

CHAPTER ONE

*If you want a job done properly,
It's best to do it yourself.*

December 14, 1992. 6:27 PM

“Hey Guid, we’s been waitin’ out here for over two hours!” Bennie Falippie whined as another quiver struck him. “When’s he comin’ out?”

Bennie glanced over at his partner, Guido Grotte, still shivering as the damp cold embraced him. He pulled at the collar of his coat and forced it a little higher up his neck.

“How should I know?” Guido replied, aggravated at his partner’s constant batter instead of keeping his eyes on the restaurant’s front door. “Da boss sez we do da deed tonight, here in Chinatown. Dat’s all I needs t’know—so quit askin’, already.”

They were waiting in a stolen car on Grant Street since 4:15 PM. It was mid-December, close to 6:30 PM, the sky was clear, there was no fog, and for San Francisco that was saying something, because it was so cold, it turned their vehicle into a real icebox. Their wait had been longer than either had expected.

Bennie glanced across the street for their prey. Another shiver climbed up his spine, and he felt his body temperature had to be close forty degrees. He knew his trigger finger could become numb. He tried to figure out a way to keep it slaughter robust—ready for the kill. He never murdered anyone in Chinatown before. He left that chore to the local Asian goons after all, he thought, it was their territory, while he claimed the rest of San Francisco as his turf.

The two of them disregarded the sounds of giggles and laughter that the Christmas season brought to happy shoppers therefore they were overlooked.

They ignored the stale Christmas decorations and halfheartedly strung lights that conflicted with mystic oriental colors. That combination made Grant Street shine like Glitter Gulch in old downtown Las Vegas. The holidays were a perfect example of how too much of more brought excitement to captivating patrons, yet were totally disregarded by these two harden criminals.

“Hey, don’t get sore,” Bennie said.

“Christ, you’s been askin’ me dat every ten minutes. Damn it, Bennie, you’s driven me nuts. Get da drift?”

“I’s just askin’, Guid, just askin’.” Bennie said glancing away.

“Well stop, damn it.”

“It’s freezin’ in dis stupid car,” Bennie kept on venting. He just couldn’t seem to help himself.

“Then concentrate on da doorway. He’s gotta come out pretty soon.”

“I’s cold and sick of waitin’. Why’d ya heist such a cruddy old car?”

“Because it don’t stand out, Bennie. It ain’t flashy like a Caddy,” Guido replied. He turned a glare on the other man. Nothing chafed him more than to explain himself.

Imagining Bennie dressed like Smokey the Bear for Halloween: He wore an old Italian farm worker's dirty pants, a sweat-laced shirt, and an open, outdated, single-breasted, plain moth-eaten brown chesterfield coat with a black velvet collar to partially cover his shoulder holster. Bennie's face resembled a bulldog rather than a bear. His boots were so tattered that even homeless bums wouldn't touch them. Bennie treated the human race as mere roving bovines, fodder for rampant pillaging as he chose.

Icy fingers of anger crawled through Guido blood as Bennie began removing and replacing cartridges in his magnum to keep his fingers loose.

Bennie twirled the cylinder several times in a slow, deliberate motion, but fast on the last cycle spin, and then he emptied and reloaded the gun again. It made an infernal rotating racket like a hamster in a Ferris wheel.

Guido got through ten minutes of Bennie's aggravating behavior before he exploded. "Jesus Christ, will you stop dat? You's driven me nuts. What da hell's gotten into you?"

"Hey, I ain't got nuttin' else to do! Gimme a break. I told ya, I's gettin' cold sittin' in here. By the way, how d'ye know Crowder will be here?"

"Listen up, Bennie. Da boss calls me in and sez, 'Take Bennie with ya and hit Old Man Crowder. He'll be dinin' at da Silver Dragon tonight. And don't screw up.'"

"Hey Guid, I hate to tell ya this."

"Tell me what?"

"Ya's fucked up yar dragons, ol' buddy. We's outside the Golden Dragon, here in San Francisco. The Silver Dragon's over in Oakland."

"Jesus Christ! No wonder he's not come out."

"No shit," Bennie commented sarcastically.

"How'd ya know 'bout the Silver Dragon?"

"Da old lady went ta school with Doris."

"Doris! Who da hell's Doris?"

"Da owner guy's bitch."

"Bennie, why in da hell didn't you say somethin' earlier? We're in deep-shit trouble! Do you hear me, deepshit trouble! Da boss ain't gonna be happy about dis! Da deed hasta be done tonight or we's dead meat!"

"So, whatta we do?"

"Da boss will know. We better see 'im first."

"Then start this piece of crap and let's get the hell out of here," Bennie vented. "We still might nail da sucker in Oakland!"

