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the,
Art
of a
Meal

Written by,
Lobo

Author's note

Yes, this work is just fiction; however, the point of story is, unfortunately, very true.

Imagine that.

□ □ □ **Chapter 1** □ □ □

John Matthews stood on the seventh floor of the high-rise building under construction and observed the organized activity of the various sub-contractors with a practiced eye. Half of the concrete over the structural steel decking, which comprised the rough floor surface of the level on which he stood, had been poured and finished and the pump truck was delivering the rest of the concrete mix to the men who were busy placing and finishing the remainder. When the ten story tower was finished it would be a contemporary design with a mix of office, retail and condominium space.

John Matthews was the Senior Project Manager for Loftus Development, Inc. and this construction project was the latest in his thirty-five year career. John had been in the construction industry since he graduated from college and was now fifty-seven years old. He was a man of medium height, in reasonably good shape, healthy with a nice smile and a positive attitude.

Standing next to him with a roll of blueprints under his arm was the project Superintendent, Jim Pearson. Jim was in his early thirties, tall and brawny, dressed in blue jeans, boots and t-shirt with a drooping mustache. He looked the part of a construction worker.

They stood for a few moments discussing the schedule.

“The job looks good Jim,” said John, “Keep the metal stud framer going right behind the concrete like you’ve been doing and then the mechanical trades can follow right behind them.”

“That’s the plan,” replied Jim. “The walls are up on levels one through six and they’re laying out on seven now. The HVAC and plumbers are making good progress but the electrician is moving a little slow. He needs more manpower on the job.”

“Okay, I’ll call the electrician and light a fire under him for you. Do you need anything else?”

“No, I don’t think so. Wait, how about a month in Hawaii?” said Jim, jokingly.

John smiled and replied, “Write up a Change Order Request and I’ll submit it to the boss. Let’s go down to the trailer and look at the Shop Drawings for the millwork. I want to check something.”

They walked over to the temporary elevator, descended to the ground level and walked across the building site grounds to the construction trailer. They entered and John opened his briefcase and removed some paperwork while Jim retrieved the appropriate file from the cabinet.

John spread some papers out on the blueprint table while Jim went to the water cooler. Jim drank down the water and was refilling his paper cup when he looked out the window and saw two Sheriff’s cars pulling into the gravel lot and approach the trailer.

“Hmm, I wonder what these guys want,” said Jim curiously?

John turned and looking out the window saw the cars stop and two officers get out of each vehicle. The two from the lead

vehicle proceeded to the stairs to the trailer while the other two walked to the chain link fencing and gate that surrounded and secured the property. One had a length of heavy chain in his hand while the other carried a large sign.

“Well, Jim I figured they’d get you sooner or later but I was hoping they would wait until you finished the job,” said John with a laugh.

“Me? It’s you they’re after,” replied Jim.

The door opened and the Sheriff and a Deputy entered the trailer.

The Sheriff was a very fat man, his huge gut hanging down over the buckle of his Sam Browne service revolver belt.

The Sheriff, with a sour expression on his face, asked, “Are you the owner of this property?”

John Matthews introduced himself, saying, “No, Sheriff, I’m John Matthews, the Senior PM for the project and this is the job super, Jim Pearson. We’re the company representatives. What can we do for you?”

The Sheriff stood with his right thumb hooked on his belt, the fingers of his hand spread out looking like he was ready to draw his weapon and said, “This property is being foreclosed on. I’m here to lock it down.”

Jim Pearson’s jaw dropped and he looked at John who replied, “Sheriff, you’ve got the wrong address. This is a commercial construction project, not a tract home in the subdivision.”

The Sheriff sneered and reached back with his left hand into which the Deputy slapped a bundle of papers. He slowly opened the paperwork, like an actor on the stage of a two-bit off-Broadway production and read a couple sentences of the information contained therein.

“The City Bank of Fresno hereby attaches all real property and construction materials, installed and/or stored on-site; and any and all documents, blueprints, contractual agreements etcetera related to the project known as Fresno Tower, which is held as collateral for the delinquent construction loan associated with said property.”

The Sheriff looked at them with a self-satisfied smug expression and said, “You and your workers have thirty minutes to remove your personal tools and vehicles from the property or they get locked up too. We’ll be checking everything that goes out the gate. Do you understand or do I need to read it again,” drawled the Sheriff as he dropped the paperwork on the desk next to John?

John Matthews stood with an uncomprehending look on his face and replied, “This is some kind of crazy mistake. Hold on, I’ll call the office,” as he turned to the phone.

“You do that, Mr. Matthews. And, call your lawyer too. But make it snappy. Your thirty minutes started,” looking at his watch, “Five minutes ago.”

John Matthews paused in his dialing and watched as the Sheriff turned and stomped out of the trailer, his Deputy following.

“What the heck’s his problem,” wondered Jim? Turning to John he asked, “Is this a joke or what? “

They observed the Sheriff apparently giving orders to the Deputy who posted himself at the bottom of the stairs as if he was standing guard duty. The Sheriff continued on toward the building and John said to Jim, “Hustle and get in the building before that guy. Tell the men to roll up their tools and call it a day. I don’t know what this is about but these papers look like they’re legal. I’ll call the office.”

Jim exited the trailer and walked briskly towards the building, passing the Sheriff who gave him a sneering smile as he passed. Jim yelled at the concrete pump truck operator to get his attention and slashed his fingers across his throat, signaling the man to shut down his equipment. The diesel was turned off, the project went suddenly quiet. Jim went next to the temporary electrical panel and threw the breaker, shutting off electricity to the hundreds of feet of the multiple extension cords powering the drills and other tools.

He immediately heard the workers all over the jobsite yelling, “Power, power.”

Jim walked to the elevator, telling the men to roll up their tools. As the elevator reached each floor he relayed the same message to the workers in the rest of the building.

Back in the construction trailer, John Matthews was calling the office. The phone rang a number of times and then was answered by a voice that John didn’t recognize.

“Hello.”

“This is John Matthews, who am I speaking to?”

“John Matthews? State your business, sir.”

“Hey, I work there. Who is this?”

“Deputy Jones, Fresno Sheriff’s Department.”

“Police? Let me speak to Mr. Loftus.”

There was a long pause and then the voice on the other end said, “Not possible,” and abruptly hung up the telephone.

John looked at the phone in his hand with a quizzical expression on his face and then hung it up. He moved quickly to the door and down the stairs, moving toward his vehicle. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and called Jim Pearson. Jim answered on the first ring.

“Jim, I’m going to the office. Something weird is going on. Go ahead and roll up for the day. We’ll get this straightened out. I’ll call you back shortly.”

“John, this Sheriff is walking around like he owns the place, telling the guys to get off the property. He’s a real asshole, this jerk. I might have to rearrange his teeth for him if he’s not careful.”

“No, don’t do anything like that. That’s what he wants. Just be cool and do what the jerk says. I’ll find out what’s going on and call you back. Okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Call me back. Gotta go.”

They ended their call as John was walking to his car. He climbed in and drove off the grounds. As he was passing the gate he saw a Deputy was hanging the large sign on the chain link

fencing. The sign, in large letters, proclaimed – “FORECLOSED. PRIVATE PROPERTY. NO TRESPASSING – “ .

The company office was about a twenty minute drive away and as he drove John continued calling the office. The phone rang and rang without being answered.

“Where’s everyone at,” he wondered in frustration.

As he pulled off the main highway and into the office parking lot he was shocked to see the parking lot full of Sheriff’s cars, police cars and two ambulances. He could see Mary, the secretary and Pete, the estimator standing several feet away from the entrance. Something was wrong with Mary as she was crying and wailing and being supported by two emergency medical service technicians.

John slammed on his brakes, jumped from his car and was hurrying towards them when he was intercepted by a Sheriff’s Deputy.

“Excuse me sir, this area is closed for investigation. No one can pass,” ordered the Deputy, as he held up his arms to block the way.

“I work here,” said John, heatedly. “What’s going on?”

“Just wait right there sir, someone will be with you in a minute.”

In frustration, John yelled past the Deputy, “Pete!”

Pete, the estimator looked around and saw John and hurried over.

“Oh, John, I’m glad you’re here. It’s terrible. Terrible.”

“What, Pete? What the hell’s going on?”

Pete was an older man, near retirement. He was tall and thin with thick glasses. He was probably the best estimator John had ever met.

“John, Mr. Loftus – oh, God, - this is terrible. Mr. Loftus, he shot himself, John!”

□ □ □ **Chapter 2** □ □ □

It was a couple hours later, after the two ambulances had left the office parking lot. One had left shortly after John had arrived, with Mary, the secretary in hysterics, being taken to the hospital. John had called her daughter who had left her work early to meet her mother at the hospital and after she was checked and released, had taken her home.

The other ambulance had driven off with the cadaver of Mr. Loftus; zipped into a blue, heavy plastic and impersonal body bag. John Matthews had stood with Pete, in the asphalt parking lot, the hot sun beating down on them and watched with incomprehension as the events unfolded.

It made no sense, thought John. He had met with the boss, David Loftus, earlier that morning to discuss the status of the company's various projects. After the meeting, about 9 AM, John had left to go by Jim Pearson's Fresno Tower job and everything had seemed fine with Mr. Loftus, and fine with Loftus Development until the Sheriff had arrived at the project, about 11:00, to announce the foreclosure of the property.

How could the whole world collapse in just a couple of hours?

John talked to Pete, standing in the parking lot, and Pete had told him everything he knew, which wasn't much, really.

Pete said that about 11:15 that morning, not long after John had left, several men in dark suits had entered the office and announced that they were from the Internal Revenue Service and were there to attach the assets of the company. The leader of the IRS agents had told Mary and Pete that they were to vacate the premises, not taking any paperwork with them.

Mr. Loftus had stormed around the office, cursing and yelling at the agents to "Get out," that he was calling his lawyer, that this was a mistake.

The lead agent had waved a handful of papers in Mr. Loftus's face and said, "Too late, I have the orders here."

Mr. Loftus had cried, "Never," and ran into his office, shutting and locking the door.

"It was pandemonium, John. Mary was wailing and crying. Mr. Loftus was locked in his office screaming, "Dirty bastards" and the agents were hammering on his door, ordering him to come out, when – 'BAM' There was a gunshot from inside Mr. Loftus's office".

"One of the IRS agents pulled his gun and shot the lock off the door and they went running inside, I was standing in the hallway looking into the room, and there was Mr. Loftus, lying on the floor with half his head shot off and blood – blood everywhere. Oh my God, John – how could this happen" said Pete in a choked voice?

John Matthews was as shook up as Mary and Pete. He found himself standing in the hot sun trembling as if, instead of the temperature being in the mid-80's, it was freezing outside.

After the police detectives had taken his and Pete's statement, John helped Pete into his car and made him promise to drive slow and careful going home.

"I'll call you later, Pete. Hang on, OK?" He watched as Pete pulled out of the same driveway the ambulances had driven out of awhile earlier, shaking his head.

He looked over at the building, the police had used yellow crime scene tape to close off the entrance and a locksmith was changing the lock on the door as an IRS agent stood by, looking over his shoulder.

John walked slowly to his car and was about to open the door when one of the IRS agents strode briskly up and inquired, "Excuse me. This is a company car, is it not?"

"What" asked John, in confusion?

"This car. According to my list, it belongs to the company, it's leased right."

"Uh, yes, it is."

"Well, Mr. Matthews, I'm going to have to ask you to give me the keys. Any and all company property is covered by the Lien of Attachment according to the rules of the IRS."

"Are you kidding me," demanded John, dumbfounded?

"No sir, I'm not kidding. The keys please," said the agent with his hand outstretched.

John Matthews removed his house key from the ring and dropping the rest into the agents hand said, "It's all yours," and he turned and walked away across the parking lot.

As he walked he took his cell phone from his pocket and called Jim Pearson. When Jim answered John told him what had happened, as far as he knew the facts, at the office that day and that Mr. Loftus was dead, an apparent suicide.

"Yeah, I know," said Jim. "I'm watching it on the TV now. What the hell, man? What's this all about?"

"I don't know, Jim. I've told you everything I know."

"So, where are you? Are you still at the office?"

"No, I'm walking down Madison Avenue. The IRS took my company car."

"What? Those assholes! Where are you on Madison? I'll pick you up."

"I'm on the corner of Brawley, but don't worry, I'll call a taxi."

"Bullshit, John. Look, there's a tavern right on the corner. Go set in the AC and get a drink. I'm on my way."

"Jim, that's not ..."

"Don't argue, man! I'm starting the engine right now. Wait there for me," said Jim, and then he broke the connection.

John looked around, saw the place; it was called 'the Tavern' and it had a "FOR SALE BY OWNER" sign out front and he walked into the building. He stood at the bar, sipping a cold beer and watched on the television on the wall as the local news delivered the story of the tragic occurrence at Loftus Development that day.

The newscaster, a man with a hairpiece was saying, "According to our source at City Hall, David Loftus was in serious financial difficulties with the IRS and was over-extended at his bank. According to our source, his troubles had intensified over the last year when he had told the IRS, during an audit, to "Go to hell" and left their offices in a rage. Apparently, he hadn't paid any taxes for several years and disagreed with the IRS over the right of the government to tax personal income. This tragedy, in our local community, is an awful occurrence. We go now to our weather lady, Jill, who can give us some good news about the coming weekend. Jill?"

John stood at the bar, thinking, "The IRS? I never knew he was in a dispute with those guys. Years? How could that be?"

Jim Pearson entered and looking around saw John at the bar. He came over and looked at John, shaking his head.

"John, I can't believe this. What the hell, man?"

John waved his hand at the bartender, holding up two fingers, and the bartender brought them each a cold beer.

"Jim, this is a complete surprise to me. I didn't know he was in a beef with the IRS or the bank. I didn't know anything. It's a total shock."

"Me too, nobody ever said anything to me. Hell, I agree with the old man. The Infernal Revenuer's don't have any right to rob people blind, but I be damned if I'd shoot myself over it. I might be tempted to shoot a couple of those bastards. But why shoot yourself," asked Jim?

Neither of them had an answer to that rhetorical question so they stood at the bar, drinking their beers, lost in thought.

John looked at his wristwatch and was surprised to see it was a quarter to 4 PM. The day had seemed to last forever, not a normal eight hours. In a few minutes, in an unspoken agreement they left the bar and walked out to Jim's personal pick-up truck and John reminded Jim of the directions to his place. They rode down the highway in silence. The day's events had shocked them both and there seemed to not be anything further to say.

Jim pulled into the driveway of John's house, passing a sign that said, "FRESH EGGS – GARDEN FRESH VEGETABLES – FOR SALE – OPEN MONDAY, WEDNESDAY, FRIDAY. NOON TO SIX", next to a small, neatly constructed and white-painted shed. Jim pulled up next to the house as a woman came walking around the corner carrying a wicker basket full of tomatoes and cucumbers.

Betty Matthews, John's wife waved and walked to the truck smiling.

"Hey, honey. Where's your car? Hello, Jim. Long time no see."

John and Jim climbed from the truck cab with grim expressions on their faces.

Betty immediately sensed something was wrong and setting the basket down by the back porch came to John and asked, "John, what's wrong?"

"Have you heard the news," he asked?

“News? What news? I’ve been outside all day, in the garden and cleaning out the chicken coop. What’s happened,” she asked?

“Let’s go sit on the porch, honey,” said John. “I got some bad news.”

The three of them sat on the back porch and John described the happenings of the day. Betty Matthews exclaimed shock and began crying.

Jim, suddenly uncomfortable, said, “John, I’ll call you tomorrow. I’m going to go now,” and he stood to leave.

Betty insisted he wait a minute and went into the house. She came out with a bag of tomatoes and other vegetables. She put them in Jim’s hands and wouldn’t take them back.

“You take these, Jim. You were kind to drive John home. Thank you. Now don’t be a stranger, come by for supper.”

“Thank you for the stuff, Mrs. Matthews. You guys call me if you need anything, okay?”

Jim turned his truck around and drove back down the driveway. His last glimpse of John and Betty was of them standing, holding each other, Betty resting her head on John’s shoulder and John, looking suddenly, very old.

□ □ □ **Chapter 3** □ □ □

Three weeks had passed and during that time Mr. Loftus had been buried. Loftus had been a widower with one child, a grown daughter who lived with her husband in upstate New York. His daughter had two grown children; a married daughter with two teenage children, and a son who was single. Mr. Loftus's daughter and her family all came in for a couple of days for the funeral.

Mr. Loftus had been a fixture in the Fresno construction industry for a half-century and many of his friends and associates also attended the funeral.

There had been requests by the local media, and even some out of town reporters for John Matthew to be interviewed. John had turned them all down as he felt the interest in poor Mr. Loftus's financial difficulties was inappropriate.

"Bunch of damn buzzards," he had remarked to Betty one evening at supper.

As the time had passed, John had helped Betty in the garden and done some house and yard maintenance. The shock of Mr. Loftus's suicide had grown to a dim and bitter regret.

"I saw the man almost every day for the last fifteen years," he remarked to Betty one afternoon while they were resting under

the shade tree, drinking some ice tea after weeding the garden one afternoon.

“Why didn’t he talk to me about this? I might have been able to help him,” he remarked.

“Maybe he was embarrassed. Maybe he didn’t want anyone to know he was having money troubles,” she replied.

“Well, he never missed making payroll or paying a subcontractor or supplier bill. No one could have known there was trouble. He took care of the books and it’s true, he was a real private person. Now that I think about it, I really didn’t know him any better now than I did when I first took the job all those years ago. I wish he had said something though.”

Some of the news reports that had come out detailed Mr. Loftus’s involvement over the past few years with the philosophy of the Liberty Movement, introduced as a proposed legislation in Congress in 1957 that would strengthen State’s Rights and abolish income, estate and gift taxes. Over the course of the last half-century the Movement had attracted various free-thinking individuals including a potential Presidential candidate in the upcoming 2008 election, who hadn’t won the nomination for his Party.

The only indication of Mr. Loftus’s interest in such matters was a comment he had once made to John, when they were discussing the amount of profit they could add to a construction estimate, that he wanted John to, “Take a few points off that number. I’d rather bid low and get the job, than jack up the profit

and give the darn government more than they deserve. You know, John, Karl Marx said in his Communist Manifesto, that, 'heavy progressive or graduated income tax' was the key to controlling the masses. Control. That's what the government wants."

At the time John had thought this was merely the normal grumbling of a citizen who was fed up with inept government and high taxes. Looking back he realized that it was a clue to the old man's true feelings.

As the days passed John and Betty talked about the tragedy. John seemed to blame himself at first, which worried Betty, but finally, after they had talked about it a great deal he realized that there was nothing he could have done if the old man hadn't confided in him. Discussion eventually turned to their own household and what was next for them in this next chapter of their lives.

John and Betty were each fifty-seven years of age, their birthdays in the same month of January, and just a few days apart. Betty was born and raised on a farm in Visalia south of the Fresno area while John was from Kansas. They had met while attending college at UCLA. John had been on a football scholarship majoring in Physical Education while Betty had majored in Library Science.

They met at a freshman orientation, sitting next to each other in the auditorium. They dated all through college and got engaged at the end of their junior year. In the first football game of John's senior year he suffered a serious left knee injury that ended his football career.

Upon their graduation that next spring they got married, moved to Fresno where Betty started work at the main library branch and John applied to some local schools for the job as PE instructor and coach. While John interviewed and waited for a job offer he began working construction. At first he thought working construction would be a temporary thing; a way to pay the bills and make a home for him and his new bride, but he discovered that he enjoyed the construction business and stayed in it. Over the course of the years he had become adept at the details of the business and advanced through the ranks working for various firms until he was hired by Loftus and was responsible for all the day to day activities of the construction projects and interaction with clients. He enjoyed the challenge of the logical sequence of building and the satisfaction of delivering a quality project, on budget and schedule to the client.

In the meantime, Betty eventually became the head librarian at the main branch and then Supervisor of the entire Fresno library system. Just a few years previously Betty had put in her thirty years with the California State Library System and had taken retirement.

Betty had always grown a good garden so she turned that into a business. She designed a simple yet functional outbuilding to display and sell her produce, and John built it for her at the end of the driveway, by the road.

