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## Chapter 1

I pulled up to the sprawling collection of Spanish villa-style buildings affectionately referred to as the "Flo-Ho Arms," just as a slow-moving posse of old men shambled out onto the front lawn like plaid-suited zombies – all giant sunglasses and gleaming metal walkers. I crept up the shallow front steps, and they waved, hollering their greetings as they'd long been taught – the civilized way to behave.

Pops had been like that. Always said hello to people he'd never met before, wished them well, told them to have a good day. He'd always meant it too. You never saw that in people under sixty anymore. Nobody just said 'Hi' to strangers on the street anymore. General consensus in many parts of L.A. was that you'd just as likely get a knife to the face as a smile or a handshake.

So I took a second and offered a lazy wave back and shouted, "Looks like a nice warm day shaping up there." A terrible cliché, but what the hell else did they have to talk about?

Most of them had been abandoned here like old furniture. At best, they got visits on the weekend from bored grandkids that they'd never met on the outside. They'd get sad, pitying glances from their condescending middle-aged "kids," who'd act as if there was something these poor old bastards could have done to not end up in a place like this – more of a prison than most federal pens.

Pops had stayed in a place like this as he approached the end, but not because he needed to be. I figured part of him wanted to plant the seeds of dissent among his fellows, prove that they didn't have to burn out, or fade away. Even fighting cancer and a couple of strokes, Pops walked the walk all the way, while most of us just toddled along behind him.

I continued up the stone walkway and through the ornate glass doors into the place. The first thing you noticed, upon entering the Florence Henderson Continuing Care Center, was the expanse of the modern open foyer. Then the lingering stench of bleach and urine attacked.

Pops went out in a place like this, riddled with cancer and fighting to breathe, yet tough as nails to the end. The day before he passed away, he was still as charming as the devil himself, flirting with the young nurses and demanding steak dinner. He never would have come out on a call like this. He would have politely declined and offered some alternate agency that could be of more help.

I shook off the stench of death and incontinence and, after a few conflicting sets of



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made my way to room 224.

ced was my hat. "What are you supposed to be, Bogey or  
ats in years. You look fucking ridiculous. At least wear a  
suit with it. What kind of gumshoe are you, anyway? You're supposed to be Moe Rossi's boy,  
aren't you?"

"Grandson."

"Right. You don't really look like him, do you? He was a handsome fucker, pulled all kinds  
of pussy. He never would have worn a fucking hat like that. Stupid 'Rat Pack' fucking thing."

My 1953 Royal Stetson fedora had, in fact, been my grandfather's hat. Pop's hat. People  
assumed I wore the hats as a joke, to be ironic – some attention-craving hipster playing P.I.  
dress-up. I took a lot of shit about the hats. I certainly didn't need to hear it again from some  
ancient, mouthy jerk-off with something to prove from the confines of what would probably be  
his deathbed.

I took it off and settled myself in a chair near the bed, folding my denim-clad legs and  
setting the hat on my knee. So far, my hunch had been correct: Obadiah Stetch didn't rate the  
trouble of putting on a suit.

"Mr. Stetch, did you just call me down here to have someone to spit insults at? Or do we  
actually have some business to discuss?"

He picked thick-framed glasses from somewhere in the mess of sheets covering his legs,  
and searched my face through even thicker lenses that magnified his rheumy eyes and made  
him look like an old bulldog.

"No, kid, I got a job for you. If you can handle it, that is."

I took a second to brush off his stale and obnoxious breath, along with some imaginary  
dust on my leg.

"Well, that all depends on the job, doesn't it, Mr. Stetch?"

The old bastard took the glasses back off, apparently satisfied that I had moxie enough to  
be worth his time. Obie Stetch had been a rich, powerful and fairly notorious man-about-town  
in his day. That day had passed three decades ago. Stetch had been a club owner, musical agent,  
boxing promoter, and self-involved prick as far back as the forties. Now he was another old  
man facing a lazy death and a rapidly declining amount of respect from the world.

I figured throwing him a bone wouldn't kill me. "Mr. Stetch, sir, I know you're an  
important man who probably has other business to deal with today, so why don't we get down  
to why I'm here."



