

In the moment that Aaron Moore would have fired the gun, Aloysius Hightower remembered who he was, he was Aloysius, and he would do something, *anything*, to solve his problem other than kill that woman. And in that minute the two girls stepped into a sporty-looking Corvette and pulled into the street – gently, leisurely, as though they had all the time in the world. He sprinted back to his car, jammed into it, and sped after them.

He followed them into downtown L.A., and then onto the strip. *What am I going to do?* He tried to improvise, like Bird, like Charlie Parker, but his mind was spinning, as though it had stripped its gears. He concentrated on his driving.

When they pulled up at the Cheesecake Factory the very beginning of an idea began to form in his mind. He ignored the valet parking and found a meter. He went in and made a phone call to Hawkins. Then he slipped the *maitre'd* a hundred-dollar bill and explained where he wanted to sit.

\* \* \*

On Monday after he resigned from the D.C. Government, John Murphy took a morning flight to San Jose, California. He would be in California all week. Automated Datatron Inc. was paying him a six-figure salary to spend most of his time traveling around the country using his

contacts to generate business. His first project was to go to the San Jose corporate headquarters of Santa Clara Associates. ADI had just acquired Santa Clara Associates. On Thursday he met with their executives and fired all but two of them. Then, after a long weekend, he visited their customers in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Murphy was on an unlimited expense account. Government contractors traditionally took their customers out to lunch or dinner to discuss business. Murphy would spare no expense to charm his municipal and county government clients.

Santa Clara Associates had the bulk of its computer services contracts in Southern California. Its biggest contract was with the city of Los Angeles, but it also had contracts with smaller cities in the neighboring counties.

Murphy had been hearing about the trendy new restaurant chain, the Cheesecake Factory, and it sounded like a perfect place for him to do business. He asked his Southern California clients to meet him at the Cheesecake Factory at six-thirty on Wednesday night.

Murphy pulled off Wiltshire Boulevard onto North Beverly Drive at six-fifteen and wordlessly handed his keys to the valet. Seeing the place packed, the last thing that he wanted was for his clients to wait an hour for a table. He asked the woman who assigned tables to step out of earshot. Murphy gave her a twenty-dollar bill and told her that he wanted a table for seven and he didn't want to wait. She took the bill

silently and disappeared into the restaurant. Five minutes later a waitress returned and brought him to a large circular booth in the corner.

Murphy sipped a beer as his clients from the Los Angeles City Government and other cities arrived one by one. He greeted each of them warmly. Murphy had been with these men, and men like them, many times at National League of Cities conventions, and he had played host to several of them when they visited D.C. Murphy had a photographic memory; he never forgot a name or a face, and for most of the hundreds of municipal government officials that he had met over the years, he knew the names of their spouses and even their drink preferences.

Murphy's six clients were all assembled by six thirty. He was ready for a long dinner with many courses and a lot of talk about how ADI would help deliver efficient services for the city residents that they represented.

Murphy and his guests, all men in their forties and fifties, repeatedly gazed at the large number of attractive young women in the restaurant. Women sure carry themselves differently in L.A. than they do in D.C., Murphy thought. They seemed so much more *secure*, more *self-possessed*, here. Murphy thought it was because women outnumbered men by such a margin in D.C. They competed with each other for attention. Here, it seemed like they knew they were hot. They dressed like it and flirted like it. He liked it here.

Then his photographic memory got a jolt.

She was perhaps thirty feet away from him. Murphy recognized her as someone who looked almost identical to the woman that he met at the ADI lunch in Washington two weeks ago – the woman Stone was so obsessed with finding. God, how bizarre! And how typical of D.C. government. Murphy was ecstatic that he was three thousand miles away and he knew – he *had to believe* – that any resemblance between this woman and the one he had known in his other life must be sheerest coincidence. Besides, he had more important business to deal with.

“You know her, Murph?”

It was the Glendale IT Director, a burly guy who chain-smoked constantly. He’ll be dead before he’s fifty, Murphy speculated.

“Nah. I was just thinking how much fun it would be to be her kid.”

“To be her wha – oh, I get it.”

Murphy reluctantly took his eyes away from the buxom woman and turned back to his dinner companion. As he did so, his eyes passed over the entrance.

It couldn’t be.

Walking through the door was a dead ringer for one of Mayor Watson’s security guards – the nervous one, what was his name, Hightower. Hightower slipped a bill to the *maitre d’*, who promptly led him personally to a table in direct line of sight with the one at which the Evelyn Boone look-alike sat.