After they had been married for a few years, and had tried unsuccessfully to have children, they visited their doctor who conducted some tests on both of them.

As it turned out, Betty had a medical problem that caused her to be infertile. She was heart-broken and John did all he could to console her. They considered having a child with a surrogate mother, using John's sperm and the surrogate mother's egg, but decided against that as the child would only be half of them. They considered adoption, but finally decided that they would be content to spend their lives together, concentrating on their love for one another.

The years passed, Betty working in the library system and John building construction projects. They were happy together; they were comfortable and satisfied with their lives. They purchased some residential properties and John would fix them up for resale, using some of the profits for their annual vacations and banking the rest for retirement.

They had friends around town that they played golf with; Betty spent some time volunteering for church and social charities, and John volunteered his efforts to the local Habitat for Humanity organization. Life for the childless Mr. and Mrs. Matthews seemed idyllic; especially to their friends, who were having lifestyle and discipline problems raising their own children.

For John, who was used to the hustle and bustle of the construction industry, the days after the shut down of the Loftus Development Company began to weigh heavily on him. He

realized that he was bored and decided to go back to work. As much as he enjoyed spending time with Betty; out in the garden, produce stand and doing yard work, he needed to work. He needed to feel like he was accomplishing something on a daily basis.

He woke one morning early and getting out of bed quietly, so as not to wake his still slumbering wife, went out in the pre-dawn morning to fetch the newspaper. He stood for a few minutes looking at the stars and breathing the fresh smell of the morning. This was the time of day he enjoyed the most. He felt at his best early in the day, strongest, both physically and mentally. He returned to the house and went into the kitchen and made a pot of coffee and while he waited for it to brew looked at the newspaper headlines.

The international news was the same as always: People all over the world slaughtering each other over geographical, cultural and religious differences. The current President and administration in Washington seemed determined to assist them in the process.

In the national news the candidates for the 2008 Presidential election were busy spouting platitudes and sound bites in an attempt to fool all of the people, or at least a big enough majority of them to get elected. Neither of them offered any real solutions to America's problems, but they both promised to 'Change' the way government worked.

"I'll believe it when I see it," muttered John as he sipped the hot coffee.

Turning the pages he saw an article where Fresno, like many other cities around the nation, was initiating legislation to make the difficulties and hardship of the homeless even more complicated. John read the article and saw that the mayor of Fresno, the Honorable Archibald Fincastle, had given a speech the day before to the City Commission where he promised to invigorate the local tourist industry by removing “undesirables and good-for-nothings” from the community.

Mayor Fincastle was running for re-election and was, as part of his campaign of “Change”, attempting to get legislation passed making “Homelessness” equal to “Vagrancy”. He also wanted to pass a law making it a crime for ordinary citizens to feed homeless people. The unspoken premise of Mayor Fincastle’s speech seemed to be that feeding them would encourage them to linger in the community.

John stood reading the article, shaking his head as he saw that the same laws had been passed in Dallas, Orlando, Las Vegas, Denver, Seattle, San Francisco and other cities around the country.

Reading further he saw a statistic from the 2005 Hunger and Homelessness Report that showed the homeless problem in America was getting worse. While the ranks of Americans becoming homeless were growing; due to real estate foreclosures, weather and hurricanes, job losses and unemployment, the cities cash-strapped budget deficits created a situation where emergency

shelter for the needy was falling far short of being adequate to the needs of those unfortunate individuals and families.

As the sky outside lightened with the quickening day and the birds sang in the trees, John tossed the newspaper down on the countertop wondering about all those poor people with nowhere to call home. He wondered how, or what, that he could do to help them, but found no answer to his question.

“What can one person do,” he wondered? “What’s wrong with our government that it could come to this?”

“Maybe old man Loftus was right,” he thought. “We pay taxes and the government just flushes the money down the toilet. What’s the point?”

John rinsed his coffee cup and placed it in the dishwasher. Then he went into the bathroom to shower and shave. Today, he decided, he was going to find a job.

□ □ □ **Chapter 4** □ □ □

When Betty woke up and came into the kitchen she was surprised to find John sitting at the table, fully dressed in a suit and tie and looking through his address book.

“Good morning,” she said, coming over to kiss his cheek

“Don’t you look nice. What’s the occasion? Are you giving a speech today or something,” she asked?

“Morning, sleepy head. I thought you’d stay in bed all day.”

“What? It’s only seven o’clock. Just because you like to get up before sunrise doesn’t mean everybody does. Really, what’s on your agenda that you would get all dressed up?”

“I’m going to get a job,” he replied with a smile. “It’s high time I made something of myself.”

“What’s the matter? Are you bored hanging out with the wife? Or, am I working you too hard in the garden,” she teased him, smiling?

“That’s right,” he teased back. “Guilty on both counts.”

“No,” he continued, “I just feel I should be doing something. As much as I like your company – maybe not the weeding so much – but, your company, I better find something to do before I get fat and lazy.”

“I’m going to make some calls and see who makes the highest bid for my expert services. By the end of the day I’ll be gainfully employed, you watch.”

Betty prepared breakfast while John made a list of those he would call, starting first with the most likely companies to have work that would suit him. After a meal of sausage, eggs and toast John began to make the phone calls. Betty went out to the garden to choose and pick the produce she would be selling in the vegetable stand that day.

All morning, John worked the phone and his contacts. At nine-thirty he took a short break and stood on the porch, drinking a glass of water and watching Betty in the garden. Betty stood and stretched her back, raising her arms to the sky, the fabric of her white, long-sleeved, cotton garden shirt molding itself to her figure. She looked like a sun worshipper. Standing in the early morning sunshine, in her pose, she looked to John like a picture of a maiden from another, simpler era. After all these years, she still looked to him like the beautiful young woman he had met in college.

Betty turned slowly; stretching her muscles and saw John standing on the porch. She waved at him, blew him a kiss and then bent back down to the plant she was tending. Like the warmth of the sun, their love for one another was complete and enveloping.

John moved back into the kitchen and picking up the telephone continued making his calls. At a little before noon, he saw Betty drive the small tractor pulling the trailer with the produce she had picked, down the driveway toward the outbuilding. He

filled a pitcher of water, picked up two glasses and went to join her there.

When John entered the small building Betty saw that he had removed his tie and taken off his jacket. His shirt collar was unbuttoned and his shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows.

“Hey, there good lookin’,” he said. “Can I interest you in some water?”

“How much does it cost,” she asked?

“Oh, this is high rent water. The price is a kiss a glass.”

“How much for the whole pitcher,” she replied with a coy smile?

Laughing, he poured her a glassful and told her they would negotiate that later, after dinner.

“How’s it going, John,” she asked him as she drank the water?

“Nothing yet, but I still have some calls to make. Do you need some help here?”

“No, I can handle it. I’m not putting all this out because my restaurant contracts will take it right in the baskets. They’ll be here soon.”

“Do you want a sandwich,” he asked her?

“No, I’m going to wash off a tomato, a carrot and a cucumber and eat it right here. Do you want me to come in and make you something for lunch?”

“Nah, I’m a big boy. I can figure it out. Call me if you need anything,” and with a pat on her shapely bottom and a kiss on her sun-flushed cheek he left to return to the house.

As he walked off she called to him, “Don’t forget, we’ve got some negotiating to do later.”

“I won’t forget,” he promised with a smile.

Back in the kitchen, sitting at the table with his notes and the telephone in front of him he reflected on the morning’s efforts. The people he’d called who owned and worked for other construction companies and that he had been in friendly competition with for the local work had all told him the same thing.

“Business is slowing down, John. I’ve never seen it like this. It’s even worse than the recession after the Stock Market crash of 1987. I’m sorry, but I’m having a hard time keeping the people I’ve got busy. Maybe after November, when we get a new President and administration in office, things will turn around. Give me call after the first of the year.”

With slight variations, the conversations had been similar. “It’s the economy, stupid”, which had been the buzzword John remembered from the 1992 election when the current President’s father had been in office and running for re-election. It seemed that family was jinxed, or, they were a jinx to America.

“Up and down. Boom and bust. Why on Earth can’t the economy stay on a level that sustains and creates jobs,” he muttered as he dialed another number. As he waited for the line to answer he realized that the economy would never stay steady as

long as the politicians only looked to the next election cycle; instead of fulfilling their campaign promises and working to plan years, decades and generations in advance. The politicians obviously only saw as far ahead as the weekly opinion polls, and the citizens of America let them get away with it.

“We elect some joker and as soon as he gets in office he starts campaigning to get re-elected. It’s like me hiring a superintendent who, instead of concentrating on building the job, he’s out there shaking hands, kissing babies and trying to get hired by someone else – while I’m paying him!. It makes me madder than hell,” he thought.

As the sun moved across the sky, John’s list of possible employment positions was slowly checked off until he had reached the end of his list. At five PM he left the kitchen and entered the bedroom where he removed his clothing and carefully hung the suit in the closet.

He took a quick shower and dressed in a comfortable pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt. Barefoot he went back to the kitchen and began preparing a few things for dinner. On the days his wife worked late in the produce stand, John was the chef if his work schedule didn’t keep him on the jobsites late. It was a task he enjoyed.

At six PM Betty closed the vegetable stand and drove the tractor to the shed and walked across the yard to the house. When she came in she smelled the delicious aroma of dinner cooking.

There was soft instrumental jazz on the stereo and John was standing by the table uncorking a bottle of wine.

“Well, I got here just in time. What’s for dinner, maestro?”

“Ah, one of my specialties, prepared just for you. Here, take this wine with you, go get cleaned up. By the time you’re out of the shower everything will be ready.”

John hummed along with the music as he poured some olive oil into the hot skillet and sautéed a tablespoon of fresh minced garlic, some chopped sweet Vidalia onion and sliced red pepper. When the onions were transparent he used a slotted spoon to remove most of the onions, garlic and peppers, then put two small rib-eye steaks in the skillet and attached a lid to keep the heat in and meat moist.

In another pan was water boiling under a steamer tray and into that he added a couple handfuls of sliced vegetables from Betty’s garden; carrots, a quartered yellow squash and broccoli. He dribbled some olive oil on the vegetables and sprinkled some fresh herbs from the garden over that. He checked the steaks, decided that side was done, flipped them, drained most of the olive oil and then spooned the garlic, onions and peppers he had earlier removed around the steaks to cook them a little more as a garnish. Earlier, he had put on a pan of wild brown rice to boil and now he dumped the rice into a serving bowl.

When Betty came into the kitchen, freshly showered and also dressed in a comfortable light cotton jogging suit, John was

putting a pan of sliced homemade bread, smeared with some of the sautéed garlic and butter under the broiler.

“It sure smells good in here, mister. You better watch out or I’m going to lock you in the kitchen and make you cook all the time,” she said as she refilled their glasses.

“Ha, think you can afford me?”

“I don’t know. How much do you charge,” she asked, smiling?

“Well, I’ll have to think about that. We can negotiate later.”

“Don’t we have to negotiate the water first?”

“We’ve got some serious negotiating to do, later. In the meantime, make yourself useful, wench, and set the table.”

“Wench. I’ll wench you!”

“Promises, promises.”

They joked and laughed, old friends and comfortable companions, as Betty laid out the eating utensils and John transferred the prepared meal from the pans to the plates.

John turned the lights down and lit a candle and they sat down to eat their supper. A soft evening breeze was blowing in through the windows, the music was pleasant, the food was delicious and their worldly cares drifted away as they enjoyed one another’s company. Each felt like they were adrift on an island of contentment. After over three decades together they still acted like newlyweds on their honeymoon. It was small wonder their friends envied them the joy of their marriage.

Taking their time over supper, they talked about pleasant, inconsequential things like Betty's plans for the garden; upcoming local events they might attend, possibilities for trips they might take. Had someone been watching and overheard their conversation, they would have seen two people who had reached a point in their lives where they were completely happy together.

After dinner they rinsed the dishes and pots and put them in the dishwasher, then moved to the living room where John changed the music to one of his old vintage LP's. It was one of their favorites; a jazz classic by Jimmy Smith and Wes Montgomery.

They danced for awhile, fitting together like a pair of spoons. One thing led to another and they soon found themselves on the couch, negotiating the price of water and John's services as a full-time chef.

It was a pleasant end to the day.

□ □ □ **Chapter 5** □ □ □

At some point, during the previous evening's negotiations, they had moved to the bedroom, shedding and trailing clothes as they completed the journey. Now, Betty woke with a start, the morning sun was shining through the window, creating horizontal slats of light and dark through the shades.

She turned her head and saw that John had, once again, snuck from the bedroom without awakening her. She realized she was naked as a new born babe and was somewhat embarrassed. She normally slept in a light silk pair of pajamas and top she had purchased on their vacation to Hong Kong a few years earlier. Like many other women, sleeping in the nude brought primal, unconscious fears of being caught in an emergency without the benefit of garments to cover their modesty.

"That man! He softened me up on good food, candles and music, got me drunk on wine and used me like his wench," she thought with a wry smile, remembering the night's pleasures.

She put on a robe and going into the bathroom brushed her teeth, splashed water on her face and brushed out her auburn, curly hair. Moving to the kitchen she found John sitting at the kitchen table, working on his laptop computer, a cup of coffee by his hand.

“It’s seven-thirty,” he greeted her with a smile. “You’re sleeping later every day. What’s the matter, can’t you take the nightlife any more?”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “You’re right, you’re right.”

John had always been able to hold his drink and seem no worse for wear the next morning. She knew better than to try and keep up with him in that department.

“Hey, if you didn’t force wine down my throat, so you could corrupt me, I could dance all night and still get up with the chickens. I forget, what was the result of our negotiations? Are you the full-time chef now?”

“Hah, the contract is, you get free water, but we still have more negotiating to do on the cooking.”

“Okay, but next time we start bargaining, no wine, or less wine anyway. What are you doing there? Emailing your girlfriends?”

“That’s right, I’m like a sailor. I’ve got a girl in every port. This Internet is amazing. I can communicate with them all over the world. They send me naughty pictures. Wanna see?”

Betty picked up a skillet lying on the countertop and, holding it menacingly, replied, “I’m going to picture you in a minute. Seriously, what’s so interesting this early in the morning?”

“I’m expanding my employment horizons. I didn’t realize how much work there was if a person was willing to travel for it. Look, this company’s job opening suits me to a tee. And the money is great, and it’s tax-free.”

“What? Doing what, where?”

“In Iraq, they’re rebuilding the country. Our brilliant politicians spent hundreds of billions of our tax-payer money destroying their entire infrastructure, and now they’re spending hundreds of billions more paying people to rebuild the schools and medical facilities.”

“John, are you crazy? That’s a war zone!”

Betty poured a cup of coffee and sat at the table across from John, looking at him with wide eyes.

“We don’t need the money so bad that I want to see you go over there and get yourself killed,” she exclaimed.

“It’s not that dangerous,” he scoffed. “In a one year contract, I could make enough to pay cash for that place by the lake we’ve always talked about.”

“Not dangerous! Don’t you watch the news? There’s been over a thousand contractors killed over there and at least thirteen thousand wounded. It was on the TV just a couple days ago.”

“Oh, those are security guys, not construction workers.”

“No, just the other day four construction workers were killed by mortar attacks right in the Green Zone, building the new U.S. Embassy. Supposedly the safest place there is, surrounded by soldiers! Promise me you won’t do anything so reckless,” she implored.

John was somewhat miffed that she immediately discounted his idea.

“Well, I’m going to look into it some more. Why not? It’s tax-free money. I’ve paid taxes all these years. This might be a chance to get some of that money back.”

“Yeah, it might be a chance to get shot or blown up too. I’m not listening to anymore of this. I love you, John, but sometimes you really piss me off,” she declared, rising from the table.

“I have to go downtown and renew my food permit for the vegetable stand. I’ll be back in awhile,” she said as she stormed from the kitchen.

“Hey,” he called. “Do you want some breakfast?”

“I’m not hungry. If you want something, eat some C-rations or whatever they call it. You might as well get used to it.”

While Betty showered and dressed she agonized over their conversation. She regretted becoming so worked up. She and John hadn’t had a spat or cross word in years. But of course, John couldn’t go to some Godforsaken place that was filled with death and destruction. It was unthinkable. The money wasn’t that important. While they were by no means rich, they had a comfortable life. She had her retirement from the library and John had put some of his salary into a 401K Plan over the years. They had bought their home years ago, before the wild spike in values and prices; and had paid off the principal with the profits on the fixer-uppers John had bought and sold.

There was no earthly reason for him to consider such a thing. Betty knew that John was a man who needed to accomplish some worthwhile endeavor, on a daily basis, or he started to feel

restless. But, Iraq? A war zone? A war that was only about oil, and the rich getting richer off of more oil? No. She had to talk to him. She had to talk him out of this crazy notion.

On her way out she stopped by the kitchen door and saw John hunched over the computer with a gloomy expression on his face. She knew that he hated to have cross words with her as much as she hated to have cross words with him. She drew in a breath, blinking her eyes to stop the sudden tears that threatened to spill from them.

“Oh, John,” she said softly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bark at you, but you shocked me with this, first thing in the morning.”

John looked up from the laptop screen and saw this woman, his wife, the woman he loved more than life itself.

He stood and crossed the room to her. Putting his arms around her he drew her close and murmured, “I’m sorry too. It was dumb of me to talk about work, that kind of work, before you even had your coffee.”

They stood for awhile, like two people clinging to a life raft, not speaking, just holding each other.

She choked, and said, “If you went to someplace like that and something happened to you I’d...”

“Shhh,” he said and gently kissed her closed eyes. He tasted the salt clinging to her lashes and he knew, in his deepest heart, that he loved this woman.

“John, you told me that you and Jim Pearson had a beer at that tavern, you know the day he gave you a ride home, and the place had a for sale sign out front. Remember telling me that?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking. Why don’t we buy it?”

He drew back and looked at her quizzically. “Buy it and do what?”

“Open your restaurant. The one you’ve always talked about and said after you retired you would start.”

“A restaurant? Oh, that was just talk. I’m not going to open a restaurant. I don’t know anything about the restaurant business. I’m a builder, not a restaurant guy.”

Betty pushed him gently away and said, “You wait right there, mister.”

She went to the room where they had made a home office; each had their desk on opposite sides of the room, opened his filing cabinet and rooted around, looking for a particular file. She found what she was looking for and holding it firmly in her hands she then picked up a stack of books off the shelf and went back to the kitchen and sat at the table.

John watched her curiously as she spread the papers on the table, next to the books.

“You look mean. Like a banker, or a bill collector. Should I call my lawyer,” he teased her?

Ignoring his joking manner, Betty said, “Here. Look at this. You’ve been thinking about this for years. Every time we go in a

restaurant you say how you would change the menu, or change the décor. Look, here is the menu you've thought up. Look at all these books you've read on the subject. Here is the pro forma you did on the expenses and revenues. Look at these drawings you did of the building you thought up. Here's the sketch for the sign out front. Don't tell me you don't know anything about the restaurant business, buster. These are some of the best ideas I've ever seen for a restaurant. You've got it all thought out."

You've even got a name for it, "the, Art of a Meal".

John chuckled, "Thinking about it and doing it are two different things. I wouldn't know where to start. There's a million details for something like that, it's not just putting up a sign and opening the door."

"Maybe not a million details, but a few for sure. Let's think about them," she replied. "Your menu has a lot of vegetable dishes; I'm selling my vegetables to restaurants now. We could use them instead in your place."

"My place? This is your idea, lady. It would have to be *our* place. If you think I'm going to do all the work while you lounge around the pool and go shopping, spending my profits, think again," he said, still thinking she was joking around.

"Okay, our place. I'll supply the vegetables and do the deals with the farmers for the meat and suppliers for the other stuff and manage the waitresses while you cook."

"Waitresses? Wait a minute. I think that's my department and besides, what makes you think I could be the cook? Who

would pay to eat my cooking? We'd go broke in a month. I think you had too much wine last night. Wait a minute. Waitresses? Hmm, all those young college babes? On second thought, maybe you got a good idea here," he said with a laugh.

