

The Hunker Game

May 2nd

The idea was to get Liz as far away from Seals as I could, so we grabbed a cab uptown to The Saloon on Grant. I needed more than one cocktail after that shaky Stoneham meeting, and hunkering down in one of the few places here to survive the 1906 quake seemed fitting.

Turns out that Liz had called Chumpo looking for me again, heard about the stiff across the street, flew herself up to research this “crime story” of hers, and ended up sweet-talking her way into Stoneham’s office by saying she was my “colleague”. I had to hand it to her; the lady was a real pip. When I told her what I had discovered on that foggy morning, though, she was suddenly less pippish.

“Stoneham never said a word...I can’t believe you found Reggie in the scoreboard.”

“Yeah. One of the perks of my job.”

She fingered the rim of her Tom Collins glass. “You should’ve snatched that note off his body. We could’ve studied it.”

“C’mon, it was a simple piece of paper. Bad enough I left the scene in the first place.”

“So Reggie being your friend pretty much rules out a coincidence here.”

“Not really. The killer might not know me at all, and just latched on to me after I found the first body.”

“Well, hopefully this new game plan of ours will shake him out of his creepy tree. Stoneham wants to kick it off during Sunday’s doubleheader with the Pirates.”

“Great. I can be a nervous wreck for five hours.”

“You don’t like the idea?”

“I’d rather cliff dive off Point Diablo. But we have to try something. Where are you staying while you’re here?”

She smirked a bit. Downed a big sip of her drink. “Oh, a nice little walk-up place a few blocks down from the ballpark. It went up for rent last week.”

I stared at her. “You have to be kidding.”

“Hey, if you stay nice to me, I’ll let you use the couch.”

“First you help organize Operation Cockamamie and now you take my place? Who do you think you are?”

“If you don’t know who I am by now, Snappy...” She polished off the Tom Collins, “you never will.”

We had two more rounds to make things friendlier, but on top of Stoneham’s Glenlivet I was in no condition to even hail a cab. It was closing time when we left The Saloon, and there weren’t many on the streets anyway. Liz dragged me onto the last bus heading back toward the Mission. We had a hard time not falling over each other on the turns, which wasn’t a bad thing.

The bus dropped us just north of the ballpark. We still had a few blocks to walk. The trees of Franklin Square

Park loomed by on our left, and it was hard to even look at them.

"I'm gonna make you be nice to me yet, mister," Liz cooed into my ear, lightening the mood.

"Many have tried. Hate to tell ya that few have succ—"

"SSSH!"

She clutched my arm and I stopped. Leaned against a light pole to keep from falling.

"Whazzit?"

"Nothing...Thought I heard footsteps."

We were past Seals, heading down the hill into my neighborhood. The sidewalk was empty in both directions. Dripping with alleys and shadows.

"Come on." I sobered up quick and led her away, around a corner and up the back wooden steps to my just-vacated apartment. She had trouble with the key.

"Amateur." I moved her aside. Jiggled it in the lock my special way and the door opened. She poked my ribcage, walked in first.

All I wanted to do was collapse, but being in my mostly empty old place was strange, and the footsteps Liz thought she just heard bothered me even more. She threw her coat on the sheetless mattress, fell face first on it and was snoring in seconds. I found the one chair that was left, slid it over. Sat beside her and smoked the first of many Camels.

I woke up today at the crack of dawn, still in my coat. Cigarette ash all over it. Liz was still comatose. I stood painfully, went to the door and

opened it to suck in some fresh air.

A note was stuck to the door with masking tape. This time scrawled on a bar napkin from The Red Parrot Room:

"2 OF YOU MAKE IT MUCH WORSE"

The Mango Room

May 3rd

"Let me see that again."

Liz had to whisper the request because we were dressed in black, seated on a couch in Reggie Fleming's living room Saturday morning. The memorial service went okay, but the house in Daly City was stuffed with working handkerchiefs, and Reggie's wife and kids needed as much quiet as possible.

Liz turned the bar napkin every which way. All she was missing was a magnifying glass and big Sherlock pipe. "You been to this place?"

"Red Parrot? Nope. Heard of it, though. It's on Evans Avenue, down near Hunter's Point. Lots of Latin bands play there."

"Can you dance?"

"Now you're being ridiculous."

Reggie's wife Diane walked over at that point. I introduced Liz and gave the widow a comforting hug. She looked like she hadn't slept since Christmas. "Thanks so much for coming, Snappy..." she said, then broke down and I had to hug her again. Liz

stood there helplessly.

"I just wish I knew who would do this... Everyone liked Reggie."

"He never said anything about someone, y'know, out to get him?"