Oh no, Murphy thought. This was no coincidence. He had quit his job and flown three thousand miles to get away from this shit.

He had no idea why Stone wanted Evelyn Boone so badly, and he didn't want to know. He figured Stone called him that night to look for her because he was after some tail. Now Murphy sensed that it was more complicated, and more important. Important enough for Watson to send one of his trusted thugs.

The last thing that Murphy wanted was to talk to the woman who looked like Evelyn Boone or a man who looked like a D.C. cop. He would have a long, expensive dinner with seven municipal government officials, and use his smarts and charms to line ADI's coffers. But when the next guest entered the room, Murphy realized there were no lookalikes. A second D.C. cop – Murphy didn't remember his name – took a seat beside his fellow officer, his jacket opening slightly to reveal a shoulder holster.

Evelyn was beginning to relax for the first time since she came to Los Angeles. Yvonne definitely knew some cool people. Her friend Theresa had shot a love scene with Harrison Ford, and had gotten killed in the very next scene. And Mariah seemed to know outrageous things about every star Evelyn had ever heard of. But Yvonne was definitely the coolest of the cool. She was so witty, so self-confident, so *in the know*...Her little friend has certainly grown up, Evelyn thought.

And look at herself! Holed up in that apartment, pouring over the *Post* every morning. No wonder she was getting paranoid. She even thought she saw John Murphy, sitting in this restaurant! Is that a hallucination, or what! Imagine travelling three thousand miles to the movie capital of the world, and who's the first person you "recognize"? A middle-aged bureaucrat from Washington, D.C.!

Evelyn took a deep swallow of her Rusty Nail and casually returned the stare of two good-looking, well-dressed men at the table across from hers. They look a little familiar, she said to herself, and then she felt the sick, metallic taste of fear rise in her throat. *The younger one...he was the one who...*she clutched Yvonne's arm. "We have to get out of here," she whispered.

Yvonne turned slowly towards her, eyes wide, half-smiling. "Why?" she asked, calmly.

"I know these men." Evelyn gestured vaguely in the direction of Hightower and Hawkins.

"Well, then, let's bring them over. They are some *fine-looking* gentlemen." With gathering horror, Evelyn realized that Yvonne was blitzed. "Yoo-hoo, young gentlemen!" Yvonne hollered, waving. "Care to join us?" Instantly Hawkins and Hightower looked away from the table. Hawkins almost upset his drink.

"Are you coming with us?" Theresa asked Yvonne. Mariah was already standing.

“Where are you going?” Evelyn cried.

“To the ladies’ room,” Yvonne replied. “Would you please let go of my upper arm? You’re beginning to cut off the circulation.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“I..” Yvonne looked slyly at Theresa, who began to giggle. “I don’t think you want to go with us.”

Evelyn thought of Hawkins, of his rough hands on her at the Marriott. “Let’s go,” she said, flouncing up and bounding in what she hoped was the direction of the ladies’ room.

Hightower was improvising as he watched them pass his table. “I think they’re going to the john,” he said, not looking at Hawkins. “Do you think you can follow them, and when they come out, cull the other three?”

“Kill the other three?” Hawkins asked, alarmed.

“No. *Shee-it*, you moron.” Not for the first time, Hightower wished he still smoked. “*Cull* them. You know, distract them. Separate them from the target.”

Hawkins brightened. “Oh, no problem,” he said, and got up. Then he grew puzzled. “What are you going to do?”

Hightower didn’t know. “I’m going to see if I can talk with the young lady, reason with her.”” As he said the words they seemed as good a plan as any. “When I give the signal, prepare to leave with me and the target.”

Inside the ladies' room Mariah posted lookout while Theresa got out the cocaine. "I don't think you should be doing this," Yvonne said, looking at Evelyn. "You look like you're wired enough."

What the hell, Evelyn thought. She had never done drugs – was too worried about what they might do to her – but at this point her life was so incredibly fucked up that it didn't seem to make any difference. They used money to snort this stuff up, didn't they? She fished through her purse and pulled out a filthy, worn dollar bill. She rolled it up the way she had seen it done many times.

"Hey, what – "

Evelyn was so much bigger and stronger than those other girls. She stepped up, stuck her face into the mound of coke, and snorted as hard as she could.

Wham! Her entire face went numb. For a second she thought somebody had punched her in the face. Then a sort of icy bliss floated through her.

"That's – that's very good," she managed.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?" Theresa howled.

"Get rid of it. Somebody's coming," Mariah announced. The women scrambled to get rid of the drug.