"Hah hah. Ten thousand comedians out of a job and I have to listen to you every day. As far as the cooking, John, you're one of the best, most creative cooks I've ever met. You could have your own show on TV."

"Uh huh, so that's why you married me, huh? Because I can cook? Now the truth comes out," he said, getting up and getting the cold pitcher of water out of the refrigerator and two glasses.

"Of course. Why did you think I married you? For your looks?"

Pouring the water into the glasses, he said, "Honey, I shook you up with the talk about Iraq and that's why you're jumping on this restaurant thing. I'm sorry I upset you and you're right. There's no reason for me to go over there and work, even for the high salary and no taxes. All I would be doing is helping those crooks in the oil companies and their corrupt flunkies in Washington make it easy to drill more oil. Tell you what I've decided. I'm going to start me my own construction business right here. I should have done it years ago."

"Oh, John, you've said a thousand times that it's a cutthroat business. How did you put it? 'A bunch of slobbering dogs fighting over the same bone.' Isn't that what you said?"

“Well, it’s true in a way. The business has changed. The clients; the corporate clients, they want more and more for the same price, or less. It used to be, you’d finish the job, give the owner the key to the door and they’d move their stuff in. Now, they expect you to take delivery of their furniture, computers, phones, their supplies – all that junk – and set it up for them so they can open the door and start business right away. And, the damn dogs want to whittle your profit down so it’s almost not worth doing the job anyway!. All the jobs are designed by accountants anymore. They don’t want something that will last. They only want the seven year depreciation so they can write down their taxes. Damn dogs. And the workers? The guys who build the jobs? They get paid less now than they did a quarter of a century ago when you figure in inflation. And that’s because the contractors have to bid the jobs so low to hit the client’s ridiculous budgets! I’m tempted to start a nationwide construction workers union. Organize all the workers and, by God, call a strike and then those corporate owners would sweat it when their jobs sit, unmanned. Then they would dig a little deeper in their pockets so the contractors could pay fair wages.”

This was a topic Betty had heard John go on about several times over the past few years, but she had never seen him so incensed and agitated before. She put her hand over his and asked, “How much would it take to start this union you’re talking about?”

“What? Shoot. Millions. A bunch.”

“And what’s the likelihood it would be successful? In the short term? In the long term?”

John drained his glass of water. He answered, “You can’t get three people to agree on anything; much less every construction worker, all over the country, who’re the most independent bunch of so and so’s there ever was. I don’t know why I even think about it. Much less get aggravated about it,” he finished with a self-conscious, hang-dog look.

“John, I want you to do me a favor. I want you to sit here and look over these papers you’ve put together about your – *our* – restaurant. I have to go get my permit renewed. I’ll be back shortly. Will you at least think about it?”

John smiled. At least Betty wasn’t upset and near tears anymore.

“Okay, but don’t think you’ve sold me on the idea.”

Betty stood and came around the table and leaning down, hugged the man who meant so much to her.

“The fried chicken is my department tonight. And, no wine!” she said with a mock, stern look.

“Maybe we can negotiate that,” he said, with a wink.

□ □ □ **Chapter 6** □ □ □

While Betty drove to town, she replayed their conversation in her mind. She had grasped onto the idea of the restaurant in desperation. But, the more she considered it, the more sense it made. It was something that John had talked about for years. It was something that she knew he would be good at and something they could do together.

He was, even though he wouldn't admit it, a really good cook and he enjoyed the concept, planning and preparation and was always secretly pleased when people liked his dishes. Any time there was a gathering of their friends and they cooked or brought pot-luck, John's items always got rave reviews. He was a natural and inspired chef.

Betty could bring her own skills into the equation by supplying the vegetables, eggs and linking with her contacts in the countryside for fresh meat. And, while John teased about the waitresses, she knew he wouldn't last long dealing with their monthly problems and boyfriend troubles. That required a woman's touch.

"Yes," she thought with enthusiasm, "This is the very thing to do." Now all she had to do was convince John, which might take some serious negotiating. That was a task she looked forward to with confidence and delight.

Betty arrived in downtown Fresno and came to the corner of Fresno Street and P Street, the location of City Hall, just a few blocks from the main library where she had worked for so many years. She found a parking place close to the building, pulled in and deposited some change into the parking meter.

Entering the building she boarded an elevator for the ride to the floor where she would renew her permit. As the elevator ascended it stopped at a few floors to let people in and out. Stopping about halfway to her destination, there was a sudden bustle as a group of individuals entered the elevator. One of those people, accompanied by several members of his staff, was the Mayor of Fresno: The Honorable Archibald Fincastle.

Mayor Fincastle was in the middle of a conversation, giving orders to a member of his staff about some press conference, when he suddenly saw Betty Matthews.

He immediately dropped the subject of the press conference to greet her.

“Well, well. Mrs. Matthews, to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit to my humble abode,” he asked with an oily smile?

Betty wasn't particularly pleased to run into the man, and she answered, “Just vegetable business, Mr. Mayor.”

Mayor Archibald Fincastle and Betty had known each other since childhood. They had attended the same schools, down in Visalia where he was also from, and even dated once, going together to a high school football game. There had been some talk; talk by Archibald Fincastle, that they might be going steady, until

Betty had found him in the back seat of his car with another girl; her dress up and Archibald Fincastle's pants down. The other girl had a reputation for being fast and loose with her favors. Betty was surprised, shocked and understandably, hurt by his behavior.

Although Archie had tried to convince her that there was nothing between him and the other girl, her soon swelling belly had convinced Betty otherwise. Archie and the girl had married, a shotgun wedding according to rumor, and soon Betty had left for college, the memory of the two-timing Archie just a bad recollection.

Over the years Betty had seen the man on television, promoting himself shamelessly and moving up in the Fresno political circle. He had gained a lot of weight and lost most of his hair, combing the right side over to cover the top in a vain attempt to disguise his balding condition.

Betty had seen on the news that he was currently in a nasty divorce from his third wife; a younger, trophy specimen, and had children from each union that he was paying child support for, in addition to the alimony. She noticed now that his teeth had obviously had a very expensive work-over as he displayed them like he was modeling in a tooth-paste commercial. The mayor was not a person she was pleased to encounter during her trip.

Betty responded pleasantly, but noncommittally, to his barrage of questions.

“So, how you been?”

“Fine, thank you.”

“You're retired from the library now, right?”

“Yes, a couple of years ago.”

“Well, are you enjoying the leisure of retirement?”

“Very much, thank you.”

“How’s the husband? What’s his name? Joe?”

“John. He’s fine, thank you.”

“What do you do with all that free time, now that you’re retired and on easy street?”

“I garden, it’s my business now.”

“Well, it sounds like the good life. Isn’t it kind of boring though, all that garden stuff? Do you ever get out and see the town. Do you and the hubby get out much?”

Ding.

The elevator bell sounded, the doors opened and the mayor’s staff filed out, patiently standing and waiting for their master to join them. Betty was relieved; once he left he wouldn’t be irritating her with his inane comments.

“You guys go ahead,” he told his staff. “I’m going to make sure Mrs. Matthews gets first class service in the permit department,” and the elevator doors shut, locking these two people into a thirty-six square foot compartment.

Betty groaned and moved to the far corner.

They stood in silence for a few moments and then the mayor said, “It’s good to see you, Betty. How have you been? Seriously, are you happy?”

“I’m very happy, thank you.”

“No, but seriously, are you happy, happy? You know I’ve thought about you a million times over the years. I don’t know what happened between us? We could have been good for each other,” he said with his sincere look.

Betty wished she could get off the elevator. It seemed to go too slow. If only the doors would open and some strangers would board. Maybe their presence would cause him to be less personal, although he would still make a show at being personable. He was a career politician, after all.

“Yes, Archie, I’m very happy, thank you for asking,” she replied watching and counting the elevator floor lights as they blinked in the slow crawl upwards.

Mayor Fincastle turned to Betty and looked her full in the face.

“Betty, I want you to know that I’m really sorry about the way things turned out. I wish I had another chance. I’m still very attracted to you.”

Betty looked at the man, her mouth dropping open. Is the mayor hitting on me in the elevator, she wondered in astonishment and disbelief? This is absurd.

“Archie, things worked out for the best, just the way they are. All we did was hold hands at a high school football game. You made your choices and your life and I made mine. I’m happy the way mine turned out, and for old time’s sake, I hope you’re happy too.”

Ding.

The elevator doors opened and although it wasn't the floor Betty wanted, she quickly exited, others filing in past her.

"Nice to see you, Mrs. Matthews, don't forget now, there's an election coming up. I hope I can count on your vote. Goodbye," said the mayor as he turned on his smile for the other occupants.

"Thank you, Mr. Mayor. Goodbye," said Betty as the doors closed and she looked around for the sign for the stairs.

While Betty was renewing her vegetable stand permit, Mayor Archibald Fincastle stood in his office, several floors up, high in the building, looking out the floor to ceiling windows of his office.

Gazing out over downtown – his city – he thought, 'I'm the top dog in Fresno'. The Grande Hombre with a good salary and benefits; a nice office, a full staff to satisfy his whims, a limousine and chauffeur, a nice home that's a tax-payer funded perk of the office, the ability to steer and shape important events, and a fat offshore bank account that Uncle Sam or his current wife and ex-wives didn't know anything about; the proceeds of many years of graft and sharp investments acquired as a bonus of his selfless government service.

I've got it all, he thought, grimly. I should be happy. So, why aren't I?

Something was missing from Archibald Fincastle's life and he couldn't place it. He could; when out in the public eye, turn on the smile and shine in the spotlight. But, when the stage lights dimmed and the audience departed, and there was only himself on

the dark stage, in the vacant auditorium; it seemed that he was just a mannequin, lifeless, unfulfilled and draped in an expensive suit.

Archibald Fincastle was one of those people who were uncomfortable with introspection. When he looked into the depths of his heart, his soul; he found no substance. He needed a stage to act on and an audience to act to. It was only when he played his part that he felt alive.

With a dissatisfied grunt and an impatient wave of his hand, like he was flicking away an irritating bug, he cast these morbid thoughts aside and turned to his desk, where the script for his part was being continuously written.

He called his secretary on the intercom and instructed her to bring in the file of the government liens on the deceased Mr. Loftus's business; and all of the payroll records, submitted for tax purposes on the former employees of the defunct Loftus Development Company. Also, he told her to research the business records of the vegetable stand owned by a Betty Matthews.

□ □ □ **Chapter 7** □ □ □

After Betty had left, John stood by the kitchen table looking down at the collection of paperwork he had accumulated. It was true, he had given the subject of opening a restaurant some consideration over the years. But, it had been really just an idle thought; he was comfortably satisfied with his career in the construction business.

The only real experience John had with the restaurant business was when he had been a part-time bartender during college. His first bartending job had been in a honky-tonk near the campus where the music was so loud he had had to wad up bits of bar napkins and stuff them in his ears to keep from going deaf. Between the loud racket, the puking drunk college students and having to constantly break up fist fights and physically eighty-six the combatants, he had soon tired of the honky-tonk scene.

His next employment was in a nice steak and prime rib house with a better clientele. The tips were better and he got a free dinner each night as part of the employment agreement.

The head cook was a gentleman named Clarence whom John soon struck a friendship with. John could never figure out the ancestry of Clarence; he was a middle-aged man, extremely tall, thin but muscular and wiry with veins standing out on his arms and hands like serpents. His hair was solid white and crinkly, standing

up in points. His Fu-Manchu mustache was also white and it had grown to such a length the two points hung down to his chest. He seemed to be covered with tattoos; they were all around his neck, on his chest where they could be seen inside his shirt, down his arms, on his fingers and appeared to be of Oriental design. Clarence was a pale-skinned man who sometimes appeared to be of African-American descent, and at other times, he looked vaguely, Chinese.

He was a nice guy to John, but a demanding task-master to his kitchen staff and a terror to the waitresses, who feared his impatience and quick fury.

Several times a night, Clarence would come out of the kitchen and approach John who was behind the bar. Clarence would say, "Hey, John, I'm thirsty. Give me a big glass of water."

This was code for, "Vodka", an arrangement Clarence had made with John his first day on the job. John kept a bottle of Stolli on ice and he would hold a large water glass below the bar level, out of sight, and: Glug, Glug, Glug; fill it to the brim with the chilled liquor.

Clarence would accept the glass of "water" and: Glug, Glug, Glug; pour it down his throat, without blinking an eye. It was an accomplishment that caused John to blink *his* eyes in amazement.

John kept Clarence in "water" during the course of an evening shift and Clarence made sure John got a healthy serving of any of Clarence's best dishes for his supper break.

One evening John was on break, in the kitchen, standing to the side and watching with admiration Clarence's expertise with organizing and cooking the hundreds of food orders the waitresses brought in to the kitchen in a steady stream. It was amazing how Clarence could keep every detail of every dish in his head and get them ready for the customers without skipping a beat, while the "water" had no obvious effect on his abilities.

While John observed the loud, organized yet chaotic activity, one of the waitresses, an older woman, approached Clarence with a plate of food and said the customer, a woman, thought her order of ground round wasn't cooked enough.

Clarence scooped the meat off the plate and put it back on the grill, over the fiery hot gas burners. He cooked it on both sides a little more then put it back on the plate. The waitress returned it to the dining room. A few minutes later the waitress re-entered the kitchen and now, sheepishly, for she was familiar with Clarence's temper said the customer still thought it wasn't done enough.

With a curse, Clarence cooked it some more; again. This nonsense was throwing him off track with the rest of his orders. The waitress took it out to the lady customer and then almost immediately came back in the kitchen. Now the waitress was terrified. "Clarence," she said in a tremulous voice, "The lady says it's still too raw."

With a roar, Clarence grabbed the meat with his fist, threw it on the greasy floor, stomped it with his greasy tennis shoe, scooped it up with his large commercial-grade spatula and pounded

it back into shape in his hands. He was wild-eyed; growling, cursing and pounding his hands together like he was killing a beast; slammed it on the grill, turned the flame up full blast and incinerated the poor chunk of abused meat.

Shoving it on the plate and into her trembling hands, he screamed at the waitress, "GET OUT, GET OUT."

The waitress was close to breaking down and she fled with Clarence chasing her from his kitchen, waving his spatula in the air like it was a sword. "GET OUT, GET OUT."

John had stood with his mouth open and eyes wide during this whole episode. It was incredible, a barbaric scene straight from the cave-man days: The capture and slaughter of the creature, the roaring fire, the smell of charred meat and the bellows of the man and frightened squeals of the woman. He was laughing so hard it hurt his stomach muscles, while the other kitchen staff were either howling with hilarity – the men; or mumbling, "Oh, my God. Oh, my God," – the women.

A switch seemed to be thrown in Clarence, altering his personality completely and he turned calmly to John and inquired in a mild voice, "You want some mushrooms and onions on your steak?"

"Uhhh. Yeah, sure. Thanks."

A few minutes later the waitress came back in the kitchen and handed Clarence a twenty dollar bill; a tip from the lady customer who said to tell the cook, "It was the best ground round she'd ever tasted."

It was a lesson to the young, college student John: From that point on, he had never, ever, sent anything back to the kitchen, at any restaurant.

John picked up the file of papers and walked out the back door and across the yard to the tractor shed. He needed to check the oil and hydraulic lines on the machine and do some other chores.

While he worked, he shuffled through the papers remembering how at one time he had really been enthusiastic about the idea. It seemed an ideal way to earn money – You opened the door, people came in, they handed you money and you supplied them with a beverage or something to eat. He knew this was too simplistic, there was certainly more to it than that, but the idea did have some merit.

Looking at the sample menu he had put together he remembered now that he had decided it wasn't feasible or practical to try and compete with every other restaurant in town. You could go into any joint and the menu, with slight variations, was the same. That would be the same as the way the contractors in town growled and competed over the construction work. 'A bunch of slobbering dogs fighting over the same bone', he thought.

No, if he was going to do it, he would do it different from the rest of the pack. John finished the work in the shed and cleaned his hands. He was walking across the yard, back to the house when he decided, "What the heck. It won't hurt to go look at the place."

John drove the few miles to the corner of Madison and Brawley where the Tavern was located. He drove slowly through the neighborhood, looking at the area with a different focus. When he had passed through here before it was always as a means of transit, a way to get to work and back home again. The intersection was a cross of two, four-lane highways. John remembered when it had been two lane roads, through the countryside with farms and fields on both sides.

Now, urban sprawl had created a suburb outside the city of Fresno with some up-scale subdivisions, golf courses, a country club and the associated commercial entities to provide services to the local residents. A few years previously John had built a small hospital in this neighborhood, a satellite branch of a larger institution closer to town. Now, there was a shopping mall next to the hospital and other businesses adjacent to that.

John drove along slowly, counting the eating establishments in the area and he realized that they were all fast-food joints, each serving the same high cholesterol, high trans-fat, high sugar junk, only calling their wares by different names. He parked at the shopping mall and entered the restaurant located at the west end of the facility.

Ordering an iced-tea, he stood at the bar and perused the menu. He soon determined the selections were just fancier and pricier combinations of what the fast food places offered. Looking around, he noticed that the wait staff seemed to be bored and apathetic, not exactly enjoying being stuck in this dimly lighted

establishment on a sunny day. John called the bartender over; a young man in wrinkled clothes with uncombed hair, a scraggly goatee and who had some sort of metal rings, the size of half-dollars, surgically inserted in both earlobes that stretched the surrounding skin and gave him the appearance of an island cannibal, or some such primitive.

The bartender said to John, "Yeah, Bub, what'cha need?"

"Bub," thought John. "I could be this kid's grandfather and he calls me 'Bub'."

John forced a tolerant smile and asked the young man, "Looks a little slow around here. When does the rush start?"

"Oh, you missed the lunch crowd. We were real busy for awhile. The dinner rush starts about four and lasts till nine or so."

"How's the beer and liquor sales? Keep you busy?"

"Not real busy right now, but when Happy Hour starts at five o'clock I'll be jumping. Then on Friday and Saturday night we get a good crowd. Monday and Thursday night football is good too. I stay pretty busy, it's alright," the youngster said, unenthusiastically.

John paid for his tea, tipping the kid a buck and some change who responded, "Thanks, Bub. Come back later. We get a lot of nurses from the hospital at Happy Hour. Good place to score. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, Bub, I know what you mean," said John and walked briskly from the depressing establishment to his car, quickly leaving the mall parking lot.

Shortly he arrived at the Tavern. The for-sale sign was still there and he drove around the building giving it a good look. The building was a long, rectangular one-story affair constructed with a brick-veneer finish and the pitched metal roof looked to be in good shape. The back door, apparently from the kitchen area, opened to a delivery area and a picnic table, probably a place for the workers to take their breaks. There seemed to be ample parking and John immediately noticed a side, emergency exit door that could be used as access to construct a roofed, open-sided garden-patio addition.

Entering the bar he paused and looked around carefully. The only other time he had been in the place was that day Jim Pearson had met him here to give him a ride home. His mind had been preoccupied that day and he really hadn't even noticed his surroundings.

Now, he saw the main room was large with a high ceiling and pleasing proportions. The attractive bar was crafted of rough sawn planks covered with a thick poly-urethane finish and covered most of the right hand wall, ending at a swinging door to, he supposed, the kitchen and office area. Hanging over the bar was a collection of vintage, stain-glassed lamps that featured what appeared to be hunting, fishing, gold mining and other outdoor scenes. The wall behind the bar was a collection of large mirrors, framed in the same wood the bar was made of. Behind the bar and work area, against the outside wall, bottles were stacked on a countertop, built similar to the bar, that covered a row of black faced refrigerators, probably containing the beer and other

supplies. Hanging from the ceiling, over the back countertop were several televisions tuned to various sporting events.

The main section of the long room was a grouping of tables and chairs and some booths along the other outside wall. There were two pool tables and a jukebox at the far end with an alcove for musicians to provide live entertainment.

Looking down at the floor, John at first thought it was covered in tile, in various patterns that framed the seating areas. Then he realized it was finished and sealed concrete, dyed, stenciled and stamped to resemble tile.