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pricks do, and straightened in his bed, a glimmer of life to kiss my ass, kid. But you're all right. I think we can

He hefted a book out of nowhere, one of those pleather-bound photo albums that are supposed to look like an impressive volume of English poetry, and laid it open on the sheets.

I was hoping he was at least looking for something pertinent to the conversation.

He rambled on as he flipped through the book. "This is bullshit, having to meet like this, in a goddamn hospital room. Once I'm fixed up, you come see me at the house. We'll have a drink by the pool, out in the sun. This is bullshit. Fucking doctors don't know a thing."

He stopped his flipping and stabbed a gnarled old finger at a photo of a younger version of himself, standing with a young Frank Sinatra in front of a stage full of musicians. Circa 1948, no doubt, on account of the banner hanging over the stage that said, "Happy New Year 1948."

"That's me with Sinatra in 1948. We were close personal friends. Frank once gave me the five thousand-dollar Rolex off his own wrist. He was a gentleman, knew how to treat important people like Obadiah Stetch!"

I rolled my eyes and held back the mounting urge to grab the book and smack him with it.

"He was playing my place in Van Nuys: The Mozambique. I had a very important, very rare piece of wax cut from that show. You know what a record is, kid?"

I bit down on the inside of my cheek and redoubled my efforts not to slap him on his bald spot.

"That record was made for me by my late wife, one of the greatest gifts I've ever received. I had it here with me. It was framed up on the wall there...."

He pointed absently at a spot on the wall where the paint was a shade darker in the rectangular shape of a picture frame. A dozen other pictures and framed memorabilia surrounded the bare spot, but it was clear by its position in the center that it was the *piece de resistance*.

"Somebody stole it?"

"Oh, somebody give that boy a lolli. Yeah, somebody stole it, you shit-for-brains! And I fucking want it back. Nobody steals from Obie Stetch. I run this goddamn town!"

I'd been regretting taking Stetch's call since I hung up the phone that morning, but at this point all I wanted was to get up and walk out and straight into the bar across the street. They'd have coffee, right? Just a coffee. Of course, if he kept up his deluded, self-serving tantrums, I'd probably be knee-deep in scotch five minutes after I left, and *that* I would most certainly regret.



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chased with a blast of industrial antiseptic, and  
any idea who would have taken it?"  
up scarlet. "Do you have any idea who you're talking to,  
you little shit? I was making gold fucking records before your mama was a bulge in your  
grandaddy's pants. Yeah, I got some ideas. Yeah, because *nobody* would steal an autographed  
fucking *Sinatra* record. You *fuck!*" Thick spittle foamed at the corners of his mouth, sputtering  
and spraying forth as if from an expired fire extinguisher

A fat nurse with too much blush stuck her face around the corner with a stern look of  
disapproval. I shrugged innocently for her, trying to convey the situation, of which she was  
probably well aware. If he acted like this now, he probably did it all the time. Ancient lunatics  
were probably part and parcel. Nothing to see here.

"Everything all right in here, Mr. Stetch? If you don't calm down we'll have to sedate you  
again."

"Fuck you!" His red face darkened a shade. "Who the fuck do you think you are? I could  
buy and fucking sell you in a heartbeat!"

She clucked her tongue and shook her head, then disappeared from the doorway.

I stood up and twisted my head to crack the tension out of my neck. I wanted to head-butt  
the old cocksucker. Instead, I leaned in close to his bed and gave him the goods in as harsh a  
whisper as I could manage without drawing attention from the nurses station outside.

"Listen, you belligerent old fart, you'd have to be stupid to put an autographed *Sinatra*  
record on the wall and *not* expect somebody to steal it. You want me to find it? Cut me some  
slack. Answer a few questions – without being a delusional prick – and maybe I can help you.  
Keep acting like a spoiled four-year-old, and I walk."

I stood there, trying to be menacing, while he composed himself, lay back, and drew a deep  
breath of resignation.

"All right, I'm sorry, kid. Maybe we should finish this some other time. You come up to my  
office on Monday. I got lunch with Michael Jackson's agent this afternoon. You know Michael  
Jackson? That kid is gonna hit it big, mark my words. Weird fucking blackie, but he's got some  
fucking pipes. I think he may be a cake-boy, you know what I mean? Likes it in the ass."