"You didn't tell me your friend was a *coke slut*," Theresa said to Yvonne.

Evelyn staggered out of the ladies' room with the rest of them. Hawkins was waiting for them.

“Good evening.” Hawkins straightened up until he looked like a giant cramp with legs. The women looked at him.

“Um – my friend and I are international businessmen who are desirous of some suave foxes such as yourselves.” Hawk looked over his shoulder for Hightower, who seemed to have disappeared. Had he pronounced “suave” correctly? He thought it might have been two syllables, but perhaps it was three. “We’ve just closed a million dollar deal.” The women looked bored. “I mean, a five million dollar deal.”

*The bathroom Romeo*, Evelyn giggled to herself, and then she grasped the gravity of the situation. Watson had sent this *thug* to kill her, and he was apparently prepared to kill all of them if he had to. Evelyn saw Yvonne flirting with him and decided that she had to save herself.

As quietly and inconspicuously as she could, she began to back away from Hawkins. She felt weightless. No, more, she felt *bodiless* – as though she was some spirit, who could simply float out of the Cheesecake Factory, perhaps through the roof.

She bumped into a table.

She turned around – too suddenly, her momentum carrying her another ninety degrees until she righted herself – and stared at the table’s occupants.

One of them was John Murphy. She stared at him. “Mr. Murphy,” she said at last. “What are you doing here?”

Murphy looked sick. “I’m having dinner with my friends,” he said.

“Well, *hell*, Murph,” a portly, middle-aged man who reeked of cigarette smoke said. “Why don’t you introduce us?” He stood up. “My name’s Tom Dollinger. I’m the king of information technology for all of Glendale, California.” He stuck out his hand. “Who are you?”

“I’m the Queen of Sheba,” Evelyn said, backing away.

Hightower stepped up and gently put his hand on her shoulder. “Ms. Boone,” he said, “How ya doin?”

“Evelyn who?” she asked. “My name isn't Evelyn Boone.”

“Listen, Ms. Boone, my name is Aaron Moore.” Hightower hesitated for a moment and then plunged in. “I’m a sergeant with the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C. I’d just like to talk to you for a few minutes.”

“Listen Sergeant, I don't know anything about Evelyn Boone or Washington, D.C. My name is Paula Kelly and I live in West Los Angeles. I’m having dinner with some of my friends and you’re bothering me. I’d appreciate it if you would leave me alone. If you don't leave me alone, I’m going to call for help.”

“Ms. Boone, I'll be very honest with you. Some people in Washington are looking for you and they know that you’re in Los Angeles. I think that you’re in some danger and I wanna help you.”

“Sergeant, if you don't leave, I'm going to call the restaurant management.”

“Ms. Boone, all I need is to talk to you for a few minutes.” Hightower was beginning to regret that he had said he was with the D.C. Police.

“WAITER, WAITER, COME OVER HERE RIGHT NOW.” She frantically waved for a waiter at the next table.

“Ms. Boone, I'm trying to *help* you.”

The waiter was here. “This man is bothering me and I don't care to talk to him,” Evelyn said.

“Can I help you, sir?”

Hightower gave the waiter a hard look. “This is a personal matter,” he said. “It's none of your concern.”

“Do you have some identification?”

*“Identification? Why the fuck would I need...”*

“HE'S A POLICE SERGEANT IN D.C. HE HAS NO RIGHT TO BOTHER ME.”

“Sir, are you with the LAPD?”

*“This is a personal matter! This woman is in danger and I need to—”*

The waiter stepped back. Hightower noted his confusion and decided to shut up.

“I'll get the manager,” the waiter said, and turned away.

Now Evelyn and Hightower were left by themselves at the table.

“Miss Boone, you don't understand,” said Hightower as he grabbed her arm.

“YES I DO UNDERSTAND. GET YOUR HANDS OFF OF ME!”

“Just come with me. Trust me, we can work things out.”

Evelyn grabbed a glass of wine and hurled it towards Hightower's head. Hightower deflected it with his hand and it crashed to the floor. Now everyone in the room, including John Murphy, was looking at the table. Hightower noticed Murphy but didn't have time to process it.

“You *are* in danger,” he told Evelyn. “I can't waste time with you. There are people in Washington D.C. who want you dead. Powerful people. People I can't...”

The waiter was back. But it wasn't the manager with him. It was the bouncer. Hightower stood up and shifted his weight to the balls of his feet. He made some professional judgments. About six-five, two eighty. Weightlifter type. Some baby fat, not much. Shaved his head, like that basketball player – Charles Barkley. Maybe he thought he needed an edge, for intimidation. Hightower figured he was slow, a little inexperienced with his fists, relied on his size and strength.