The entire place had a clean look and smell about it. There were four guys back by the pool tables, shooting a game; a half-dozen sitting at the bar and a few of the tables were occupied with men and women. The patrons were eating sandwiches, drinking beer and mixed drinks and everyone seemed cheerful.

By the door was a large sign that proclaimed, in large letters, "Welcome to the Tavern. Make Yourself at Home."

"Okey, dokey", thought John and he walked to the bar, pulling out a stool and sat down. The bartender, an older man in crisply ironed jeans with a sharp crease, cowboy boots and a white western shirt with a bolo tie under his collar walked over and greeted John. He noticed the bartender walked with a pronounced limp.

"Welcome, sir. What's your pleasure today," he asked while sitting down a bar napkin in front of John?

“How about a cold beer. One of those will do,” responded John pointing at an advertising sign on the wall.

“Excellent choice, that’s my favorite too,” said the man as he popped the bottle cap, placing the beer on the napkin.

“Maybe you can answer a question for me, where can I find the owner,” John inquired?

“You’re looking at him. I’m Nate Sherman.”

“Mr. Sherman, I’m John Matthews,” as he extended his hand in greeting.

“Now, let’s forget that mister stuff. It makes me feel old. Call me Nate,” the man said, smiling. They shook hands.

“I see you’ve got a for sale sign out front. You got a minute to talk?”

“Sure, but if you’re a realtor, I’m not interested in listing the place.”

“No, I’m not a real estate agent. I’m thinking of going into the restaurant business. I guess my first question is: Why are you selling? Has business slowed down or what?”

“Nah, nothing like that. I’m just getting too old to keep up with the place. Fell down last year and broke my hip. Busted my ass good. Business like this, you gotta be on the go all the time. I’m going to retire and do some fishin’. Got me a houseboat on Pine Flat Lake, the southwest end of the Sierra National Forest, I’m gonna settle in and take it easy for awhile.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your accident. Hips are hard to heal.”

“You’re telling me, I haven’t had a good nights sleep since it happened. Can’t get comfortable, not lying down, sitting down or standing up. It’s a royal pain in the ass, so to speak. Hell, sometimes I think I should just go on down to the glue factory,” said Sherman with a laugh.

“No, you’ve still got some miles left on the original warranty. Let me ask you this; does the contract include the property, or just the business?”

“It’s the whole nine yards. Lock, stock and barrel. Property, building, liquor and beer license, booze and furnishings, everything. The only thing I’m carrying out of here is my pool cue and a bottle of whiskey, strapped to the back of my Harley. The rest goes to some smart feller who knows a good investment when he sees it, and shows me the color of his money.”

“You mind if I look around,” asked John?

“Shoot no, come on I’ll give you the guided tour. Hey, Jerry, watch the bar for me for awhile,” he yelled at a guy sitting at the bar, watching a baseball game.

“You bet,” responded the man.

John and Nate Sherman walked the building and property, Sherman explaining details as they went. The kitchen was roomy and well supplied with ovens, stoves, refrigerators and freezers and all the necessary utensils to work with. Sherman had obviously not scrimped on the budget for a well-equipped food preparation and cooking facility.

The restrooms were clean and presentable, unlike many facilities that had disgusted both John and Betty in restaurants over the years, and there were separate restroom facilities for the staff, off the kitchen. All the restrooms were constructed of easily to maintain ceramic tile. There was good storage space including a janitor's closet.

Surprisingly, there was even a one car garage where Nate parked his Harley-Davidson; a beautiful, vintage 1947 EL Knucklehead. The office area included a small studio apartment, with its own kitchen and bathroom that Sherman confessed he sometimes used for living quarters, in violation of the zoning restrictions. John thought that it might be converted to a private room for special events, such as invitation only dinners or parties.

Sherman described how he had, over the past forty years, converted the place from the original one room saloon in the middle of what was then a cow pasture, to the present establishment. He had obviously taken a lot of pride and care in the work of creating his tavern. Oddly, while the layout and décor wasn't exactly what John had previously envisioned for his idea of a restaurant, the rustic and simple feel of the place appealed to him.

"What's your clientele like," asked John?

"They're a bunch of good folks. Got some regulars, construction guys who stop in most days for beer and billiards after work, some utility workers, and on the weekends I get the local college crowd from the area. They're not wild, they just party, dance to the jukebox and I've very seldom had to cut somebody off.

On Thursday's there's a group of bikers who fill the place up and I sell enough beer on those Thursday night's to pay the bills for the month. These aren't hell raisin' outlaw motorcycle bikers, they're mostly yuppies and a local military veterans group who just like to have fun. I've never had a bit of trouble out of them. Matter of fact, I ride my ole hawg with them in the local poker runs. This is one of the usual stops."

They had made the circuit of the establishment and were standing back in the kitchen. A middle aged woman, a Latino, was frying up some hamburgers on one range. The rest of the extensive, stainless steel appliances were not being used, sitting idle.

"You've got enough gear here to cook for a small army. Do you have a larger dinner crowd sometimes?"

"Well, the fact is, John, my wife used to be the main cook and we did serve a full menu and had a good, steady trade out of it. She passed away a few years ago and I cut it back to burgers, brats, chili, potato chips and whatnot. I couldn't do the bar and the kitchen at the same time."

"I'm sorry, Nate. I didn't know."

"No, it was a fair question. Fair questions deserve an honest answer."

They moved back to the bar and Nate got them both a cold beer.

"Well, what do ya think?"

“It’s an interesting place, Nate. I’ll sleep on it and get back to you. My wife is frying chicken tonight and I can smell it from here.”

John pushed away from the bar and held out his hand. “Thanks for the tour. I’ll get back to you.”

“Well, no matter what, stop back in for a beer. It’s been good talking to you, John.”

They shook hands and John departed.

□ □ □ **Chapter 8** □ □ □

While John drove home, he considered what he had seen. It was a possibility, he admitted to himself. The property was in good shape, the location was right, and while the price Nate had quoted was high, it wasn't astronomical and John thought he could make arrangements with his banker to do the deal.

The real question was: Did he really want to be in the restaurant business? Could he be successful at? Could he make a go of it?

According to John's research, and depending upon various people's opinions, somewhere between seventy-five and ninety percent of newly opened, independent restaurants failed in the first year. Anyway you looked at it, it was a staggering statistic. How could he be sure he could be in the ten, to, maybe, twenty-five percent range of the ones that managed to make a go of it?

Of course, Nate had been there for over forty years, obviously doing well enough to keep the lights on and continue improving the facility. Maybe he could interest Nate in hanging around for awhile, on a consulting basis, and show him some of the tricks of the trade?

On that thought, John pulled in the driveway and saw that Betty's car was parked and she was home. Entering the house he smelled the aroma of frying chicken and his mouth watered. Betty

used a combination of flour, corn meal and mashed potato chip crumbs in her recipe. She had learned the recipe from her mother and it was the first meal she had ever prepared for him while they were still in college.

He came in the kitchen and saw her standing at the cook-top range turning the pieces of chicken in the skillet.

“Hey, honey,” he said, coming up behind her and giving her a hug and a kiss on the side of her face. “I’ve been thinking about the cooking duties. You know: who should be the full-time chef? And I decided that you should do it and make your fried chicken for every meal.”

“Uh huh,” she replied, with a smile. “Is that why you married me? Because I can cook chicken?”

“Well, that’s not the only reason. You do have some other talents.”

“Yeah, like what?”

“You know. Maybe you can demonstrate them, later,” he said with a grin as he bit her neck and one of his hands began trailing upwards while the other moved south.

“Get out of here, you sex maniac,” she said, wiggling out of his grasp. “Make yourself useful and set the table, this will be ready soon.”

Shortly, they sat at the table, eating and John was describing his visit to the tavern, telling her the details of the building, business and property. The owner, Nate, he told her, looked like an old cowboy or gold miner, in his classic western attire. He also told

Betty about the other eating places in the area and how he had gone into the restaurant at the mall.

“I’m concerned about finding decent help. You should have seen the bartender in that place. He was dressed like a slob and he looked like a clown. Why would somebody put rings in their ears like that,” he wondered in puzzlement?

“Oh, John, you remember how we dressed back in the sixties? You had that beard and long hair. Everybody was in old blue jeans with tie-dyed shirts, sandals and granny glasses, peace signs and love beads hanging around their necks, walking around with flowers braided in their hair.”

“My hair wasn’t that long! Besides, I kept it clean and combed anyway. Yeah, those were the good ole days,” he reflected with nostalgia. “You used to walk around wearing my old football jerseys for a dress with no panties. I remember those days well.”

“I did not,” Betty retorted. “Well, not out in public anyway.”

“The fashions change, John. We probably looked like clowns to the older folks and now the younger generation looks odd to us. I’m sure there are people who would work and make a good impression. You just have to interview to find them.”

“Speaking of interviewing, that apartment in back of the office would come in handy for interviewing those college babe waitresses,” he said jokingly.

“Uh huh, keep it up buster and you’ll be frying your own chicken from now on.”

They finished eating, worked together cleaning the dishes and moved to the back porch where they sat on the swing, watching the sunset. They continued the conversation; bouncing ideas off the wall, discussing the details of financing, working hours and arrangements, food and other supplies, Betty's contacts where they could get fresh meats and anything else that popped into their heads.

John retrieved his file of research papers and they talked about how his ideas would fit into the existing business and physical space. Looking at the sketches he had made it was apparent that John's conception of a design had been to start from scratch and build a new building. He was a builder, after all, and it was natural to see the whole picture from a standpoint of massing the vision of the overall building with the requirements of the necessary interior requirements.

"When you compare the price to the square footage of the building I could build it for less, but you'd still have to buy the property and of course there's the ongoing business. It's not a bad deal when you add in that," he commented.

"Nate showed me his books and he's got a good thing going. It's a profitable business venture. He's done well with it and of course the property itself, right there on the corner, in that area, would continue to appreciate. But, still, it's a lot of money. And, a risk too, since we're not exactly what you would call restaurant professionals. I don't know, maybe I should stay with what I know. Maybe I should start a construction business like I said this

morning. Or, I could go to Iraq and get all that tax-free money. Hey, you could come with me. You could dress in those long robe things those women wear, but with no panties!"

Betty squirmed to the other side of the swing, away from him, and said, threateningly, "If you mention that one more time I'm going to get so mad I'll drive you to boot camp myself."

"Ah, I'm just kidding, Betty. You know that. So, what do you think about this tavern thing?"

"I think it's a wonderful idea, John. I know! Let's jump in the car and drive over there and look at it. You can show me around and we can see what the evening crowd looks like?"

"That's a great idea, honey. Let's get cleaned up and have a night on the town. You can wear one of my old jerseys, with, you know, no ..."

"Hah, you wish, mister," she said as she punched him on the arm.

"Ouch."

Standing, she clenched her jaw and told him, "Keep it up funny man and I'll have to kick your ass."

"Uh huh, promises, promises."

Betty and John pulled into the parking lot at The Tavern and had to hunt for a parking place. There seemed to be a good crowd. A couple dozen big motorcycles were parked right in front of the building under a sign that read, "Harley parking only".

Entering the front door they saw that the Tavern was hopping. Nate was at the closest end of the bar making drinks and he looked up, saw John and waved him over.

“Long time no see,” said Nate in greeting. “Who’s your date, John?”

John introduced Betty and Nate expertly fixed them drinks saying, “First ones on the house. Make yourselves at home.”

“Nate, do you mind if I show Betty around,” asked John?

“Shoot, no. Help yourself. Here, take the key to the office. I’d join you but as you can see, I’m a little busy right now.” Nate replied with a smile as he opened beers and mixed drinks.

“Thanks,” said John and he and Betty moved aside so other customers could place their orders.

They moved slowly around the room, taking in all the details. The place was full of customers. John mentally tallied up the probable sales of food and beverages and was favorably impressed. Betty’s eye was drawn to the décor and furnishings and while it was somewhat simple and rustic as John had described, she decided it was a comfortable place for people to gather and relax. Maybe it needed some greenery; some nice plants here and there, but otherwise it had a pleasant feel to it.

John took Betty back into the kitchen. She immediately saw it was complete with everything needed to fix a good batch of dinners. In fact, she saw it was under-utilized, with only the one woman and a helper working at one work-station. John showed her

the rest of the space, the garage with the old Harley parked inside and when he opened the door to the apartment she was surprised.

“From the outside the building doesn’t look big enough to hold all this; the big customer area, the kitchen, the garage and it even has this apartment. It’s amazing, really.”

“Yeah, and like I said, this apartment is just right for interviewing the waitresses. Shoot, that’ll be a full-time job for me. I don’t know if I’ll have any time left for cooking,” he laughed.

“Right, funny man. Maybe you should go to Iraq after all. They keep the women locked away in harems over there. That would give you something to joke about.”

Back out in the main area, Nate refreshed their drinks and they leaned back against the bar surveying the scene. The customers seemed to be a fairly diverse group; college age to middle age, all enjoying themselves, laughing, joking and talking. Unlike many places, the music playing on the jukebox wasn’t so loud that you had to scream at the person standing right next to you to make yourself heard. The group by the pool tables was comprised of several men and their dates, the women shooting pool along with the men.

At the end of the bar by the door and in the tables and booths, there was a group of patrons; an equal number of men and women, dressed in boots, jeans and black t-shirts with logos and motto’s on the back and fronts from various Harley-Davidson dealerships. All of their clothes looked neat and clean, as had the shining motorcycles out front. John supposed these were the

yuppies Nate had mentioned. They were laughing hysterically at some joke one of them was telling; swinging his arms around, making theatrical faces.

“Now, those guys know how to have fun,” said John with a smile.

One of the bikers walked toward them, heading for the juke box. John recognized him as an executive in one of the local real-estate development firms. They had met at a zoning meeting and now the man saw John and stopped.

“Hello, John. How’ve you been?”

They shook hands and John said, “Hello, George, good to see you. This is my wife, Betty. Betty, this is George Marin.”

They talked for a few minutes, George saying he was sorry to hear about Mr. Loftus. They agreed it was a senseless tragedy. After a few minutes of polite chat, the fellow excused himself and moved on.

As he turned and walked away, Betty noticed that printed on the back of his t-shirt were the words, “***Born on a mountain. Raised in a cave. Biking and fucking is all that I crave.***”

“Good Lord,” she whispered, shocked, shaking her head.

“Maybe I should buy a Harley,” said John with a laugh. “Sounds like they have the right idea.”

“Uh huh, maybe you should take your comedy routine to Iraq,” she replied, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Come on, Mr. Smart Ass, I’ll drive you to the airport right now,” as she took a step away from the bar.

John chuckled and reaching out his hand, hooked his fingers under her belt, at the small of her back and gently pulled her toward him. He slipped his arm around her waist. They were standing hip to hip, in a companionable silence as they watched the people around them. They stood and considered the possibilities associated with owning this busy, happy place. They each had smiles on their faces.

After a while they gave Nate a wave and walked out to their car. It was mid-September and the late evening had a nice feel to the air. As they drove home they talked about the Tavern, each happy to hear the other remark favorably on it.

“What about the name, John? Would you change it to ‘the, Art of a Meal’, or leave it ‘The Tavern’?”

“You must be a mind-reader? I was just thinking about that. It’s been The Tavern ever since it opened. Everybody knows it by that name. Forty years or more, it’s almost a historical landmark. It seems a shame to lose that name recognition.”

“Yes, but your Art of a Meal sounds so good. I know, how about this? Get a bigger sign and have it say, ‘the, Art of a Meal at The Tavern?’”

John turned his head and looked at her in surprise, “Yeah, I like that. That’s good.”

“You know lady; you’re pretty handy to have around. I might have to put you on payroll.”

“Yeah, how much are you going to pay me?”

“That’s open to negotiation,” he answered with a smile as he reached for her hand.

□ □ □ Chapter 9 □ □ □

When Betty got up the next morning and entered the kitchen, John was standing by the sink, rinsing some vegetables. She supposed what had woken her was the smell of the bacon frying on the stove.

She walked over and leaned sleepily against him, “Good morning.”

“Good morning. Sleep well?”

“Like a rock. How about you?”

“Like a baby. I’m fixing an omelet; it should be ready in about a half-hour.”

“Okay, I’ll be back.”

Betty washed up and dressed in her gardening clothes. Returning to the kitchen she poured herself a cup of coffee, refreshed his mug and leaned against the counter watching John work. He was sautéing some chopped scallions and red bell pepper in a skillet with a little butter. He drained the bacon grease out of the other skillet, removed the cooked bacon and used the spatula to scrape the bottom of the pan. Sitting that aside he spooned the sautéed peppers and scallions out of the other skillet onto a saucer. Then he added the scraped up bits of bacon from the one skillet to the skillet he had sautéed the veggies in.

Betty smiled, watching him. The only problem with John's cooking was that he used a lot of skillets, pans and utensils. He'd probably learned that from observing Clarence, who probably had had a crew of dishwashers ready to clean up his messes. John had introduced Betty to Clarence when they were in college and John was tending bar in the steak house. They had gone on a picnic to the park with Clarence and his wife, and Betty had brought some of her fried chicken.

Clarence had raved over her chicken, asking for the recipe and advised John, "You better marry this girl."

Betty had laughed and said, "Hah, what makes you think I'd have him?"

It had been a wonderful afternoon in the park. John had asked Clarence about his tattoos and Clarence told him he got them, many years before, when he was working as a chef in Hong Kong. Clarence removed his shirt and the artistic tattoos; snakes, warriors, dragons, wizards, lightning bolts and all manner of exquisite designs covered his arms, entire chest and back, disappearing down into his trousers.

Clarence's wife, a tall woman full of joy and humor who looked like a Nubian queen, rolled her eyes at Betty and said, "He's only showing you the top half, there's a lot more. No! Set down, Clarence, nobody wants to see the rest. Just sit down! Don't make me kick your ass, mister."

“He thinks he’s a work of art. He don’t wear any underwear neither,” Clarence’s wife had commented to Betty, shaking her head. “Crazy man.”

“There’s this museum in Hong Kong of tattooed skin, I’m going to leave my body to them so they can hang me on the wall. I’ll be immortal, like a Picasso, a Rembrandt or something,” said Clarence enthusiastically.

“Jeez, you see what I put up with?” Clarence’s wife asked Betty, shaking her head and rolling her eyes.

John had exclaimed to Betty, “Hong Kong! Far out. Let’s go over there! I could get some of those groovy tattoos.”

Betty looked straight at John; narrowed her eyes, picked up a sharp knife and tested the edge with her thumb. John dropped the subject and never mentioned tattoos again.

Now, he poured a bowl full of stirred up eggs into the skillet with the scraped bacon scraps and scallion flavored butter. As the eggs cooked he gave them an occasional adjustment, tilting the skillet so the uncooked portion on top rolled to the bottom. While doing this he put the fried up bacon in a bowl and used a large fork and knife to crush the bacon slices into small bits.

When the eggs were done he sprinkled the crushed bacon on top, added some shredded cheese and over that the sautéed peppers and scallions. He placed the skillet with the whole concoction under the broiler for a few minutes, watching it carefully through the small window of the oven door.

Removing the skillet with a flourish, he announced, “Ta Da!”

They sat at the table, the toast, jam and orange juice already laid out and John used the spatula to serve them both a portion of the omelet. It was delicious.

Betty asked, "So? Did your unconscious mind come to any decisions while you slept?"

"Yes, I'm interested, but let's not jump the gun. We have to find out if we can afford it first. I'm going to see the banker and discuss it. Depending on what he says, I'll go to the lawyer and look into some details like contracts, licenses – you know all that legal stuff? I'll have to get a title search since there's no realtor involved. There's a lot of things to figure out. The whole thing might not even be do-able."

"Okay," replied Betty, "I'll clean up the kitchen. You go ahead and get ready. And, John? I've got a good feeling about this. It feels right. Know what I mean?"

"Yes, honey. It feels right to me too."

Driving to the bank; John reflected on life, and its many twists and turns. It's funny, he thought. Who would have guessed that he might actually go into the restaurant business? If Betty hadn't mentioned it, and, he had to admit, push him a little, it probably never would happen.

It could be a life changing experience for them. It worried him: Would it be a positive experience, or a negative experience?