Jesus H. Addle-brained Christ, Obadiah Stetch was a piece of work. I couldn't even fathom  
what an unbelievable scumbag he must have been when he was out on the loose with money  
and power and youth to spare. I thought of trying to knock some sense into him, imagined  
myself wrapping the cord from one of his machines around his scrawny neck, maybe slapping



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indly little hate-filled head popped off. Instead, I forced always told me. *Everybody's an asshole. You have to be able* his mind, never turned into one of these cartoonish old farts with a walker yelling about kids on the lawn.

I tried to summon some sympathy for Stetch, but came up short. "Look, Stetch, you've got a lot of impressive trinkets up there – more than any sane person would keep out in a place like this, but I get it. You want everybody to know that you used to be a big shot. They took the one piece. Only that one. That speaks to pre-meditation and motive. That means that whoever took the Sinatra record was only after the Sinatra record. Was there anyone who showed an interest in it? Anyone who would have profited unusually from that one piece?"

"I've been calling some old friends. See if they know where I left it."

"Left it? Did you lose it? Or did it get stolen? Make up your goddamn mind, Stetch!"

"Hey! My kind of friends, they'll take some real interest in helping out. They'll put some feet on the street for you, get answers. I don't even know why I called you. You used to be the best. Look at you now. Moe Rossi. Big Man."

"Moe Rossi was my grandfather, you batshit old goon." I shook my head and sat back, frustrated. I'd give it one more shot and try to keep the disdain to a visible minimum.

"Mr. Stetch, I understand you're a very important and busy man, so if you could just give me the names of anyone you suspect might have taken the record...."

I hoped to Christ that he was paying attention and understood. If not, the whole morning was a waste of my time and his money, although I was much less worried about his pockets than my sleep schedule. He sat heavy, slumped forward. I was beginning to think he'd fallen asleep, or died while I was talking, when he suddenly sat bolt upright with a hard glint in his eye.

"Ramone?"

"Who is Ramone? One of the people here in the hospital?"

"Ramone." He repeated, flipping the photo book open again and stopping on the picture he'd shown me before. He jabbed his finger at a trumpet player in the background, a real *pachuco* with a pencil thin moustache and slick hair. He looked like a stereotypical Big Band musician – like DeNiro in New York, New York.

"It couldn't be Ramone. He's dead. Been dead thirty-some years. Maybe one of his people...."

How could I take anything he said at face value? He was constantly self-aggrandizing, or



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plain lying his ass off.

ly?"

ictures were taken."

"That would be more than sixty years ago, Stetch. I think we can cross him off the list of suspects."

"You think I don't know that? You fucking guido punk! Come in here and try to push me around, will you, Tony?" He hollered, waving his glasses around for effect.

I stared a hole through him, hoping it would bear fruit and settle him down a little. Whether it was my eyeballing him, or he just wore himself out, he shrunk back against the pillow. All the energy that had been pouring out of him moments before was gone, replaced by clear eyes and a set jaw. It would be a miracle if I could keep myself from ending up on the wrong end of a bottle after talking to that batshit codger.

"Are you finished?" I growled at him. "You were telling me who you thought might have stolen the record."

"Look, anybody could have stolen it. Fuckin' Viet-Cong nurses and spic janitors they have in this fucking place. Every one of 'em is a goddamn thief. Come to think of it, there's a kid works here, named Enrique, looks just like old Ramone. I never realized it until just now. I knew there was a reason I didn't like that fucking beaner kid, sniffing around my room all the time. Probably some grandkid or something."

I stood up and looked through the windows to see if there were any Hispanic kids working in the area. All I could see was the fat nurse and a couple of shady-looking white dudes in orderly jackets.

"I'll check out Enrique. Now why do you think this *Ramone* would have something to do with it?"

"That Mex hump tried to steal it from me back then. He played horns on the gig and was always trying to get his hands on the record to prove it. He was crazy, had it out for me. Tried to attack my wife once. I had his hands broken and called the cops on him. He got out, came back and tried to steal it again, the fuck. Somebody killed the spic a few weeks later."