The boss's two bumbling hit men sped across the Bay Bridge. Above them, going in the opposite direction, was Mr. Crowder, heading for a late meeting at his Montgomery Street office.

Restaurants, in the surrounding financial district of San Francisco, come and go like tides; full of crashing waves that smash ethnic tastes then wimp out never to be heard of again—life expectancy from six months to two years—unless the dives have cheap comfort food or domiciled foreigners executing exquisite haut cuisine and embrace top notch management.

The elderly John K. Crowder lived in San Francisco for over forty years and he witnessed restaurants open with much fanfare and disappear like musical chairs.

A savvy French boy came to America. His parents resided in Marin. Soon the boy realized his French accent dripped off his tongue like sweet butter smeared over a hot breakfast croissant; he made the girls giggle, but the boys feared he would steal their steadies. He was determined to correct what he thought was a flaw. He went to City College and took hotel restaurant courses. When he turned thirty-three he opened, RAOUL INFUSIONS. He concluded not to open a French Bistro, and he knew California Cuisine had established a foothold, so he combined the two and also offered other ethnic dishes.

Raoul's restaurant was open for lunch and dinner, but closed on Mondays. He and his executive chef ordered replenishments and dreamed up specials for that week. His staff wore black with white half aprons. At lunch, white paper covered the table. Water glasses, cloth napkins, salt and peppershakers, and tableware, plus one small appetizer suggested—welcome to Raoul's. At dinner the paper was replaced with white linen, a wineglass was added, a narrow vase with a rose sat in the center plus two candles. Patrons were encouraged to take the rose with them; a true businessman—make the customer happy and reward them—a combination that made them want to return and brag to their friends.

Crowder became a regular at Raoul's. When his Monday's luncheon routine restaurant went south for reporting but not paying the required taxes, he asked Raoul if he would accommodate them on Mondays since they were closed. Crowder suggested a fixed price and Raoul could use anything fresh from the night before. Raoul said, "Since my chef will be here, and with my help and one waiter, we can do it. But I will not use cooked leftovers except the weekend prime rib. I will make two main dishes."

The arrangement has lasted for six years. Crowder arrived at Raoul's restaurant earlier today in order to beat the arrival of the little band of the Monday Business Club luncheon acquaintances he enjoyed for years. He wanted to sit at the head of the table so he could brag to the group about some exciting information he had received that morning. He wanted a special desert and asked Raoul for suggestions.

"Ah, Mr. Crowder, you are in luck. We ordered too many raspberries. I will put them in a wine glass, with a little Grand Marnier with whipped cream over."

"I was thinking of some of that sponge cake you have at dinner."

"Oh, you mean the genoise, Perfect, we bake two sheets every day. I'll cut some into three inch rounds, sprinkle Grand Marnier over, top with the raspberries and pour over some heated creamy custard with toasted Pecans, and pipe a little whipped cream over."

John K. Crowder stood and smiled; he gave Raoul big hug. He wanted his lunching revelers to remember today's lunch.

*F*inishing his dessert, he stood and tapped his water glass repeatedly for attention.

"I want all of you to know, I'm going to meet an agent from the Hong Kong police this evening," he said. "Most of you know my wife, Ruth. Well, she has information that members of the dreaded Tong Family are establishing a network here to sell drugs."

"Come on, John, those are just rumors," a stout man replied somewhat amused knowing John tended to exaggerate.

“No—no. Actually, the real Tong are right here in San Francisco. They’re already starting to sell drugs in small quantities to get established.”

“This is America. They can’t do that here,” an elderly banker spoke up.

“Yeah,” camera shop owner Trefs agreed. “Our cops will eat them for dinner.”

“I don’t know anything about drugs or this Tong gang, but you’re one lucky man, being married to a beauty like Ruth,” haberdasher Charlie remarked. “Every time she looks at me, I want to melt into a glob of sweet chocolate hoping she’ll find me delicious. She’s a dynamo. When does Ruth have the time for all her charity work? I can’t get my wife to even make phone calls for the museum funding drive, but Ruth is the chair of the restoration committee.”

John was very moved by the compliment; everyone could tell by the slight watering in his eyes. “Thank you very much. I will tell her about your praise this evening. She wants all the museum’s oriental exhibitions preserved forever.”

“Come on, John, tell us how she does it,” another chided. “I mean, your Ruth is on several city committees, and the mayor is constantly after her to run for supervisor.”

Charlie saw true love in a May/December romance. He figured this was the only time he could ask, “Tell us, John, how did you meet such a beauty like Ruth? Was it love at first sight?”

“Yeah, John, you’ve kept her a secrete all these years. Where did you meet her,” Trefs extorted, while others shouted, “Yeah, come on and tell us.”

“You win,” John said, then paused for thirty seconds trying to retrieve his recollection. “I guess you didn’t know, but I was on PT boats in the Pacific during WWII.”