Pulling into the bank parking lot he determined to make it a good experience. He would work hard to make it so. They had

come to far together, had too much happiness and good fortune in their lives for it to be anything but good. He wouldn't fail.

With that thought in mind he walked into the bank with the confident air of a man who didn't need any money; which was, really, the only kind of man the bankers wanted to talk to about making loans.

An hour or so later, John left with the bankers assurance that the money was there if he were to decide to go forward. His banker had cautioned him to, "Look at the books carefully, and make sure the numbers add up. Bring them to me if you want. I'll give them a good review."

At his lawyers office John sat and listened to a lecture on the success and failure rate in the restaurant business. John's attorney was a very cautious man. John supposed it came with the job; working all day, day in and day out, at a desk piled high with litigation between various warring parties with negative attitudes.

John had done his own research and was fully aware of the risks and potential rewards. Interrupting the lawyer's theme, they discussed the legal paperwork involved with the acquisition. The man would do the title search and look over the sales contract from the present owner, a copy of which John had brought with him.

John's next stop was downtown, where he would investigate the licenses and such. Arriving at City Hall, he entered the building and stood in front of the directory in the lobby, searching for the location of the correct office. Boarding the elevator he noticed a television news crew sitting up a camera and gear over by the

information desk. Not giving it any thought, he proceeded with his business.

Leaving the License office a while later, he was encouraged. The application and transfer process was simpler than he had imagined it would be and he had the necessary paperwork in hand.

Back down in the lobby there was now a huge crowd of people filling the entire space. John saw that the mayor, that Fincastle fellow, was giving a press conference, standing in front of the TV cameras while photographers snapped pictures and reporters yelled questions.

There was large group of people; ranging in age from children standing with their parents, to older men and women and they were carrying signs that read, "HELL NO – WE WON'T GO!"

From outside, on the sidewalk, he could hear another group of people chanting the same words that were on the signs.

Curious, John moved to the side of the elevator door he had just rode down, in the corridor with the twin sets of elevators facing each other and listened to the reporter's questions and the mayor's answers.

The mayor was saying, "...it's the responsibility of the government to provide social services to the poor, but it's also the responsibility of the poor to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and improve their own living conditions."

A woman reporter yelled out, "Mr. Mayor. Isn't your new legislation the reverse of what you just said? Isn't it a denial of those social services you say it's the government's responsibility to

provide when you close emergency shelters and criminalize the feeding of the homeless?”

“That’s not what I said at all,” answered the mayor, as he posed for the cameras.

“Everyone knows the city is running a budget deficit due to high energy costs, lost taxes from the foreclosed homes and various other reasons. We simply have to prioritize and use our revenues where they do the most good for the most people. We’re consolidating the emergency shelters, closing some so we can give better service to the most people in need. The law against feeding the homeless doesn’t apply to anyone’s private homes, it only applies to outside gatherings.”

“Mr. Mayor, isn’t it true that closing some shelters means that those in need have to travel farther to reach the one’s that are open? And, some of these people don’t have transportation. How are they supposed to travel from the outskirts of town, to downtown?”

“Walking is good exercise. Next question?”

“Mr. Mayor, this anti-feeding law prohibits gatherings not only in public parks but also on private properties, such as lawns and parking lots. It penalizes people who want to help the homeless, so how can you justify saying it’s okay to feed them inside people’s homes? The average house can only fit a handful of people when hundreds go hungry.

Beginning to look impatient, the mayor answered, “Studies have shown that any large gathering of people of that sort can lead

to unruly behavior. The city has a responsibility to protect the law-abiding, tax-paying majority from the criminal minority.”

“Mr. Mayor. Are you saying it’s a crime to be poor and that the poor are composed mainly of the criminal element,” asked a reporter in astonishment?

“The facts speak for themselves. That’s all. Thank you. No more questions. Thank you.”

Surrounded by members of his staff and walking closely behind a few Sheriff’s Deputies who cleared the way, the mayor crossed the lobby toward the elevators.

The group of people holding the signs aloft began chanting, “Hell no, we won’t go. Hell no, we won’t go.”

Smiling, nodding and waving like the Queen of England riding in a carriage past Buckingham Palace, the mayor ignored the yelling of the mob as his squad of assistants cleared the way for him.

John was pressed against the wall by the crowd. He figured there was no point in trying to go anywhere so he would just stand there until the tumult subsided.

As John stood just a few feet away and watched, the mayor arrived at an elevator the doors to which were being held open by a Deputy and before he entered he turned back to face the lobby. The mayor was looking out at the people, a roar coming from the crowd and he had a smirk on his face like he was enjoying the spectacle.

The mayor looked around and his gaze fell on John, leaning against the wall on the other side of the corridor. The mayor's eyes opened wide in recognition. His mouth opened as if he were about to say something, when suddenly, from out of the crowd someone hurled a rotten egg that smacked the mayor right in the face.

The egg hit him dead center, right on the nose, above his still open mouth and below his wide open eyes. The egg splattered with an explosion of slime; the rank odor of decaying, putrefying barnyard and graveyard filling the air like a burst from a skunk.

"AHHH," shrieked the mayor, falling backwards in the elevator into the arms of his staff, knocking them down like a bunch of bowling pins. They lay in a tumbled, writhing mass, fighting each other in panic to get away from the gut wrenching stench that covered the mayor like a wet blanket. Suddenly, one of the staff began choking, then barfing. Like a chain reaction, the other staff members also emptied their guts, the up-chuck spewing out like fountains and since the mayor was on top of the heap, the multiple spews trickled down, landing on him.

"OHHH, GOD!" one of the women in the pile screamed in horror.

There was a moment of shocked silence, and then, a cacophony of cheers, yelling and applause. Flashes from photographer's cameras captured the scene while police pushed through the crowd to apprehend the rotten-egg throwing perpetrator. The last glimpse John had before the doors closed was of the mayor, now on his knees, slinging the slime and puke off

his face, bald head and expensive suit with both hands and cursing at the top of his lungs.

“AHHH FUUUCK! AHHH FUUUCK!”

“OHHH, GOD, OHHH, GOD,” the woman continued to scream hysterically.

John burst into laughter with the rest of the crowd – well, most of them. The police weren’t laughing, or at least trying not to. The cops fought and shoved people aside to chase down the perp who was yipping and yelling in triumph as he raced for the exit. It was complete bedlam, madness; a riot as hoots and hilarity consumed everyone. John was pushed backwards against the wall, crushed by the rampaging crowd and just then:

Ding.

An elevator opened behind him and he backed into it, pushing any button he could see through his tears of amusement. He hadn’t laughed so hard in years. He roared with laughter until he choked and gasped for breath.

Ding.

The elevator doors opened and John stumbled out, roaring with laughter. He’d laughed so hard his knees were weak and he had trouble walking, like he was drunk. He’d arrived on a floor that was so quiet in its work environment you could have heard a pin drop on the carpeted floor. Several people standing and waiting for the elevator now shrunk back from him in surprise.

Who was this deranged individual? What on earth was wrong with him? Was he overdosing on a lethal combination of illegal substances and contraband?

John leaned on the side of the door, at the threshold and the look on the people's faces caused him to burst into another wild fit of laughter. They were staring at him as if he was nuts, a lunatic escaped from the asylum.

He tried to explain the events in the lobby that just occurred but he was laughing so hard he couldn't talk. He kept pointing down and back, behind him, towards the lobby, at the floor of the elevator and the people looked at the spot he kept pointing at with incomprehension.

"What? What's on the floor," their puzzled expressions seemed to be asking?

The look of bafflement on their faces caused John to almost break down he was laughing so hard, the tears pouring down his cheeks and his stomach muscles cramping.

Finally, shaking his head, he walked away. The group of people watched as the lunatic stumbled down the hallway, supporting himself with one hand on the wall as he howled with laughter.

Those people turned back toward the elevator and suspiciously looked at the spot on the floor the lunatic had been pointing at. Was there some sort of invisible substance there that was, perhaps, a chemical weapon, sprayed by terrorists? Had it

triggered the lunatic's bizarre behavior and caused him to lose his mind?

Not willing to enter the elevator; as the foreign substance might also cause them to lose their minds, they took a cautious step back to wait for another car.

Ding.

The doors closed, and the lunatic continued howling and laughing as he moved down the hallway to the stairs.

Driving across town, John's mind kept replaying the look the mayor had given him right before the egg splattered full in his face. It was a look of surprised recognition, but that made no sense as he had never met the man before. Sure, he had seen the mayor on television and his picture in the newspaper, but he was certain they had never been introduced. So how could the man know him?

It must have been a case of mistaken identity, he thought. He dismissed it from his mind, but not before having another good laugh as he recalled the rotten egg incident. It had been hilarious. And, John couldn't think of a better person to have had it happen to than a smug politician. It had been worth the price of parking and admission.

He was still chuckling as he walked through the front door of The Tavern.

□ □ □ **Chapter 10** □ □ □

John pulled his car to a screeching halt and whipped it into the driveway. Jumping from the vehicle he called to Betty, “I made a deal with Nate Sherman. We’re buying the joint. What do you think about that, honey?”

John was standing outside the vegetable stand, leaning on the counter as he told her the news. Inside, Betty exclaimed her pleasure and sitting the basket of peppers down leaned forward to wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him on the lips.

“That’s wonderful, John. I’ve got such a good feeling about this.”

“Me too, Betty, I’m sure it’s going to work. Come on, lock this place up and let’s celebrate. I’ve got a bottle of champagne and some lamb chops. We’ll grill out tonight. What do you say?”

“That sounds wonderful. You go ahead, I’ll be there shortly.”

John kissed her and then he drove to the house.

That evening as they grilled the chops and vegetable shish-ka-bob’s they began making plans for the next steps required for their restaurant. Betty had a notebook and was writing down the notes and thoughts as they poured out, like a torrent from each of them.

They sat at the kitchen table filling out the various applications and documents pertaining to the purchase and

licensing of The Tavern. Looking at the proposed menu they made lists of the foods, supplies and paraphernalia required for each dish, and then they multiplied those figures to adjust for cooking the dishes in quantities. John told Betty her new title would be the general manager while he would be the chef and cook.

“Wait a minute, you’re missing something there,” she advised him.

“What’s that?”

“The correct term is, ‘chef, cook and bottle washer’. Are you going to do the bottle and dishwashing too? Somebody has to do it and I’ll be too busy if I’m the general manager.”

“Well, you can supervise the dishwashers. I’ll be busy cooking.”

“Uh huh, now I see. You’re trying to get more work out of me already. See how you are? I see how you are now, you slave-driver,” she said.

“What? Are you angling for a raise already? I see how you are!”

“Speaking of money, how much are you going to pay me?”

John stood and picking up the bottle of champagne in the bucket of ice said, “Let’s move this discussion to a more comfortable venue. We can start negotiating your salary right now,” as he moved toward the bedroom.

“I see. You think you can trick me into working for free, don’t you? Well, I’ll show you. I bet you’ll be the one working for free,

mister,” she replied playfully as she reached for the cord and turned off the light over the kitchen table.

“I’ll take that bet, lady,” he answered with a devilish grin.

The next morning John visited his banker and lawyer. He instructed them to begin immediately on the loan documents and legalities. When that had been arranged, John drove downtown to City Hall to submit his license application.

Of the eight elevators in the lobby, four on each side of the corridor, John noticed the one that had been the scene of the amusing disaster was out of service, a large sign proclaiming that it was, ‘Closed for Cleaning’. With a laugh, he boarded his lucky elevator, across from the one with the sharp smell of industrial disinfectant surrounding it.

John had stepped off the elevator on the wrong floor and after poking his head in a few offices, realized his error. Riding the elevator to the correct floor it had stopped for more passengers and one of the people to board was the mayor, Archibald Fincastle, accompanied by the County Sheriff, Benny Hoke.

The mayor had decided that he would not go anywhere in the future without an armed bodyguard to protect him from unruly citizens.

John had his head down, shuffling through and studying his paperwork when he heard, “John Matthews?”

Looking up, John saw the face of the man he had last seen with rotten egg and vomit all over it.

Stifling a sudden grin, John responded, “Yes, that’s me.”

The mayor stuck out his hand enthusiastically, "I'm Archibald Fincastle, your hard working mayor. I don't think we've met before but I feel like I know you since your wife Betty and I practically grew up together. It's good to finally meet you, John."

The mayor had taken John's right hand in his right hand and then covered it with his left. He was giving John the two-handed politician's handshake. The mayor's hands felt sort of greasy and it was making John uncomfortable. He smiled politely, while loosening his hand to end the shake; now trying to pull his hand back. The mayor seemed determined to hold John's hand all day.

While the mayor talked about his childhood down in Visalia and how he and Betty had attended the same schools John stood with a queasy half-smile on his face, pulling back his arm in an attempt to retrieve his hand. The mayor continued gripping and shaking John's hand until he finally managed to jerk it loose. John resisted the temptation to wipe his hand off on his pants leg while continuing to nod at the mayor's description of his wonderful childhood and his many wonderful friends. The mayor spoke so fast that his words were jumbled, accompanied by a high pitched, nasal stream of giggling. John could barely understand him.

With a questioning look, John glanced at the Sheriff as if to inquire, "Hell's wrong with this guy?"

Looking at the man closely for the first time, John realized this was the Sheriff who had served the foreclosure papers that day at the job-site. It was out of the ordinary; to find himself on the

same elevator with a babbling moron and a grossly obese bully with a badge on his uniform and a big gun on his hip.

“What? Pardon me? I didn’t understand your question.”

“I was asking, what brings you to City Hall today? Is there anything I can help you with? It never hurts to have the mayor on your side you know,” Mayor Fincastle said, giggling.

“Oh, I’m just dropping off some paperwork.”

“Yeah, what department do you need?”

“I’m going to the restaurant license division. Thanks, but I don’t need any assistance.”

“Restaurant? Are you opening a restaurant?”

“That’s right. Over on Brawley, the old Tavern place. I’ve bought it.”

“Really? Well, that’s great. Good luck with it. Let me know if you need any help with the license or anything.”

Ding.

The doors opened on John’s floor and he moved to exit. He had to kind of slide around the Sheriff’s protruding gut to make good his escape.

“Remember now, let me know if you need anything. That’s what the mayor is here for, you know,” the mayor said sincerely.

John looked back, “Okay, thanks.”

As he turned away John noticed that the Sheriff was looking at him with his eyes half-closed and his lips pursed, as if he were considering whether to place John under arrest for suspicion of something.

Ding.

The doors closed and John walked away, dismissing them from his mind with a final thought, "Pair of bozos."

Mayor Fincastle, with a thoughtful look on his face ordered his Sheriff, "Check out that Tavern. See if it's on the up and up. Take a look at that Matthews guy. See if he has a record or anything."

"You want the place closed down or what," asked the Sheriff? His slow, deep voice seemed to originate somewhere in the vastness of his enormous stomach.

"No, not yet. Maybe later. I just want to know what's going on. Keep an eye on it. Keep me informed"

"You're the Boss."

The next few weeks were a blizzard of activity as they waited for the paperwork to be processed. John was at The Tavern each day, working with Nate, either behind the bar or in the kitchen as he became familiar with the details of the building and business. Nate introduced John to all the customers and John was pleased that they all seemed to be friendly and supportive of the change of ownership.

He submitted the building permit application for the garden-patio addition and when it was approved he hired Jim Pearson, the superintendent he had worked with previously at Loftus Development to assist him in its construction. Finished, it was an open seating area, airy and comfortable with a slanted roof to shade the tables and stools. The Harley riders especially liked it as

they began parking their motorcycles in that section of the parking lot where they could see their bikes and discuss them with their fellow riders.

Nate had commented, "That's a good idea! I should have thought of it myself. See? You're a natural at the restaurant business, John."

Jim Pearson hired on as a part-time bartender to work the evening shift and Betty began interviewing for waitresses. Betty also made deals with her former contacts for supplies of fresh meat.

During this period, John was making the occasional trip to City Hall to arrange the paperwork and licensing requirements. On his initial visit, almost a month earlier, he had submitted the restaurant and beverage license applications but they had not yet been approved. Everything was ready except for those licenses. The contract for the purchase of the Tavern had finalized, John and Betty had become the new owners.

One morning early, John and Betty were at home, standing in the kitchen discussing the arrangements for the Grand Opening celebration they had planned and John commented, "That date won't work unless the license comes back soon. I don't know what's holding it up. They told me in the licensing department it would be ready in just a few weeks."

"Is there someone you can call? At that office?" wondered Betty.

“Hey, that’s reminds me. I met an old school chum of yours. Maybe he can help.”

“Oh, who’s that?”

“The mayor. Archibald Fincastle.”

“Archie? Where did you meet him?” Betty asked.

“I told you about the TV interview, the rotten egg and all that. I met him the next day, in the elevator. Did you really go to school with him? I would have thought they’d put him in a special school. You know, one for the dimwitted. Boy, was he a strange guy, kept jabbering and giggling. Hah, I almost busted up laughing right in the elevator. I kept picturing him covered in the puke and rotten egg mess. Hah. Did you really go to school with him?”

“Yes, Archie and I were in school together, and I hate to admit it but I even went on a date with him.”

“You what?” John asked, flabbergasted.

“Yes, we were both on the debate team and he kept asking and asking me to go to a football game and so I went. I felt kind of sorry for him, he didn’t have any friends, he was so pitiful sort of. It was a mistake because then he really wouldn’t leave me alone. I hadn’t seen him for years, about forty years I guess, and then I bumped into him in the elevator too. That day I went down to renew my vegetable stand permit. He hasn’t changed any. He’s still sort of pitiful.”

John was stunned. He couldn’t imagine his beautiful, smart wife and that babbling, bald-headed bozo going out on a date.

“You never told me. I didn’t know.”

“It wasn’t important.”

“Not important? He’s the mayor for God’s sake. You used to date the mayor?” he asked incredulously.

“Oh, John, I was a sophomore, in the tenth-grade. It was one stupid high school football game. He was a year ahead of me, a junior. We were kids. It’s no big deal. Besides that, he got some girl pregnant and they got married. He lived with his new wife and baby in her parent’s house until he finished high school.”

“Still, it’s hard to picture you with him. I thought you had better taste than that.”

“Well, I must have because I married you didn’t I?”

“Only because I can cook.”

“So? You only married me for my fried chicken.”

John stood with his eyes half closed, looking his wife up and down.

“No, you have other talents and since you don’t have any chicken to fry you can demonstrate them. Right now,” he said, pulling the belt of her robe loose.

“John! We don’t have time for this. You need to go to The Tavern and I have to get busy in the garden.”

“Nate’s got a key. He can open it up. He’s been there forty years, I think he can figure out what to do. Besides, I’m paying him a consulting fee so let him earn his pay while we attend to more important matters. And your gardens not going anyplace either.”

Now, the robe was undone, parted and Betty stood there in her shimmering blue silk Hong Kong sleeping garments. John looked her up and down, admiring her trim figure.

“You never went to a high school football game with me,” he remarked, accusingly.

“I didn’t know you in high school. I went to all your games in college. I was right there in the stand behind the bench, cheering you on. I was your personal cheerleader. Don’t you remember that?”

John removed her robe and hung it over a kitchen chair. Now she was only in the silk top and bottom.

“And, if you recall I snuck in the locker room that time and we ... in the shower ... well, you remember? That time after you scored the game winning touchdown?”

There was a spot on Betty’s neck that was midway between her ear and her shoulder that was especially tender and now John took that little piece of skin gently between his teeth and rolled the skin back and forth like it was a ripe grape, tenderly, accompanied by a sharp intake of his breath, just enough to cause her to shiver.

“Johnnn,”

His hands began a slow exploration of the topography of this delightful terrain that he was so familiar with, yet, that was each time like unexplored territory, rubbing here, stroking there. His hands were like the baton of a conductor, slowly raising the tempo of the orchestra, a single, haunting violin that was gradually joined

by the soft chorus of a single drummer, tapping a cymbal, picking up the beat.

In one swift, practiced movement her silk top was removed, tossed onto the floor, behind her. Raising his arms she pulled his shirt over his head, joining hers in the pile on the floor.