"And I'm sure you had nothing to do with that, right?"

"Hey, I'm a business man, not a thug! And he wasn't worth the time. Just another dirty tortilla-munching Mexican. Like I said, maybe it's his grandkid or nephew or something?"

Time for the important stuff. Now I had to wonder who made the initial offer for this job: Old Man Ignorance, or the 1970's recording magnate still stuck inside his cracked head? I had a



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...d be, but I had to ask.

...ed on the phone?"

...ning his eyes away from me and towards the door.

Never a good sign.

"Look, Stetch..."

Then I saw what he was looking at: a tall, lithe redhead. I'm a sucker for redheads, just like Pops was. She had startling green eyes, and the greatest set of lips I'd ever seen on a woman—the bottom lip pouty and full, with a top lip just as welcoming and perfectly matched.

She smiled as she stepped through the door, showing perfectly formed pearls of white between those red daydreams. Lush. That was the word for those lips. Or comfortable, like one of those overstuffed chairs that sucked your will to move the second you sat down. The woman looked to be around my age, his granddaughter, perhaps? God forbid it was his wife, though stranger pairings happened every day in California.

I hadn't seen at first from where I sat, but as I stood to welcome her, gentleman that Pops trained me to be, I noticed the girl. She was maybe six or seven, or she could have been four or twelve for all I knew about kids. She was cute, obviously the product of the lovely woman with the magic lips. The little girl had the same auburn tresses, the same green eyes. She'd be a heartbreaker someday, and a boatload of trouble, no doubt.

My gaze returned to the mother, who was leaning across the bed to hug the miserable old bigot I'd wasted my morning on, although I had to admit that the morning was looking up. It took me a second or two to realize that I was still standing, and staring, when the woman stood and held a hand out to me across the hospital bed.

"Hi. I'm Rose, Obie's daughter." The voice matched the lips. Pure velvet.

My knees buckled a little. "I... um... sorry. Cole, Moss Cole."

I reached out and shook her hand—soft and warm, welcoming. Her handshake was firm, not the frail laying-on of hand that a lot of women tended to do, as if they were Scarlett fucking O'Hara, afraid you'd break their delicate, dilettante fingers. This girl had confidence and character. I was doomed.

"My pleasure, Miss Stetch. I'm sorry, but you did say 'daughter'?"

It seemed patently ridiculous as she stood next to the withered old creep in the bed who, even in his heyday, could not possibly have contributed to the smouldering beauty from which I was currently trying to wrench my eyes.

I turned to the little girl, bowing with my hat in hand, hoping both to impress Rose Stetch



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with my schoolboy stare. "And you are?"

idence her mother showed. Yep, she'd be trouble by

"Well, Holly, it is a pleasure to meet you. My name's Moss."

"Like on a tree? What kind of name is that?"

"Holly! Be polite," Rose warned.

I winked at Holly and stood to face her mother and grandfather. "It's all right. Kids will be kids, right?"

Rose smiled, her luscious lips turning up into something that made my pelvis vibrate and my heart echo in my chest. Sweat broke out on my forehead.

"Holly, honey, can you go wait in the hall for a minute? Go ask nurse Terri for a cookie."

She turned and watched Holly skip out the door and down the hall, then turned back to me. The smile faded from her beautiful face, a look I knew well after many years of disappointing various women.

"Mr. Cole, my father is not interested in buying anything or investing in any businesses."

*What? She thinks I'm a salesman?* Gone was any semblance of cordial flirtation or even mild tolerance. Women tend to go that way around me, for some reason.

"Listen, I'm not —"

"Mr. Cole, this kind of thing happens all the time. I know Obie Stetch used to be a 'big-time operator,' or whatever you people call it, but he's just an old man now. He needs to be left alone."

The old man stiffened in his bed and shot her a look of pure vitriol. She recoiled like a kicked dog, and I again had the instant urge to smack Obie Stetch in the bald spot.

"Shut up, Rose," he said. "I called Cole. He's an investigator. He's gonna help me find the record."