“Hey, my brother, let's take this outside, why don't we?” The bouncer had an easy smile, half-opened eyes. Hightower knew this fucker's game. He'd take Hightower outside and try to pound the shit out of him. This was one guy Hightower would not be reluctant to shoot. Not at all.

“*Brother?*” Hightower arched his eyebrows. “Are we *related?*” He noticed the way the guy stood, like a gunslinger, with his legs open. Hightower could reach down casually, like he was about to tie his shoes, and then ram his fist into the guy’s balls. Then, when he bent over, gasping for breath, Hightower could ram his elbow into the guy’s face, breaking his nose and flooding his nasal passages with blood.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Evelyn weeping. Or – no. This was some sort of post-drug drip – he recognized it, and an idea hit him like lightning.

“*She snorted coke in the john!*”

Instantly the room became silent. *Oh, shit, I’ve done it now,* Hightower thought. Then he heard Yvonne Brown speak.

“Oh, my God!” she said reverently. “It’s Sean Penn.”

Hightower looked up and saw the actor striding towards them. Like everyone else in the room, Hightower automatically noted that Madonna was not with him. The tabloids were full of stories of the breakup of their three-year-old marriage.

Penn seemed coiled, intense, like he wanted to bust somebody up. *You’ve come to the right place, buddy,* Hightower thought.

A dozen flashbulbs went off.

Penn whirled around. Hightower remembered that the actor had once done thirty days for punching out a photographer – what did they

call it, a *paparazzi*. Well, if he punched out everyone who took a picture now, he'd be out of commission for two, three years.

Hightower hoped Penn would do it anyway. But instead he just turned heel and stalked out of the restaurant.

Evelyn bolted past Hightower, Sean Penn, and the bouncer and ran toward the restaurant entrance. She grabbed Yvonne. "THEY'RE AFTER ME. COME ON WE'RE GETTING OUTTA HERE."

"What, Evelyn? What are you talking about?"

"COME ON, DO YOU HAVE YOUR CAR KEYS?"

She dragged Yvonne toward the entrance. Evelyn and Yvonne were now running toward their car with Hightower and Hawkins in hot pursuit. Murphy joined the throng of customers at the entrance and watched as the four of them ran out of the restaurant. "My respect for you has shot through the roof," Dollinger chortled. "I had no idea you were acquainted with such lively ladies."

"She's a cokehead," Murphy uttered, remembering what he heard Hightower shout. *Is D.C. Government my own personal curse?* he thought. *Am I doomed to have it follow me around for the rest of my life?* "She's bad news," he said aloud.

Evelyn and Yvonne reached her car before Hawkins and Hightower reached them. Yvonne jumped into her car as Evelyn tried to elude her pursuers. As Yvonne started her car and started to back out of the parking space, Hightower grabbed Evelyn with his right arm.

Evelyn screamed at the top of her lungs. "LET ME GO. GET AWAY FROM ME."

The bouncer reappeared. He put a ham hand on Hightower's arm.

"Let her go, fella."

Hightower maintained his grip on Evelyn.

"Let her go or I'll have you arrested."

Hightower turned to the bouncer, opened his jacket, let the asshole get a good look at Hightower's .32. "I'll kill you, motherfucker," he said, loudly enough so that only the bouncer could hear, meaning: *I'll kill you for sport.*

Evelyn immediately got into Yvonne's two-door lipstick red Corvette and slammed the door. Yvonne floored it and they screeched out of the parking lot.

"Where should we drive to, Evelyn?"

"ANYWHERE, YVONNE, ANYWHERE, JUST DRIVE."

As Yvonne tore out of the parking lot, Hawkins' car tires screeched. Good old Hawkins! Hightower sprinted towards the car and they took off after the two women.

"Who are these guys?" Why are they after you?"

"They're bad guys." Evelyn's throat was full of fear and cocaine and adrenaline, and she wanted to die. "They're very bad guys."

Yvonne wanted to ask more but she knew that this was all Evelyn was going to tell her. She accelerated down Ocean Boulevard, trying to

get away from the men two cars back. But after some aggressive driving, Hightower and Hawkins were now tailgating them.

Yvonne didn't know this section of town, and of course Evelyn was of no help. Yvonne's first thought was to drive to a police station but hadn't she heard Evelyn say something about one of their pursuers being a police sergeant? Was Evelyn in trouble with the law?