Now they stood bare chest to bare chest, more of the landscape for him to admire and explore. Betty, too, was addicted to this foreplay and skillful with her teeth, tongue and lips. She knew his nipples were as sensitive as hers and she pleased and tormented him. They were both fully committed now, there was no turning back.

Their breath came faster as John popped the snap at the waist of her silk bottoms while Betty was busy with the buckle and zipper of his trousers. Soon they stood like new born babes in the middle of the kitchen floor, their bodies' heat blazing as they used their hands, fingers, teeth and lips on each other.

The bedroom was only a few dozen feet away, but seemed impossibly far so John picked Betty up and laid her on her back on the kitchen table, scooting her bottom to the edge, closest to him. With one of her ankles in each of his hands he began a leisurely journey, kissing and nipping her legs as he slowly moved to the fountainhead and furnace of her love.

He had a hand under each of her knees now, holding her bent legs in the air, continuing the kissing and gentle biting. He was leaning forward and she had her fingers tangled into and gripping his hair as she pulled his face to meet her. John knew her

secret spot, hidden between the folds of her velvet flesh, drowned in sizzling juice like honey in a beehive in a tree that was on fire.

His tongue, like a cat to cream, went straight to that spot and her back arched on the table.

“Ohhh, Johnnn,”

He worked on that tender, yearning piece of her flesh for awhile, a period undefined in time, and then, withdrew his tongue and standing straight, placed her ankles over his shoulders. Using the thumb of his right hand he continued to caress and massage the spot his tongue had previously made to smolder and now, he inserted the steel of his manhood between the cleft of her yielding flesh and gently pushed just the tip towards the yearning, burning core of her being, a slow calculating movement, back and forth, like a cliff-diver, gauging the current and waves, readying for the leap.

“Ohhh,” she moaned.

Gritting his teeth, the muscles of his legs quivering, he forced himself to forgo any further pleasure of deeper breaching, using his thumb to continue the massaging of her secret spot until she began to moan and toss her head from side to side, her teeth clenched, lips drawn back in an agony of delight, pain and pleasure, he was waiting for the unbridled cries of her passion, waiting waiting waiting, until she was there, and then he pushed himself all the way into her, magnifying the intensity of her pleasure like a sun going super-nova, her cries now becoming yells and moans of almost unconsciousness, joining his guttural cries of pleasure, pain and exquisite torment; the both of them, together,

reaching a plateau of orgasmic suffering that was a mix of heaven and hell and living and dying and then; like two survivors thrown on the beach by a tidal wave, a slow re-awakening, a miraculous rebirth.

They were drifting, their hearts hammering; Betty on the table and John collapsed in her arms, the edge of the table cutting into the front of his upper legs.

The telephone rang; shocking them both from the deep, not sleep, but a tranquil slumber.

□ □ □ Chapter 11 □ □ □

With an exasperated sigh he raised himself up on his hands, looking down at Betty's face. She was a picture of bliss and utter contentment; beautiful and peaceful. I wish I could draw, he thought. I would draw this face; my wife's face, right now. It would be better than the Mona Lisa.

The telephone continued ringing.

"Who is it," asked Betty, sleepily?

"Who cares," he answered.

The telephone continued ringing.

"It might be important, I better answer it," she said, moaning and tried to move, an inch or so. She was trapped, beneath him, the link between them still complete. "Answer it."

The telephone continued ringing.

"Whoever it is, I'm going to kill them," said John, moving back, groaning with the effort. As he moved the connection between the two of them was severed and Betty and John both, pitifully, murmured, "Ohhhh".

John stepped to the countertop, picked up the phone and growled, "Hello!"

"Good morning, John. It's Nate. There's a load of beer here. Do you want me to sign for it?"

“Oh my God,” thought John. Is this the first shipment of beer the man has ever seen in forty years?

“Yeah, sure. Put my name on it if you want. Look, I’m running late. I’m going downtown to check on the status of the license applications.”

“Have you been jogging or something? You sound out of breath, John.”

“Huh? Oh, no. Just some RPM around the house here.”

“RPM?”

“You know? Just some routine preventative maintenance and moving some furniture around. Look, I should be there at The Tavern in a couple hours or so. I’ll see you then.”

“Well, don’t have a heart attack man. Okay, John. See ya.”

Betty was still lying on the kitchen table, splayed out, arms and legs akimbo, her body parts in a state of semi-paralysis. “RPM? Is that what that was?” she asked in a quiet voice.

John almost staggered, reaching for the refrigerator door, he removed the pitcher of water like a man who had run a hard race and drank deeply from the jug.

Pulling up a chair he sat down heavily, facing and looking right into the scene of the crime.

“What did you want me to tell him? That we just ... “

“No. Help me up. Oh, what did you do to me? I can’t move.”

“I don’t want you to move. I like the view from right here.”

Realizing what he meant she snapped her legs together like a blushing virgin and rolled to the edge of the table.

Standing, John helped her off the table, pulling her to him. They embraced and the current began to flow again, like the atmosphere just before a lightning strike.

Pushing him away, Betty said, "You're a sex maniac. Are you trying to kill me?"

"Me? You're the sex maniac. You started it."

"Uh, uhh. How did I start it?"

"Talking about your old boyfriends and trying to make me jealous! I had to stake my claim."

"What? Archie? Are you nuts? Archie wasn't a boyfriend. He was just a silly kid and so was I. I went to one stupid football game with him. If you're looking for an excuse for being a sex maniac you're going to have to do better than that," said Betty, reaching for her robe.

John pulled her back, biting her neck, "Uh, uhh. I tell you what. Later, tonight, we can negotiate who was to blame for that little episode. Okay?"

"Well, okay. But next time you have to lay down on that hard, cold table. Let's see how you like it?"

"You got a deal, lady."

A glass of orange juice in one hand, an apple in the other, John steered with his knees and consumed his light breakfast as he drove to the City Hall. The radio in his car was tuned to an old classic rock station and Eric Clapton was crooning about the lady

who “Looked wonderful tonight” and John blessed his lucky stars for finding his wonderful woman. He hoped the wonderful days and nights would never end.

Several blocks from City Hall he ran into a traffic jam. It was past the normal time for early morning rush hour and he cursed his bad timing as he patrolled the streets searching for a parking place. It seemed downtown was jammed this morning and there had been no advisories or reports on the radio.

He finally had to park in a lot, several blocks away and was glad to find the spot. Walking to City Hall he saw that there were hundreds, if not thousands of people who were carrying the signs he had seen before that proclaimed, “Hell no. We won’t go.”

“Great,” he thought. “Another demonstration.” He reminded himself to not get in the path of any egg-throwers. Chuckling, he entered the building and moved to his favorite, lucky, elevator. The one the mayor had been in still had the ‘Closed for Cleaning’ sign on it.

Entering the License Department he walked to the counter and recognized the lady who he had submitted his application to. She was an older woman with her hair dyed in a stiff permanent, skinny with a bad complexion.

“Hello. I hope you can help me. Can you tell me the status of my license application?”

“I’ll certainly try. What’s the name on the application?” she responded.

“Matthews. John Matthews.”

“Who?”

“John Matthews.”

Oh, just a moment, and I’ll look it up,” and she moved quickly to a computer work station.

She tapped the keyboard for a few minutes and returned to the counter.

“I’m sorry Mr. Matthews; I can’t find any record of your application.”

“What? That’s not right. I submitted the paperwork a month ago.”

“Well, just a minute and I’ll check the hard copy,” and she walked over to a series of filing cabinets that covered one whole wall.

As John watched, the clerk opened one drawer and shuffled through some file folders. Closing that one she moved to another cabinet; shuffling files, then another cabinet and another cabinet.

Returning to the counter she said, “Mr. Matthews, there is no record of your application. Are you sure you submitted the correct form? Did you bring it in here?”

“Yes, of course. I handed it to you. Don’t you remember?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, there are hundreds of people in and out of here every day. I can’t possibly remember everyone. Would you like a blank application to fill out?”

“No, I don’t want to start all over again. Can I speak to your supervisor?”

John was beginning to get aggravated. Good God, he fumed. How could they lose a simple piece of paper?

“There’s no reason to get upset Mr. Matthews, and I am the supervisor of this department and I’m the City Treasurer. You’ve obviously made a mistake and submitted your paperwork to the wrong department. The only thing I can tell you is to fill out this application,” the woman told him, pushing a piece of paper across the counter.

John stood by the counter totally disgusted. I don’t believe it, he thought. A simple piece of paper: Gone. Well, it’s not this woman’s fault. I shouldn’t take it out on her.

“Okay,” he said. I’m going to check somewhere else. Thank you for your time.”

The woman watched John leave through the door and waited until he had boarded an elevator, the lights above the door indicating he was ascending then she picked up a telephone and dialed a number.

Several floors up in the building, in the penthouse suite, Sheriff Benny Hoke was sitting in an ante-room next to the mayor’s office, his feet propped up on the desk, reading a tabloid magazine. The cell-phone in shirt pocket rang; his personal cell phone and he looked at the caller ID and answered, “Hello, there Mrs. Hoke. What can your husband and Sheriff do for you today?”

“Benny! That man, that gangster, the drug smuggler you told me to watch for. He was just in here! Oh my God, I was

scared to death. I'm here by myself, everybody else is on break. Ohh, I was ... "

"Slow down. What happened?" asked Hoke.

"I did it just like you told me to. I told him his application wasn't here. Ohh, I wished you were here, I was so ..."

"Wait, honey. Just calm down. Everything's okay. Where is he now?"

"He got on an elevator and went up, just like you said he would. Ohh, Benny ..."

"Calm down, sweetie. I got it all under control. Hey, are you gonna fry those pork chops tonight?"

"What? Well, I was ... "

"Good. And make some baked beans, fried taters and biscuits and gravy too. And a chocolate cake. I'll be down there to get you at five o'clock. Now don't you worry about a thing. See ya later."

Sheriff Benny Hoke ended the call.

"Benny? Should I lock the door? Benny? Benny?"

The Sheriff returned the cell phone to his pocket. He levered his big fat ass and gargantuan gut out of the comfortable chair with a series of grunts and groans, accompanied by several loud farts.

He went across the room and opened the door to the mayor's office. The mayor was sitting at his desk reviewing several sheets of paper his speechwriters had prepared for him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Mayor. That Matthews feller is coming up. What do you want me to do?"

Mayor Archibald Fincastle removed his reading glasses and looked at his Sheriff and bodyguard across the room.

“Now? He’s here now?”

“Yes sir, on his way up. You want I should call for backup?”

“No, no. Just wait next door. If I hit my emergency button come in but sit tight for now.”

“You’re the Boss,” the Sheriff said, closing the door. He returned to his comfortable chair and the very interesting story about how Elvis had been photographed by a NASA satellite, alive and residing on Mars.

Mayor Fincastle looked at his desk with squinted eyes and twisted lips. He needed to prepare the stage. He opened a desk drawer and stuffed the important re-election speech he had been reading into it. Then he jumped up and grabbed a handful of thick books on jurisprudence and Constitutional Law from the bookshelf. He opened them to random pages to give a visitor the appearance he had been using his taxpayer funded salary, studying and preparing for his important governmental duties.

His intercom rang and the secretary said, “Excuse me sir, there’s a Mr. John Matthews here who would like a word with you. He doesn’t have an appointment. Shall I tell him you’re busy?”

“No, bring him in,” the mayor answered.

When John was ushered into the mayor’s office by the secretary he saw that the mayor was very busy, reading from several books and making notes on a legal pad.

The mayor had his finger on a part of a page, writing with his other hand. He didn't look up.

"Please, come in. Come in, I'll be right with you. Mary? Would you ask our guest what he wants to drink? Some coffee, maybe?"

"Would you like some coffee or a soda?"

"Ah, no thank you," replied John. The mayor continued his studying so John walked over and took the seat at the side of his desk.

"Hmmm, very interesting," mumbled the mayor as he made a note.

Carefully inserting a post-it-note so he wouldn't lose his place the mayor closed his book and then looked up at John.

"Hello, John. Sorry to keep you waiting but I was just checking a fact that applies to our State budget, something the Governor asked me to look into for him. He and I will be going to Washington D.C. to appear before Congress. Work, work, work. My job is never done you know," the mayor informed John with a serious expression.

"It's good to see you again, John. We keep bumping in to each other, don't we? Is this a social call?"

"Hello, Mr. Mayor," said John offering his hand which the mayor grasped in both of his and shook vigorously.

John eventually got his hand back and said, "Well, I guess it's half and half. I wanted to say hello, and see if your offer of assistance you made the other day was still good?"

“Assistance? Well, of course. What can I do to help you?”
asked the mayor.

“I seem to be having a bit of trouble in the restaurant license department. They’ve lost my application.”

“They what? I don’t understand?”

“Yes sir, about a month ago, if you recall, we were in the same elevator and I was going to the license department? Well, I did all the paperwork and now they can’t find the application. I see you’re very busy and I hate to bother you ...”

“No! It’s no bother at all. That’s what I’m here for; after all I am your public servant. Now, tell me what happened?”

John described how he had bought The Tavern and submitted all the paperwork. He told the mayor he had a grand opening scheduled but, without the paperwork he wouldn’t be able to meet the date.

“Right now, everything’s in a limbo. I’ve been operating on the previous owner’s license, but the paperwork for his permit expires the end of this week and I need mine to keep going. I was wondering if you could help me figure out what’s going on?”

“Are you certain you submitted the application? Maybe it was lost in the mail?”

“No, I brought it in and hand-delivered it. The lady in the office told me it would only take a few weeks. I can’t figure it out,” said John, shaking his head in confusion.

The mayor expressed his sorrow at John’s predicament and told him he would give the matter his full attention.

“Don’t worry about a thing, John. I’ll make some calls and see if I can straighten this out for you. You go ahead with your plans, I’m sure we can get this figured out in time for your grand opening. The restaurant business, weren’t you in construction or something? How did you decide to go into the restaurant business?”

John and Archibald Fincastle sat and had a good conversation. He described to the mayor his lifelong ambition to become involved in the restaurant business and how everything had seemed to fall into place. John thought that maybe he had miscalculated the man previously. He seemed to be not the bozo John had previously figured him for. He wasn’t giggling and babbling the way he had in the elevator. And, he seemed to be a genuinely nice guy, concerned about John’s plight and ready and willing to help in any way he could to resolve the situation, in addition to working hard at his job, getting ready for his Congressional testimony.

They sat and chatted for awhile, the mayor asking John’s opinion about zoning, permitting and construction for the city’s master growth plan and other issues. It was a good discussion and John was relieved that his application problem would be taken care of by this man who was obviously concerned about the welfare of his constituents.

“Mr. Mayor, I see you’re a busy man and I won’t take any more of your time,” said John rising from his chair and offering his hand. “Thank you for seeing me without an appointment.”

The mayor rose and took John's outstretched hand in both of his, shaking it warmly.

"It's no bother at all, John. Maybe I could come by for dinner at your new place sometime?"

"Anytime at all, Mr. Mayor. You'll be the guest of honor. We have a private room if you ever need somewhere to hold a dinner meeting."

"Great! I might just take you up on that, John. Good to see you. Don't worry about a thing. I'll look into your little problem and I'm sure we can get it straightened out."

John exited the mayor's office with a bounce in his step and a smile on his face, sure that, now, the problem would be resolved.

He's not a bad guy, he thought. I guess it was okay for Betty to go to the football game with him. I'll tell her I forgive her, after she negotiates it out of me, he thought with a smile.

Mayor Archibald Fincastle sat at his desk and looked at the door the Matthews guy had just walked out of. His expression, which had been one of camaraderie before the man had left, now turned to one of evil calculation.

Sliding open one of his desk drawers he removed the original license application the man had left downstairs, a month ago, and he looked at it thoughtfully.

He stood and walked over to the far corner of his spacious office to the large shredding machine and pushed the ON button.

"I found your application, Mr. John Matthews," he said as he carefully fed it into the maw of the machine. He watched as the tiny

strips came out the bottom and fell into the wastebasket, the scraps of which were burned each night in the city incinerator.

“Don’t worry about a thing, Mr. Matthews” he said with a satisfied, self-serving smile on his smug, politicians face.

□ □ □ **Chapter 12** □ □ □

When John exited the City Hall main doors he saw a line of Sheriff's Deputies standing at the top of the stairs by the entrance, checking identification and barring access to the building to only those with official business.

Out in the street were more Deputies on foot and another squadron on horse-back, riding along beside the demonstrators who stretched along the entire street.

He stopped for a moment at the top of the stairs and looked with amazement at this large gathering of citizens most of whom were carrying the "Hell No. We won't go" signs. Some of the demonstrators also carried other signs that read, "Stop Government Abuse", and, "Justice for the Poor" and a large group who carried the signs "I'm Madder 'n Hell."

One large banner that stretched across the street from sidewalk to sidewalk, supported by a line of people read, "Mayor Fincastle Sucks!"

The entire crowd was chanting, "HELL NO. WE WON'T GO. HELL NO. WE WON'T GO"

Below John, halfway up the long line of steps to the building, a TV news crew was filming the action while a coiffed and manicured reporter was speaking into a microphone, facing the camera, the crowd behind her.

John had parked his car several blocks away, on the other side of the assembly. He would have to take a circuitous route to get to it. Where's an elevator when you need it, he wondered?

His car was parked due north, the crowd was marching east, so he figured he would move along with them, angling across the street as he went and hopefully only have to backtrack, maybe, a few blocks to get to his parking space.

He descended the long steps to the sidewalk and was caught up the flow of people like a leaf in a stream of water. As he walked forward he began to attempt to slowly drift to the left side.

High up in his office, Mayor Fincastle stood in front of the plate glass window, Sheriff Benny Hoke by his side.

"Right there. See him," said Hoke pointing down toward the street.

"No? Are you sure it's him?" asked the mayor.

"Yes sir, that's him. Lucky he showed up today, huh? Kind of a bonus. You want me to give the order now?"

"I don't see him," the mayor complained. "Where is he?"

"Looky right thar. He's by that fire hydrant. Wait, now he's straight across from my deputy on the white horse. See him?"

"Yeah, I see him now," enthused the mayor. "Maybe the horse will trample him when everybody starts running. Okay, go ahead and start it. Oh, these are the best seats in the house! This is going to be so good; I wish I had some popcorn."

“There’s some microwave popcorn in my room. You wanna get some before I tell them to go? It’s the kind with the extra butter on it.”

“No, no. I might lose sight of Matthews. I don’t want to miss that. Go ahead, make the call,” ordered the mayor.

“You’re the Boss,” replied the Sheriff. Darn, I wanted some popcorn too, he thought sadly.

Taking the walkie-talkie from his belt, he said into it, “Attention all units. This is the Sheriff. Code 451. Repeat, Code 451. All ...”

“Make sure they get Matthews,” interrupted the mayor.

“All hear this: Move in. Now,” continued the Sheriff, finishing the transmission.

From his perch, on high, above the scene, the mayor saw several Sheriff’s cars pull up and stop, blocking the street at the east end and at the adjoining intersections which effectively plugged the marcher’s route. The people in the front of the huge mass of disobedient malcontents now came to a halt, the people behind them continuing to push forward.

Several large trucks, paddy wagons, the words, “Civil Disobedience Unit – Sheriff’s Department” painted on their sides pulled up next to the patrol cars and dozens of riot-squad geared troopers began climbing from the rear of each truck.

Looking to his left, west, the mayor saw more of the same vehicles, trucks and deputies arriving at the rear of the assembly.

Quickly looking back east he almost lost sight of Matthews but found him again, he was right in the middle of the crowd.

Now the assemblage of criminals was pinned in between the two groups of law enforcement personnel at the east and west ends and the tall buildings that blocked their escape route on the north and south sides.

The mayor's eyes were bright, his lips parted and his tongue was protruding from his mouth in excitement. "This is so awesome."

"I'm sure that dirty bastard egg thrower is in the pack somewhere, Mr. Mayor. We'll get him for you this time. You got my word on it," the Sheriff growled.

John had been slowly moving forward with the crowd, veering to his left in order to move to the opposite side. He hadn't been in a crowd of people this large since his college days when Nixon had ordered the illegal incursion of troops into Cambodia. On his college campus, as at hundreds more all over the nation, students had gathered in peaceful protests of this escalation of the pointless Vietnam War.