She sank at the word *record*, and her exasperation made her look tired and worn. "We've been through this. It's gone. Let it go."

"This man can find it, and find whoever thinks they can fuck with Obie Stetch!"

The old prick clenched his fists in rage, and his glare burned a hole through the bare patch of wall where his record used to hang.

"Father —"

"I want you to give him a fucking check! It's still my money, Rose. You may have locked me up in this prison, but I'm still the *man* in this family, goddamn it. I'm still your father!"





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her green eyes pleading, telling me everything I needed to know. Stetch couldn't really afford my services, and she wasn't about to let him try to pay, but she still wanted me to help the coot.

I hoped my eyes were communicating just as clearly: I was broke, needed the money and the work, and wasn't keen on helping the fucker even at full pay plus incidentals. I don't think we were simpatico.

"If you don't write that fucking check *right now*, I'll have Goldstein down here and cut you off so fast your pretty little red head will fucking *spin!*"

Rose flushed and glared down at her father. "*Fine*. But don't think for a second that you'll be staying with Holly and me if you can't pay for this place anymore."

Her father grunted and turned away like a spoiled child.

"How much are we talking about, Mr. Cole?"

The chill coming off her ran through me like a ghost. This one wasn't even my fault. I just got caught in the crossfire between a spoiled octogenarian and his fed-up daughter. I wanted no part of it, but needed the money. Of course, that didn't mean I couldn't play the good guy, right?

I shrugged good-naturedly and shifted on my feet in my best 'Aw shucks Ma'am' impression. "Well, I... we... discussed my normal rates, which would be five hundred for the consultation and fifteen hundred per week, but your father...."

She glared at me so hard it hurt my head. I guess she wasn't in the market for 'shucks.'

"How much, Mr. Cole?"

The way she said my name hurt even more than the glare. Watching it twist its way from between those beautiful lips through clenched teeth made me think of a ring-necked spitting cobra I'd met once in Mozambique. That had only been a slightly better morning than this.

"We don't have to," I stammered.

"My father is obviously a big boy and can do what he wants with his money, whether he has it or not. How much?"

Stetch broke in before I could undercut the deal.

"It's my fucking money. I told him I'd pay twenty-five grand to get the record back. Give him half. I gave more than that to that shithead Reagan for his campaign last year."

Rose Stetch looked as if she'd just been slapped by a ghost. "Twenty-five *thousand*? Are you



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ched back.

th her blazing green eyes as she reached into the bag hanging from her shoulder. She looked down, shaking her head in anger just long enough to scribble something out, then tore the check from the book and thrust it across the bed at me. Stetch continued to stare at the wall like a sulking four-year-old.

I nodded to Rose and turned to her father on my way to the door. When I spoke, my voice croaked in a hushed whisper. "I'll check out your mysterious latin orderly and start contacting dealers and fences. I'll be in touch, Mr. Stetch."

They both stayed frozen, staring at ninety degrees from each other. Neither acknowledged my existence as I left. The acorn and the asshole tree.

I felt a little sheepish myself after that transaction. Now I was just a slimy, money-grubbing Dick-for-hire. How the hell had Pops done it? Endless tides of obnoxious assholes who thought they had a right to anything and everything they didn't already own. Jerk-offs like Obie Stetch making demands and treating you like an indentured servant. Covering up affairs and ruining business partners. Somehow, Pops used to avoid these jobs, but I have to pay the bills.

I shuffled down the hall to the nurses' station and asked the fat nurse if Enrique was around. She basically told me to go to hell, or the Human Resources department. Usually that's the same place. That dry, cottony feeling pulled at my throat, begging me to pour some whiskey down it, pleading with me to feed my stomach and my brain with the sweet, mind-numbing nectar of the gods, the one that used to drive all my troubles away. I thrust my hand into my pocket and found the coin, flipping it between my fingers in a desperate effort to shake the monkey off my back as a flop-sweat broke out on my forehead and behind my ears.

Holly came out of a common room at the end of the hall and waved as she saw me head toward the elevator. I gave her a little wave and flipped my hat up onto my head with a flourish and a bow. She giggled and bounced off to join the party. Nice kid. Too bad she'd end up like the rest of us.