphy's wrist. Murphy's grip begins to loosen, but he makes no cry, no sound, and then the heavy breathing of the wrestlers is punctured by a gunshot blast and the biting man cries out, "Aiiii," as he collapses dead to the ground. The bullet went straight to his heart and when it reached that organ, when it blew it open, the man's life left his body and escaped to wherever such a man's soul goes after death. The first

assailant's objective now changes from trying to toss Murphy off the fence and down to the rocks below, to extricating himself from the weak grip on his neck. He does this quickly and runs off into the darkness.

Murphy lays on the top of the fence, his spent energy slowly gaining strength, as Steinway moves over to him.

"Who shot him? Backup arrive?" Murphy rolls his head atop the fence toward Steinway.

"No." Steinway holds the pistol out to Murphy, butt first, the warm barrel in his hand, "I shot him."

Murphy takes the pistol grip in his hand and permits hand and pistol to drop slowly against the front of the fence. "Son of a bitch." Long pause from tiredness and incredulity. "Oh man, son of a bitch dog." Murphy is tired. His adrenalin spent. The wrestling match was too long, too much energy grappled into it. He took some clean blows, only gave a few, and the piano man probably saved his life, at the most; and saved him from broken bones, at the least. But he didn't save Murphy from the humiliation, no matter which way it ended. Steinway did not save Murphy from the humiliation. He enhanced it

Steinway breaks into the ocean sounds. "I was hoping to see some police helicopters out here tonight." He tries to buoy Murphy's spirits. "At least another squad car, something with more vigor than this electro glide." Steinway likes the quiet car, its unobtrusiveness. "Maybe all that electricity in the car interfered with the police radio and they didn't get your call?" He finishes speaking and his attention is caught by an object flying in the air thirty yards to the south over the sea. Not reflecting white like a sea gull or pelican, but black, like a cormorant. *Sea birds don't usually fly in the night*, he thinks, *the explosions must have spooked 'em.*

Murphy slowly sits up from the fence, gun in hand. "I owe you one," long pause so that Steinway understands their relationship, "but we ain't even." He stands up wearily. "Those two booms we heard. The smoke in the air. Somebody living around here must have heard. Must have called it in."

"I don't know," responds Steinway. "All these houses probably got triple pane windows to keep out the winter storm lashings. They don't hear anything but the sweet cooing of their bidet toilets."

"Don't know," Murphy says, "but I'm gonna find out," and he walks over to the electro glide and drops into the seat and after several deep breaths, pulls out the microphone.

Steinway is thankful that it is early Saturday morning. He knows by the time the investigators finish with him he will have the rest of the day to sleep and relax and wake up for the Sunday paddle out at Windansea for Becky Thornton, a middle-aged surfer, who ended her surf session with the Big C.