These people today, just like the students then, had been exercising their First Amendment Right to "Peaceably Assemble".

On Monday, May 4, 1970, John and Betty had been in a group of students at UCLA gathered around the campus fountain. They had just finished breakfast at the cafeteria and had stopped to listen to the speech a fellow was making standing in front of a large bed sheet that had the peace sign painted on it. The speaker was

a long haired and bearded ex-Army veteran, dressed in his army green uniform that had been modified to include counter-culture patches, peace signs and love beads. The man was describing the horrors of war he had seen and the senselessness of it when another ex-Army guy had run up with a transistor radio in his hand.

It was nine forty-five AM Pacific Time and the news of the fatal shootings at Kent State in Ohio were being broadcast over the radio.

John was remembering the shock of the event, the shock of Americans shooting fellow Americans – and then –.

One of the Sheriff's Deputies climbed onto the hood of his patrol car and raised a megaphone to his mouth.

“ATTENTION. ATTENTION. THIS IS AN UNLAWFUL GATHERING. YOU DO NOT HAVE A PERMIT FOR THIS ASSEMBLY. EVERYONE WILL DISPERSE. DISPERSE NOW OR FACE ARREST.”

John had been lost in thought and now he bumped into the person in front of him, people behind him continuing to push forward. There was a mass of people in front of him and he couldn't see over them to the scene ahead. People began to shout in anger in front. “What's going on?” “Hey, why is everybody stopped?” he heard the mass began yelling. “Keep moving”.

Yells of panic began to be heard and the crowd in front turned to retrace their steps, but the people in the rear were pushing forward.

“What the hell's going on now?” said John aloud.

In the office high above, the mayor was bent over giggling, his moist hands leaning against the floor to ceiling window to hold him up. He watched the riot-squad deputies thrust forward into the crowd, swinging their batons and spraying tear-gas into people's faces.

The Sheriff continued to give orders into his walkie-talkie, directing his troops from his 50-yard line view of the activity.

The crowd was in a full panic now and John was having difficulty staying on his feet as everyone pushed and turned to escape the melee.

At the edges, by the sidewalks, the mounted deputies clubbed people away who tried to get to the office doors of the buildings that hemmed them on the north and south sides of the street.

John saw an opening to his right and made for it. Screams and yells filled the air and now, a Sheriff's Department helicopter zoomed overhead. John looked up and saw its side hatches were open and sharpshooters with rifles were hanging out, their rifles pointed down at the crowd.

"Good God," he yelled.

What just a few minutes before had been a boisterous, yet happy and law-abiding assembly of citizens exercising their Right's had suddenly turned into a flight of panicked people trying to survive.

As John tried to make his way back to the sidewalk he managed to hold up several people who were in danger of falling

and being trampled. Suddenly, in front of him, he saw an older lady fall to her face, hitting the sidewalk curb. She had a child, a young girl of ten or so by the hand and the child was crying and screaming hysterically, "Grandma! Grandma!"

John bent and scooped the little girl up his right arm and with his other hand grabbed the woman by the back of her jacket and jerked her to her feet. Holding them both tightly he barreled through the crowd to reach the safety of the building, just a few feet away.

"COME ON. MOVE," he yelled.

All around them was frenzied yelling and screams of terror. He saw a man get clubbed to the ground by a deputy on horseback and then the horse stomp the man as the deputy spurred the horse forward, into the crowd.

"HOLY SHIT. COME ON," he yelled as they continued forward.

Miraculously, right in front of John a hole opened and he surged forward aiming toward the front door of a haberdashery shop on the ground floor of the next building just east of City Hall.

As he reached the door a frightened clerk was attempting to lock it from the inside, his fingers through the door trying to pull it closed against the people who were attempting to pull it open, holding the handle. John rammed his left hip violently against the door to slam it shut against the clerk's fingers.

"AHHHHH," screamed the clerk falling backwards onto the floor clutching his hand and rolling around. "AHHHHH."

John jerked the door open and ran into the shop as a multitude of fleeing citizens followed him in.

He still had the little girl in his arms; she was wailing and crying and almost strangling him in her terror. His other hand was still gripping the woman's jacket, pulling her in his wake as he stepped over the clerk, saying, "Sorry about that. I'm really sorry. Sorry."

A man who was being fitted for a pair of trousers stood on a platform in front of the mirrors; the tailor beside him, wide eyed with pins in his mouth. The man's trousers had fallen down around his ankles and he watched in amazement as the procession of people fled to the rear of the store and the back exit. The customer stood in his shirt, the tails hanging over his blue boxer shorts with big red hearts on them and said, in a distinct British accent to no one in particular, "I say, is this another one of those Boston Tea Party's?"

John bulled into the storeroom, in the back, hoping for a rear exit. There, he saw the sign. Running to it, he kicked the latch; it opened to the alley behind the building. Jerkily, they ran to the middle of the alley. He looked to his left and right, he saw Sheriff's cars with their lights flashing, blocking that means of escape. The little girl was crying and screaming into his ear so loud it was difficult to think. Her arms were wrapped around his neck so tightly he was gasping for breath.

People boiled out of the door behind him and then police whistles began blowing as the deputies saw the crowd.

"Over there, get 'em," one of the deputies yelled.

“Jesus Christ,” yelled John in desperation.

“Look,” yelled the woman who was tightly clutching John’s arm, pointing across the alley.

Across the way was an open back door and standing there, eyes wide in his shocked face was a Chinese fellow in a cook’s apron.

Seizing the opportunity, John took a firm grasp of the woman’s arm, tightened his grip on the little girl and ran toward the door.

The Chinese fellow saw the red-faced, sweating man with the crying child in his arms and the terrified woman, her face bloody, beside him. He had stepped out back for a break and heard the police sirens and yelling from the next block over. He looked to each side and saw the police in riot gear charging toward them. He made a speedy decision.

The Chinese cook pushed the door fully open, waved his arm at them and said in accented English, “Queekly, queekly. Hully.”

As they hurtled past him the Chinese man jumped back in and slammed the door, locking it tight against the horde of police who were wailing away at the other people in the alley, clubbing them with mindless ferocity.

John, the girl in his arms and the woman ran into the back of the facility, a restaurant, a dozen other cooks and staff busy at the steaming woks stopping to watch as they barreled through. They

ran through a swinging door into the dining room, past the tables full of shocked customers and out the front door onto the sidewalk.

Across the street was a department store and John pulled the woman behind him as he ran into the street; cars slamming on their brakes, tires squealing and horns honking as they made it to the department store's revolving doors.

As they pushed around the door John looked back and saw the name of the Chinese restaurant was "Lucky Gate No. 8". Yeah, no joke, he thought.

They entered the store into an oasis of sanity. The atmosphere was quiet; some instrumental Musak softly playing through the overhead speakers, customers shopping as if they didn't have a care in the world and knew nothing about the demonstration and heavy-handed law enforcement reaction just a couple city blocks to the north.

John gently pried the little girl's arms away from his throat, and finally, was able to take a deep breath. He patted her on the back and attempted to hand her over to her grandmother, but the little girl wouldn't let go of her death grip on his shirt.

"Come on, let's keep going. If I remember right there's an exit at the other end of the store."

He noticed now that the woman had a scrape on her cheek, apparently from when she had fallen. The woman put her hand to her face and her fingers came away bloody.

"You need to clean that up. Let's find a restroom," he said.

The woman was in shock, her hand was clutching at John's shirt. He followed the signs to the Customer Service Department where they found restrooms. The woman eased the girl from John's arms, saying gently, "Come on, Connie. Come to grandma."

John watched them go into the Ladies Room and then he entered the Men's Room.

He stood at the sink splashing cold water on his face, trying to cool himself off from the struggle and hasty retreat. He looked in the mirror, but instead of seeing his own face, his mind replayed the last feverish minutes.

"Jesus," he muttered. "What was that? Why did the cops do that? Somebody could have been killed."

After a few minutes at the sink he left the restroom with a grim face.

"By God, I'm telling the mayor about this," he determined. "Somebody's ass is going to get fired, or worse."

The woman and little girl were still in the Ladies Room so John collapsed in a chair and considered their next moves.

□ □ □ **Chapter 13** □ □ □

They left the department store by the far south exit and found a taxi-cab sitting at the curb, its engine idling. John sat in the front and the woman and little girl got in the back. John gave the driver directions heading southeast, meaning to make a large half-circle, around the downtown area, to get back to his car.

After a few minutes the little girl fell asleep in her grandma's arms and the woman sat ashen-faced, looking out the window.

On the radio, newscasters and DJ's at every station were excitedly describing the event. As John listened it became apparent that there were no fatalities, but many injuries. The hospital emergency rooms were full and the jails were filled to overcrowding.

Callers in to the shows were expressing their outrage, one fellow was ranting about, "Politicians! They're all a bunch of criminals! You mark my words, when the truth comes out you'll see this was Fincastle's doing. I say, fire him. Fire 'em all. Let's take our country back. We all gotta get madder 'n hell."

The taxi-cab driver, a swarthy skinned, bearded man, the name on his license on the sun-visor reading, Ali Ben Ali, saw their fatigued condition, torn clothes, her bloody face and figured they must have been caught in the disturbance.

He remarked, "In my country, where I am from before I come to America, this would be much worse. No one is allowed to gather in large groups. Everyone would be shot."

Yeah? Where's that?" asked John, in a tired voice as he rubbed his eyes.

"Saudi Arabia. The House of Saud is fearful of the people. They allow no one to speak or march. Many deaths."

"Really? In Saudi Arabia? I thought it was a country with some democracy. That's what our President says, anyway."

"Your President, the 'W' they call him, he only sees the palaces and beautiful places the Ruler wants him to see. He has never seen the slums where most of my people live. There would be many deaths today, if this were in my country."

"How long have you been here?"

"Five years, and I am very glad to have coming to America. I am very much sorry for your troubles here today. It is much worse at home. I pray it does not become here, like there."

John turned and looked at the sleeping girl and the woman. He asked, in a quiet voice so as to not wake the girl, "Hey, how you doing back there? You okay?"

The woman turned her face from the window and John saw she was crying. Seeing her closely now for the first time he realized she was probably in her mid-sixties, a small woman, her grey hair worn down to her shoulders.

“You saved our lives, and I don’t even know your name. Thank you, thank you. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t rescued us.”

Embarrassed, John mumbled, “No, it ... you would have been okay. It’s a good thing you noticed that kitchen door. My name’s John, John Matthews. What’s your name?”

“Mr. Matthews. Thank you so much for what you did. My name is Angela Morris and this is my granddaughter, Connie.”

“Please, call me John. Look, everything’s okay now. Here we are. Over there, Ali, just pull up by the curb,” John said, pointing.

John paid the fare and tried to tip the man a twenty-dollar bill.

“No. There is no need for tipping. Go in peace. God Bless America,” said Ali Ben Ali.

John looked at the man and smiled, “Hey, thanks for the ride.”

John stood by the taxi’s door and helped Angela out who was still holding the sleeping girl.

“Where do you live? Come on, I’ll drive you home”

“You’ve been very kind, John. We’re only a few blocks away, we can walk. I’m sure you’re busy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Come on,” he said and walked to his car.

After a moments hesitation the woman followed. She climbed in the back, John started the car and they pulled from the lot.

She gave him directions and soon they pulled in front of a building, the sign out front proclaiming it to be the, "Wayside Mission". John realized it was a temporary shelter for the homeless.

"You live here?" he asked.

"Yes, we live here. It's only for awhile."

John parked and walked into the lobby with her and the little girl who was now awake. The little girl saw some of her friends and with the resilience of youth ran out a side door to an enclosed playground. The woman asked John to sit with her for a few moments; they went out to the playground area and sat under a tree at a picnic table.

"Mr. Matthews, John, I can't thank you enough for what you did."

"Hey, don't worry about it. I'm just glad I came along when I did. We were all in a tight spot. It's no big deal. Angela, I don't mean to be nosy, but were you marching today because, you, well, because you live here?"

"Yes, John, my home was foreclosed on last month and the Mission gave me and my granddaughter a small room to live in. I'm very grateful to them."

It was against John's nature to pry into another's business, but after what they had just experienced together he decided to ask, "Where are the child's parents?"

"My daughter is in the Army, stationed in Iraq and her husband, my son-in-law, he passed away a few years ago. It was cancer. Their insurance cancelled them. They said it was a pre-existing condition. I took out a mortgage on my home to pay the hospital bills, and then the adjustable rate went up and I couldn't pay it anymore."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. But, why doesn't your daughter come home if you're having financial troubles. You need her help."

"She tried to, the Army is supposed to be doing the paperwork, but it takes time."

"Does she know you've lost your home?"

"No, I didn't tell her. Not yet. She's worried enough already and where she is, they're fighting everyday. Connie and I will be alright here in the meantime, we've got a roof over our heads and three meals a day. We'll be okay."

John admired the woman's stoicism; she sat with a dignified face as she related her troubles. He looked around at all the children, on the swing sets, slides and playing hopscotch and other games.

"Tell me Angela, how many people are here, families with children?"

"A couple hundred, most of them have lost their homes, some of them have been here for months."

My God, thought John. This is happening in America?

Just then John's cell phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket.

"Excuse me, Angela."

"Hello."

"John? I just came in to start dinner and I turned on the TV and, oh my God. John, you were downtown. Did you see the riot? Were you in it? Are you okay?"

"Betty, calm down, honey. Yes I was there but I had my lucky elevator, or, this time the lucky gate. I'm okay. And, it wasn't a riot, it was a ... Gestapo... something, I don't know."

"Elevator? Gate? What in the world are you talking about? Where are you? You're not in jail or the hospital are you?"

"No, I'm fine. Look I'll tell you all about it when I get there. I'll be home soon. Okay?"

"Can you drive? Do you want me to come get you? Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"Honey, I'm fine. I'll be there in just a little while. Okay? Look, I'm going to go. I'll see you soon."

"Well, okay, but be careful driving, John. I love you."

"Love you too, honey. Bye."

Angela Morris said, "That was your wife? She's worried about you. You should go home."

Standing she offered her hand, "Thank you again, Mr. John Matthews"

John took the woman's hand in his and just then the little girl, Connie, came running up. She took her grandma's other hand and stood there looking solemnly at John.

"Mr. Matthews is leaving now, Connie. Tell him thank you for giving us a ride home."

The little girl stuck her hand out, offering a handshake, and John took the small hand in his. He kneeled down to look her in the eye.

"Connie, it was very nice to meet you. You take care of your grandmother, okay?"

The little girl opened her mouth to speak, and then she threw her arms around John's neck, hugging him tight.

"Thank you, Mr. Matthews," she said in a tiny, choked voice.

□ □ □ **Chapter 14** □ □ □

Betty and John sat at the kitchen table, his left leg propped up and a bag of ice on his knee. He'd wrenched his old football injury and his knee was swollen.

"Good God, why did the cops charge the crowd like that? No one was breaking the law! It was a...it was peaceful. They were only marching. When did that become a crime?" he asked, in a dumbfounded voice.

They watched the mayor on the ten o'clock news, saying, "Criminal elements and their criminal behavior will not be tolerated. The full force of the law will be used to put down any insurrections."

The mayor had made the one statement and left the podium without taking any questions from the reporters.

On every television station the anchors and their invited guests and experts were discussing the event, all expressing outrage and shock. The television crew on the City Hall steps and another, a helicopter with an Eye-Cam had captured the earlier action downtown and Betty was watching with her hand over her mouth and her eyes wide in disbelief.

"Oh my God. I can't believe you got caught in that. It's a miracle you weren't hurt. Tell me again about the woman and child, how did you meet them?"

“It’s like I told you, we didn’t exactly meet, it was more like a car crash or something. They both seemed to be alright when I left them at the mission. I’ll tell you this – I don’t think I ever want to go back downtown! First the crazy rotten egg thing, and now this. It’s a nuthouse down there,” said John with a grimace as he adjusted the ice pack.

“I hope that guy’s hand is okay. I feel really bad about slamming his fingers in the door like that. The stupid idiot, if he’d just opened the door instead of trying to lock everybody out. On second thought, I hope all his fingers are broke,” he finished with a grim expression.

“You know, I’d just left the mayor’s office, he acted normal, like he didn’t even know the demonstrators were out front of City Hall. All these news stations,” he said, pointing to the TV, “Are saying it was his fault. You know the man, could what they say be right?”

“John, I don’t know Archibald Fincastle, the mayor. I only knew him when he was a silly kid. Back then he was kind of the class clown. He got attention by acting goofy. He was very smart, an A student, but everybody made fun of him and picked on him. He was pitiful.”

“But do you think he ordered the police to charge the crowd, like they’re saying on TV?”

“I don’t know. Who knows? Maybe he did, he was sneaky even back then. But, can anybody prove it?”

“Come on, let’s go to bed. You need to rest your knee. I’ll get another ice pack and a towel to wrap it in,” said Betty, standing and pulling him up.

She put her arm around his waist, “I don’t think you should go back downtown either. We’ll get the license straightened out over the telephone. Oh, John, I’m so glad you didn’t get hurt.”

“Not hurt? What do you call this knee? It’s going to take some serious nursing, lady.”

“Uhh, is that all you think about? Come on, you crazy man.”

The next morning John woke to the smell of bacon cooking and coffee percolating. Moving into the kitchen he saw that Betty was up and dressed.

“Well, good morning, sleepy head. I thought you’d stay in bed all day. How’s the knee?”

“Good morning. I feel like I got hammered by the entire defensive line. I’m getting too old for this nonsense.”

“Do you need to go to the doctor? Let them see your knee?”

“No, the swellings gone down, it’s okay. All that good nursing you did to it made it feel better. Well, maybe it needs a little more ...”

“Uh, huh, maybe I should take you to the doctor and let them keep you for awhile. You need something examined, that’s for sure. How do you want your eggs? Scrambled or fried?”

After breakfast, John showered and dressed, and then they drove together to the Tavern. It was a beautiful, sunny fall morning

and Nate had already arrived and opened the doors, getting ready for the lunch trade.

He asked if John had been able to get the license situation straightened out and John described his trip to City Hall.

“Holy smoke! You were there? Hey, I thought I saw you on the TV, but I figured, no, that can’t be John. He’s got more sense than to get in the middle of that mess. I guess that was you I saw? I guess you don’t have any sense,” said Nate with a chuckle.

“That’s right,” agreed Betty.

“Well, I hate to say it but I have to agree with you both, this time,” replied John.

“And no, I don’t have the license. They lost the application. The mayor’s supposed to be looking into it for me. I should hear something soon, hopefully today or tomorrow. At least by Friday, I hope anyway.”

“The mayor? He might not have time to look into it for you. Have you seen today’s newspaper?” asked Nate.

“No. I didn’t look at it. Why, what’s in it?”

Nate went to the bar and returned to their table with the newspaper. The bold headline read:

CITIZENS COMMISSION DEMANDS ANSWERS

The mayor’s office is in full disaster-recovery mode as members of the Citizens Commission and the ACLU ask hard questions related to yesterday’s demonstration and the Sheriff’s Departments reaction.

Hundreds of lawyers from all over the state are lining up to represent the thousands of injured people who are expected to file claims against the City and State. Lawyers from around the nation are applying to the California State Bar so they can be admitted to practice and represent potential clients. The President of the California State Bar said in an interview that, “Billions, maybe trillions of dollars in claims will be filed. This is the next Gold Rush. This is going to be easy money!” The mayor’s office is making no comment and Sheriff Benny Hoke is in seclusion. The Governor canceled his vacation to Austria, saying, “Gut Gott, vat has dat Einfaltspinsel done now?”...

In disgust, John tossed the paper on the table and said, “Well, maybe he was in on it. But, like you said, Betty, how can it be proved?”

“I hate to tell you this John, but that’s not the least of your problems,” remarked Nate.