“No we didn’t,” the attorney said, then thought, unlike army men who kept battles to themselves most seamen bragged about war stories. “What was the number of your PT boat?”

“Number?” John exclaimed, “Those plywood hulls were constantly being shot out from under us.” Do you want to hear about Ruth or not,” Crowder said quite indignantly.

“Sorry,” the attorney said, “My father was killed on one, late in the war.”

“Oh dear, was he in the New Guinea campaign?” John asked. “We were trying to sink the heavily armed barges that were supplying the starving Japanese troops. The Japs threw everything at night as we seldom attacked in the daylight. Zero’s could see our wake. We lost a lot of men and boats, but we prevailed. Japanese soldiers feared our PTs, and called us monsters.”

“Were you a gunners mate?” One younger man asked.

I was a seaman and worked under the quartermaster in the galley. I hate guns of any kind. The problem on PTs was as the war continued bullets were changed to lethal 20 mm canons, then came the 40mm. This meant something had to go. Our icebox shrunk to almost nothing. I made spam sandwiches with orange marmalade not mayo—ugh. We bartered and begged for food from nearby ships, but ammunition and gas was at our beck and call—you need firepower, well just ask. It’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Please John, give us the lowdown on Ruth,” The attorney responded immediately realizing only navy PT men would have known that information.

“As the war came to a close some of the bachelor skippers were toying with stealing the boats and resorting to piracy. Finally common sense was weighed against the

reality of no resources. We ended up removing all the ordnances, dosing them with their own 100octane airplane fuel, then torched them according to the Navy procedures.”

“Why did they do that?” Charlie asked.

“Economics. They only brought back a few that represented historic value. I was discharged in 1947, in San Diego. I remembered the pirate chatter and knew the best port outside of Japan would be the British controlled Hong Kong. I decided on becoming an importer of Asian goods as a suitable career.

“To return their economic base, the Pacific Rim Countries needed to produce consumables quickly. China had started a battle with communism, and Japan already had too many established importers and exporters, but Hong Kong seemed ripe—the Brits were organized. I needed cash so I worked two jobs. In November of 1947, I boarded a tramp steamer to my destiny.

“By the time I arrived in Hong Kong, the affluent Chinese saw where Mainland China was headed, so they fled to Hong Kong taking their wealth with them. We both wanted the same thing—money, be it in pounds or dollars. I became connected with a family who’s oldest daughter hated violence, spoke very good English, finished her education in the British schools and wanted to visit America. After five years of shoving and pushing around in bouts playful bliss, the young lady made me feel young again; she became my Ruth. Her mother and father were delighted when I asked them for permission for her hand in marriage.”

“You asked them?” Trefs said astonished.

“Her family is old school. I wouldn’t have had it any other way. Two years later, we moved here and brought our connections with us. I will tell you this, the markup of simple trinkets is enormous.”

“I never knew you were in the Navy,” Charlie announced, then wondered how much of Crowder’s story was true, malarkey or fantasy. “Ruth certainly knows how to run committees. I guess that’s why she’s always in demand.”

“She’s organized thanks to British schools. Best part, this Hong Kong police agent is going to pay my Ruth for the information. She will donate the money to the museum fund,” Crowder said smiling.

“That’s very commendable, but why on earth would the Hong Kong authorities pay her?” the attorney asked. “That’s not normally done.”

“Her family lives in Hong Kong, on the top of the hill. They are filthy rich. She calls them often,” Crowder answered. “They know... they know everything there, be it legit or someone’s deadly aspirations.”

“I didn’t know Ruth was from a prestigious Hong Kong household until today. No wonder she only shops at the best clothing boutiques,” Charlie commented as the group started to break up.

“She keeps herself exquisitely dressed, all right,” John added still smiling “My Ruthy leaves the clothing tags lying around so I’ll find them.”

Charlie pondered about Ruth’s age. Most Asians appear younger than they were, somewhere from ten to fifteen years. She actually may have been a teenager or younger when John met her. He frowned, then saw John staring at him, so he smiled back. “John, funny you mentioning Hong Kong, I received several bolts of silk suit materials from there yesterday. Come by and take a peek.”

“Splendid. I’ll ask Ruth to come with me,” Crowder said.

Trefs slid in a dig as he left. "I guess she lets you know who's the boss."

"She reminds me repeatedly." Crowder said still sitting and took a last sip of coffee. He gazed around, and then gleefully broke into his annoying, insidious laugh. "Tee—hee—hee. That agent's going to get more than he bargained for tonight. Yes, indeedy, yes, indeedy. He's going to learn what really happens to gangs that move into San Francisco."

The attorney stood and threw his cloth napkin onto the table. "My goodness, John, you make it sound so ominous."