She turned left – and immediately realized her mistake. They flew out of town, parallel to the Ocean, with the Caddy – the only other car on the road – in hot pursuit.

Hightower couldn't believe his luck. While they were in town he couldn't do anything but follow her. Now, out in the sticks, he could take her with the driver as the only witness.

“Accelerate,” Hightower said.

“Right.” Hawkins pushed the gas until he was right on their bumper.

“Cut her off,” Hightower said, and Hawkins swung into the left lane – the oncoming traffic lane – and smoothly sped up until he was three-quarters of a car length ahead of Yvonne and Evelyn. Then he swerved right. The little Corvette was no match for the Caddy. It sped right into a culvert, where its wheels spun uselessly.

Hightower got out of the car, breathing deeply. He walked over to the Corvette's passenger-size window and rapped with his knuckles. Evelyn hunched down. She was crying, he thought.

He rapped again. "Ms. Boone, please open the window," he said, as loudly as he could. "I just want to talk."

"Let me do this, Hi," Hawkins said. He had gotten his baton out of the car and was measuring the passenger-side window with it.

"Hawk, don't do that," Hightower said urgently, but Evelyn had seen the nightstick too. She screamed, and then rolled down the window.

"Please don't," she wailed.

Hightower leaned in. "Evelyn, remember, we won't hurt you," he said. "We're here to help you. Now calm down and come with us. We just want to talk to you. That's all. Let's make this easy for both of us."

No response from the two frightened women sitting in the front seat.

After about thirty seconds, Hightower said, "Look, I want to make this easy for you Evelyn. We're wasting time. You have my word. I won't hurt you. Now let's go."

After another thirty seconds, Evelyn nervously unlocked the passenger side door and got out of the car. "What the hell are you doing, Evelyn?" Yvonne said.

"I'll be all right, Yvonne." If these guys had wanted to kill her they could have done it already. Killed her and Yvonne. So whatever was going to happen, they were planning to let her live. At least for a while.

But if she didn't go with them they *would* kill her, kill her and maybe Yvonne, and she had already brought so much misery into her friend's life she couldn't stand it.

What a fool the younger one is. How easy it was to outmaneuver him at the Marriott. She didn't know the older one, this Aaron Moore, but from her encounter with him in the Cheesecake Factory she was not that impressed. If she was to engage in a battle of wits with these guys she liked her chances.

"I'll be O.K.," she repeated, and got in the Seville.

"Here's some money for your troubles, ma'am," Hightower said. He reached into his wallet and counted out ten hundreds. When Yvonne wouldn't take them from him – wouldn't do anything but cower over her steering wheel – he put them down on the passenger seat.

Hightower got into the back seat with Evelyn. The car tires screeched as Hawkins sped away to the north toward Santa Monica.

Hightower expected that Evelyn's friend would call the police and report her abduction. There was also John Murphy and the other witnesses at the Cheesecake Factory. *And Sean Fucking Penn.* The sooner that they got out of town, the better.

Hawkins ran into their hotel and came back with two large suitcases. They had to get out of California as soon as possible. The closest state was Nevada. O.K., they were now on their way to Las Vegas.

The roads were crowded as thousands of people were making their weekend pilgrimage to the City of Dreams. The four-hour drive to Vegas would give Hightower time to try to reassure Evelyn that he had no intention of trying to harm her. And also, to make up a plan. A plan that could satisfy the Mayor and would leave this poor woman alive.

He had Hawkins put on a Miles Davis tape. Cool jazz had a way of putting everything in perspective. Once they were out of Los Angeles County – beyond their reach – *he* began to put on perspective. Thank you, Miles.

Hawkins drove east on Route 15 as it twisted east and north into Death Valley in the California desert. Hightower held his breath as they passed several California Highway Patrol speed traps. The highway patrol was watching for drivers exceeding the speed limit. Hawkins slowed down to 65 and the three people in the car looked like all the other Californians going to Vegas for the weekend.

In the rearview mirror Hightower was able to study the sad woman beside him. Miles wasn't doing it for her, he concluded. What a miserable break she had caught! He wanted so much to reassure her.

He turned to her. "Evelyn, you have my word. We will not, repeat, not harm you. We are police officers. We are sworn by the badge that we wear to protect people and not harm them. After we get settled in Las Vegas, we'll work things out and we'll be back in Washington in a few

days. We'll make things as comfortable as we can for you. You have my word.”

Evelyn sat in the back seat and looked out the window at the bleak Death Valley desert. She said nothing. She thought, they don't know who I am.