"Oh no. No... He was just so looking forward to starting his new job, buying us a new car. Who would have ever thought he'd end up in that park..." Her voice evaporated on my shoulder. I wanted to tell her about the scoreboard, but what good would that have done?

Afterwards I drove Liz back into the city, giving us plenty of time to think.

"What was his next job?" she asked.

"Construction on the new park. Candlestick Point."

"Really? I think Seals is pretty nice. Why doesn't Stoneham just double deck that place and build a parking garage?"

"Don't get me started. Not sure of all the details but you can bet he got a sweetheart deal."

"Hmm. Might be worth looking into that deal."

"How come?"

"Maybe someone else likes Seals Stadium too. Someone who doesn't want to see it vacated. Someone who would kill to make that not happen."

"Then why wouldn't they go after Stoneham? I don't know, Liz..."

"Well, I still think we oughta check out this nightclub. Have a little tequila, ask around."

"Or we can just show this napkin to the cops and let them do it."

"That's no fun. Where did you say this Candlestick Point is?"

"I didn't. It's down near the airport on this little peninsula. Just south of... south of Hunter's Point."

We looked at each other. And just like that we had a post-game date.



The Red Parrot was a kick. Mongo Santamaria and his Afro Cuban Drum Beaters were the headline, and the place was a spicy sardine can. A shiny wood dance floor was packed solid with couples feeling the salsa. The tables were full too, so Liz and I wedged into a spot near the bar. While we ordered margaritas, I quizzed the barkeep about any strange *hombres* he might have seen in the club lately. He told me to mind my own cheeseburgers in so many words.

Just as Mongo launched into "Pito Pito," smacking away on his congas, I spotted two guys in a prime booth at the edge of the dance floor. They both wore tropical shirts. One had a fedora and smoked a cigar. Waiters and assorted patrons paid a whole lot of attention to them. I inched closer for a better look, then retreated and nudged Liz.

"Hey. Guess who's here."

"If it isn't Harry Belafonte, I'm not interested."

"It's better. Orlando Cepeda and Ruben Gomez!"

"Who?"

"Cepeda's our rookie slugger. Not burning up the field yet but he did belt a couple winning homers. And

Gomez smoked the Phillies on the mound today, remember? When you're at the game you should check the scorecard once in a while."

I coaxed her over to the booth. Cepeda and Gomez had big blue drinks. Their eyes looked like blood-shot wading pools. But they were digging Mongo with a vengeance. Cepeda's giant torso was grinding to the rhythm beneath the table and making it bounce.

"Hey Ruben," I said to Gomez, "Great game this afternoon."

He nodded and grinned without looking at me. "Thanks a lot, man."

Then he looked up at Liz. So did Cepeda, who shoved Ruben over in the booth to make room for us.

"Have a seat, chiquitos! You two like to mambo?"

"Sure!" I said, earning a glare from Liz. "You guys come here a lot after games?"

"Not too much. But for the Mongo Man? Anytime!"

Gomez knocked some ash off his cigar, turned so he was directly facing Liz. "This friend of yours here...he show you the right moves?"

"What's that?"

"You gonna move wrong to the music, might as well not move, si?"

Liz was dumbstruck. A slower rumba called "A Ti No Mas" began. Ruben cocked his fedora, slid out of the booth. Came around, took Liz's hand and she followed him onto the dance floor without a peep of protest.

Cepeda just smiled and handed me

a cigar. "So you some big Giants fan?"

"You can say that." A lighter appeared in his big hand, and I let him fire me up. "Actually...I'm also an usher at the park. People call me Snappy."

The lighter snapped shut. Cepeda's smile dropped through a trap door.

"You the one found that *hombre muerto!*"

"Excuse me?"

"The body! The one with the knife in him Opening Day!"

"Well, yeah...but that's why—"

He snatched the lit cigar out of my hand. "Go, man! Get away from me!"

"What's the problem?"

"YOU the problem! I got a .208 batting number so far and you wanna hex me some more? Adios!"

I tried to reason with him but a 300-pound door man was on me in seconds. Liz slid away from Gomez, came to my rescue. Seconds later we were in the parking lot.

"Well, that got us nowhere in a hurry," I said, fixing my manhandled shirt collar, "Enjoy your salsa lesson?"

"Shut up."

My Coronet was parked at a far, dark edge of the lot. A cold wind whipped off the bay, shook the bushes in front of its hood. As we neared the car, we both stopped talking. Looked around and listened. Our hearts pounding.

There was no new note taped to the door, no knife sticking out of a tire. Whoever this killer was, though, he was spooking us without even being there.