“Today is Wednesday and my license expires day after tomorrow, Friday. Your Grand Opening is scheduled for the next day – Saturday – in three days. Betty and I looked at the dates on

the fresh food deliveries and it's all going to expire in a week, next Tuesday. I'm not saying it's going to go bad, but according to the restaurant laws, it all has to be used before the expiration date or trashed. I hate to see you waste all that meat and money if you can't get your license. Oh yeah, I almost forgot. The sign company called, they'll be here this afternoon to install your new sign. Thanks for keeping the Tavern name. It's going to look good – 'the, Art of a Meal at The Tavern'. I like it," finished Nate.

John sat at the table, rubbing his forehead, lost in thought.

"Why did I think this was going to be easy," he wondered.

Looking up he saw that Betty had a worried expression on her face. He reached over and took her hand, "Cheer up," he comforted her. "It'll be alright, and if not you can go shopping for some of those long gown things to wear in Iraq."

"What?" asked a puzzled Nate. "Oh, it's a private joke. Never mind."

"John's a comedian," Betty told Nate. "As the general manager I'm going to put him on the stage. He'll be our big act. We'll sell out."

"Seriously," she said turning back to John. "This isn't funny. What will we do with the thousands of dollars of food and stuff we have if we can't have the grand opening?"

John looked around at the big room with a few customers in it for lunch. He considered: Nate's license expires Friday night. So Saturday morning this place is shut down – No license, No

business. The food he had acquired for the grand opening would go to waste.

Damn.

Unless...

“Nate, you know the restaurant laws. Let me ask you a question. If we can’t sell the food, can we give it away? And if we don’t have a license for the inside, can we do it outside?”

“Give it away? You mean for free?”

“Sure. Can we do that?”

“Raw? Not cooked?”

John chuckled at his puzzled expression. “No, we’ll cook it first, just like what’s on the menu.”

“Well, I reckon you can do that. Who would you give it too?”

John sat at the table with a satisfied smile on his face as he described to Nate and Betty what he was thinking. He spoke for many minutes, both of them looking at him with confused expressions that slowly turned to one’s of delight.

They sat and discussed the logistics of the plan, Nate making a wonderful suggestion. They worked out the details and when they were satisfied with the plan John and Betty left for a quick drive and Nate got on the telephone, calling some of his motorcycle riding buddies.

□ □ □ **Chapter 15** □ □ □

When Betty and John arrived at the Wayside Mission they saw a television crew was set up and the same lady reporter who John had seen on the City Hall steps was speaking into the microphone. Parked on the street next to the curb was a large RV with the words, “BURT, BURT & BURT LAW OFFICES – IF YOU’RE HURT, CALL THE BURTS” painted on its side in bold letters.

A man, apparently one of the Burt legal team was standing at the bottom of the RV’s steps. Like a carnival barker he was chanting, “Step right up folks for a free initial consultation. Tell us your story of pain and suffering and we’ll tell you what its worth. Remember, we don’t get paid until you do. Step right up for the best deal in town.”

“Good God,” muttered John, “Bunch of buzzards.”

He was relieved to see that none of the residents of the Mission were falling for the man’s spiel. The grassy front yard of the building was empty except for the TV crew and the barrister Burt.

Just then a solid built, older woman with white hair, dressed in a nun’s habit without the veil came running out the front door of the Mission with a broom in her hand. She ran up to the lawyer and

shook the broom in his face like she was chasing a pig from a garden.

Her face was red and she yelled, "Beat it you bum! I told you yesterday to not come back here. Get outta here!"

Betty and John watched as the man high-tailed it up the stairs into the RV. He skedaddled with such haste that one of his shoes, a tasseled, expensive Bally brand that John had always thought looked like ballerina slippers, came loose and fell on the sidewalk. The angry woman slammed the door shut behind him and beat her broom against the side of the large vehicle as the man hurriedly started the engine and drove off. She bent, picked up the shoe and sailed it through the air, where it landed on top of the RV.

She next turned to the TV crew and marching over to them told them in no uncertain terms that this was private property and if they weren't gone in one minute she was calling the police and would have them arrested for trespassing.

The woman reporter sensed a good spot for the evening news and kept saying, "How do you feel? Are you angry at the City? Are you angry at the mayor? How do you feel? ..."

"I'll show you how I feel – " and like Babe Ruth knocking one out of the ball park, the nun swung her broom with a whistling swoosh, hitting the lady reporter right on her butt, knocking her into the cameraman who fell, knocking over the sound tech. They landed on the ground in a tumbled heap and the nun yelled, "GET OUTTA HERE!"

Turning and stalking back to the Mission the woman entered and slammed the door with a boom that echoed.

“Land’s sakes,” said Betty, “Are we going to have to get by her?”

They stood by their car, John weak from laughing, he said, “No, let’s try to go around her.”

Pulling out his cell phone he dialed directory information and was soon speaking to the telephone operator at the Wayside Mission.

After a short wait, Angela Morris answered, “Hello?”

“Hello, Angela. It’s John Matthews. How are you and Connie?”

“Oh, well, hello, John. We’re fine, thanks for asking. How are you?”

“I’m fine thanks.”

“What can I do for you, John?”

“Hey, I’m standing out front with my wife, Betty. We’d like to talk to you if you’re not busy.”

“You’re out front? Hold on a minute, I’ll be right there.”

Shortly, John, Betty and Angela were sitting at the picnic table under the tree in the playground area. Angela had introduced Connie to Betty and the little girl had shyly shaken her hand. John got a big hug and bright smile.

The adults sat and talked, watching Connie playing with her friends.

John described his plight with the restaurant license and how he had been at the City Hall yesterday trying to resolve the situation, when they met. John and Betty then told Angela what they had thought of and asked her opinion.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea. Can you wait here just a minute?” asked Angela.

They sat under the tree and waited for her to return. It was a nice place for the children to play with its clean, inviting surroundings and selection of exercise equipment and space for the children to enjoy.

“That little girl is so cute,” said Betty. “I’m glad you were able to help them. Maybe that’s why you were there? You know, maybe you were their guardian angel?”

John grunted and replied, “Oh, don’t get all soapy on me. Jeez. Guardian angel. Next you’ll be talking about crop circles or something.”

“Alright, Mr. Smart Ass, just because you’re a cynic doesn’t mean I have to be. I’m going to get that woman’s broom and hit you on the knee!”

“Uh oh,” said John, looking over Betty’s shoulder. “Speaking of the broom, here she comes. Think we should run?”

Angela and the nun approached the picnic table.

Angela introduced them, “Betty and John Matthews, this is Sister Martha. She’s in charge of the Mission”

Everyone shook hands and John felt the woman's strong, sure grip and he noticed the serene smile on her face, her blue eyes twinkling.

"Mr. Matthews, Angela has told me how you helped her and Connie yesterday. Please accept all of our thanks."

"Ahh, your welcome. It's no big deal. Angela found the lucky gate for us. It's, ahh ...ahh...," as he looked down in embarrassment, twisting his shoe on the ground.

The three women stood looking at John and smiled, they each were thinking: No matter how big and burly a man is, sometimes they act like little boys.

They sat and John outlined his problem and the possible, obvious, solution. He talked for awhile, answering Sister Martha's questions and she made some common sense suggestions. Soon they were all in agreement. The talk turned to other, pleasant matters and they were quietly laughing and enjoying this social occasion.

After awhile, the sun began to set and John and Betty said goodbyes and stood to leave. The little girl, Connie, ran up and Betty sat back down and pulled her close.

"Connie, would you like to come over to our place and see the chickens and garden?"

"You have chickens? What color are they?" asked Connie.

"Well, some are brown and some are white. We have a rooster too. He acts like he's the king but he's just a big doofus. Actually, I have two doofus'es, counting the rooster."

“Who’s the other doofus?”

“Oh, one of these days when you grow up and are a big girl you’ll know what I mean.”

Angela and Sister Martha laughed quietly. John coughed.

“How about this Sunday? Would you and your grandmother like to come for a visit?”

“Oh, yes. I’d like that.”

“Okay. We’ll come by and get you after church, okay?”

“Okay.”

Driving home, John looked over at Betty and said, “Ha hah, that was very funny.”

Betty looked at him innocently and asked, “What was funny? Oh, you mean your crack about the crop circles? Yes, I’ve given it some thought and you’re right, it was funny. Ha hah.”

John chuckled and said, “Come here you,” pulling her to him, putting his arm around her.

Betty laid her head on his shoulder and John said, “All that walking made my knee sore. Maybe you could, you know ...”

“Maybe we can negotiate it, Mr. Doof ... I mean Mr. Matthews.”

□ □ □ **Chapter 16** □ □ □

The next two days were a blizzard of activity; John, Betty and Jim Pearson, along with the Latino woman and her helper were all busy in the kitchen prepping dishes.

Nate was burning up the telephone wire placing calls and organizing his riding buddies. George Marin, the fellow Betty and John had seen in The Tavern that night was assisting Nate by running errands to the copy shop and then going around to several other establishments, coordinating for the event.

Nate and George were attempting to accomplish in two days what usually required several weeks of planning and activity.

“Okay,” said Nate, as he and George stood at the bar, a cold beer in their hands, papers spread out before them. “I’ve called three dozen people who’ve called at least ten people each.”

“I’ve called everybody on my list and they did the same,” replied George.

“What about the other joints; ‘Fern & Moody’s’. ‘The Blues Bar’, the ‘Swamp’ and the rest? Are they gonna be set up?”

“Are you kidding? They’re rearing to go. Wild Bill at the Swamp is our first stop and he’s been helping me contact and organize the rest. It’s going to be a good Poker Run. At least five-hundred bikes, maybe a thousand people, let’s see: At ten bucks a hand I bet we raise at least ten thousand. Shoot, if everybody

takes at least two hands, it could be as much as twenty-thousand dollars. Subtract out the two grand for the winning hands and it's still a bunch."

"Whatta'ya wanna bet the winning hand money goes back in the pot," asked Nate, with a knowing grin?

"No thanks. I bet I'd lose that bet," replied George Marin.

"So, everything's set on our end. I'm gonna go back in the kitchen and see how they're doing. Then I'm going to get the bar ready for my last Happy Hour."

"Okay, Nate. I'm out of here. Sorry I can't stay, but I have to go get the buses organized. See ya later."

"Okay, Bro. See ya tomorrow morning."

Nate walked back in the kitchen and stood smiling, watching John who was obviously a born restaurateur. John was going back and forth between the long stainless steel prep tables mixing and stirring and adding ingredients. As the large bowls were being prepared the dishes were placed on cooking trays and set in the hot ovens.

It smelled good in the kitchen and Nate's mouth watered.

John looked up and saw him at the door, "Hey, Nate. You want a job?"

"Sure. What do you need, John?"

"Come taste this and tell me what it needs."

"I think I'm qualified for that job," agreed Nate with a grin.

It was a long night in the kitchen, everyone working up a storm to get the food prepped and cooked. Some dishes would be

cooked now and re-heated the next day while other stuff, like the meat, would be cooked right before serving time.

John could hear, out in the bar, a boisterous crowd. He knew there was a surprise party planned for Nate, his farewell and send-off after forty years at The Tavern. John, Betty, Jim and the Latino woman, Juanita and her daughter Maria had left the kitchen and snuck in the bar right before the giant cake arrived.

The cake was a surprise for Nate, secretly bought by donations from all his friends and loyal customers. George Marin had used the excuse of getting the buses organized so he could go to the bakery and pick up the cake.

George and a large group of his biker pals had wheeled in the cake with a loud roar of, "Happy good riddance," sang to the tune of Happy Birthday.

The cake was big, about four foot tall and three foot in diameter at its base. There was a single large candle on top and they made Nate stand and blow it out. The instant the candle was out, George pulled a string and the top sprang open on a hinge and out popped a gorgeous woman in a slinky outfit. Nate was so surprised he almost fell over backwards. It was one of those trick, novelty cakes with enough space for someone, usually a sexy woman, to hide inside.

Nate had a toothy grin spread across his face as the woman led him to the bar and sat him at a stool. She climbed up on the bar and lying languorously across it sang the "Happy Good Riddance" song as she did a sexy Marilyn Monroe imitation.

Everybody was whooping and hollering as Nate sat there in a hypnotic state, enjoying his surprise and the woman's professional rendition of the song. At the end of the soulful song the woman climbed from the bar and taking Nate by the hand, escorted him to the studio apartment for a more, private setting, to continue her entertainment.

His biker buddies were yelling, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do Nate" and other advice, some of which was too colorful to repeat.

It was a good party; the laughs, jokes and refreshment flowed smoothly. John and Betty enjoyed the activity, moving around the room saying hello to the people they had previously met and happily meeting new ones.

Eventually, they went back into the kitchen to continue prepping and cooking. They worked steadily and finally, about one o'clock in the morning John was satisfied that all was ready.

After a few hours sleep they were back at The Tavern. It was early-morning and volunteers were outside sitting up the cooking grills, tables, chairs and the other necessary equipment. The volunteers consisted of Nate and George Marin's riding buddies along with other Tavern regulars. There was a long line of shiny motorcycles spread across the parking lot and more arrived by the minute. Nate was directing traffic while George was at a table signing people up, collecting the money and shaking a bagful of playing cards which the riders selected as their beginning Poker Run hands.

The Poker Run included the price of a meal and John was busy grilling steaks, chicken, fish, hamburgers and hot dogs while Betty and Jim brought the cooked dishes out from the kitchen. The appointed time to begin the meal was noon and the time passed quickly. As they worked, across town, several chartered buses pulled to the front of the Wayside Mission.

Sister Martha assisted the happy group of children, their parents and other residents on the buses and they soon left for the excursion. This was a special day for them all and excited chatter filled the buses as the drivers brought them from the downtown area to The Tavern.

Betty saw the large shiny buses turning the corner and she called to John, "Here they come."

"Everything's ready here. How you doing?"

"I'm ready."

They looked at each other, across the expanse of the parking lot and shared a smile.

Several of the bikers started their engines and pulled out on the road, pulling sideways across the lanes and stopping traffic so the bus drivers could make the left hand turn into the parking lot. Nate waved them to one side, directing them where to park.

The doors opened and in just a few minutes the parking lot was full of excited, happy people. The children ran over to eagerly look at the long lines of motorcycles, glistening in the sun. Betty and John strolled over to Sister Martha who was standing with Angela Morris and Connie.

“Hello and welcome to The Tavern. I’m glad you could make it,” John greeted them.

As they all exchanged pleasantries, Connie moved to John’s side and took his hand.

“I think she’s got a crush on you,” Betty whispered to John.

“Who’s hungry,” hollered John? “Come on and grab a plate.”

□ □ □ **Chapter 17** □ □ □

John was at the grill, cooking the meat, filling the plates. Nate's buddies were also serving the side dishes as the Mission residents and others moved along the serving line and then took seats at the tables and sat down.

Everyone said the food was delicious and gobbled it up. The sun was shining and the day was pleasantly warm, just right for an outdoor event. The pile of steaks, burgers and hot dogs was soon diminished and the other dishes as well. The air was filled with laughter and the chatter of people in good cheer.

Betty and John sat with Sister Martha and Angela and they talked and laughed with the other people around them. It was a wonderful meal and a wonderful get-together.

As the children finished eating they ran to the giant inflatable playhouse that was a combination trampoline and fun house with sliding boards and spongy balls they could throw without hurting each other. John had rented it for the day and it was set on a large pad of artificial turf on the parking lot.

"Watch, Grandma," yelled Connie as she whooshed down the sliding board and landing on the inflated pad.

Now, most of the adults were finished eating and they were walking around looking at the shiny motorcycles, talking and visiting with each other.

Sister Martha said, "I've never rode on one of those Harley-Davidson machines. I drove a little scooter once when I was younger, over in Italy, but never been on a big one like that. How do they hold them up? They look so big and heavy?"

Sitting at their table just happened to be Nate's buddy, the one they called Wild Bill. Bill was the owner of a couple bars in town; the Swamp and another called, Fern & Moody's. His nickname was right on the money as he looked wild, with his long hair and leather biker attire.

He heard Sister Martha's comment and leaped to his feet.

"Sister Martha, are you kidding? You've never rode on Harley? Come on, I'll give you a ride on my Hawg."

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that. I didn't mean I wanted to right now. Oh, no ..."

Offering his hand to her he coaxed her, "I won't go real fast, I promise. Come on."

Everyone at the table joined him in encouraging her to go for a ride, laughing and egging her on.

Finally, she stood and said, "Well, okay. But just a little ride, if you won't go too fast."

Everyone stood and walked with them to Wild Bill's big machine. John thought it was beautiful, a trophy winner if he ever saw one. Wild Bill climbed on and Sister Martha got on behind him.

He raised the kickstand, pushed the starter button and the big engine came to life with an ear popping noise. Sister Martha's wide blue eyes opened even wider and Wild Bill yelled, "Hang on."

He steered the bike to the driveway and pulled out onto the road and away they went, everyone cheering.

Out on the road, Wild Bill put his fist in the throttle, gearing up as they rode down the road.

"This is wonderful," yelled Sister Martha, the wind in her face.

"How fast does it go?" she asked in a loud voice to make herself heard.

"You wanna find out?" answered Wild Bill with a happy grin.

"Sure. Let's go!"

After a good ride and several fast miles they returned to The Tavern; Sister Martha's face beaming like she had just discovered the meaning of life.

Wild Bill parked his bike and the pair of them climbed off, laughing and chortling, giving each other high-fives.

John, Betty, George and Nate and Angela stood watching them. Nate commented, "I don't know if Wild Bill got religion or if Sister Martha is going to get a Harley."

"Maybe both," said John, smiling.

Sister Martha and Wild Bill each had wide smiles as they walked over to the group.

"John, it was very nice of you and your friends to do this for us," said Sister Martha, the others all joining in and making John extremely uncomfortable.

He hemmed and hawed for awhile and they finally let him alone.

He was rescued by Nate yelling, "Okay. Let's get this show on the road."

The bikers all moved to their machines and started the engines: VRROOOM, VRROOOM, VRROOM, filling the air with a thunderous noise, like a barrage of artillery.

There were over five-hundred big motorcycles all revving their engines as they pulled out of the parking lot. The children were especially enjoying the spectacle, jumping up and down in their excitement. It was a scene they would probably remember for the rest of their lives.

George Marin and two more of the bikers approached John, each carrying and weighted down with a large, filled, construction-grade trash bag. They sat the bags down and George said, "Here, John. I tried to keep track but I got so busy I lost count at twenty-three thousand. The third bag got filled up after I lost count. I'm guessing thirty grand, probably more. I have to get to the Swamp so you take care of this, okay?"

With a wave they ran to their bikes and joined the last of the riders pulling out.

John looked down at the bags containing a small fortune in cash. He turned to Sister Martha saying, "This is for the Mission."

Sister Martha was stunned. "Oh, John. Betty. How can we ever thank you for all you've done?"

Betty said, "No thanks are necessary. We're grateful you and the others could come today."

“That’s right. I would have hated to waste all that food. I’m glad it went to a good cause,” agreed John.

John looked around at the parking lot. The biker volunteers had stacked all the tables and chairs, ready for the rental company to pick them up; cleaned the grills and organized all the other utensils and paraphernalia. The pots and pans had been carried into the kitchen, rinsed and placed in the big dishwasher equipment. They’d even swept the parking lot and taken the trash to the dumpster. The only thing left was the inflatable playhouse that the rental company would dismantle.

There was nothing left for John and Betty to do except watch as Sister Martha organized her large brood and loaded them on the buses. Little Connie came running over and gave them each a big smile and hugs.

“We’ll be there tomorrow in the early afternoon to pick you up, Connie.”

“Oh, good. I can’t wait to see your chickens.”

John and Betty stood as the buses pulled away, waving their hands and smiling.

When the last bus pulled out Betty put her arm around John’s waist and said, “Well, you did it, mister.”

Looking down into her twinkling eyes, he asked, “What did I do now, lady?”

She moved in a half circle, turning John with her and pointed to the new sign, on its pole at the front of the parking lot, and said, “You opened your restaurant: the, Art of a Meal.”

John looked at the sign, looked over at the closed front door, looked back at Betty and said, “Your right. And this,” pointing at the empty lot which had been full of happy people, “And this was exactly that – the, Art of a Meal.”

They stood in the waning sunlight, the sun on the horizon, just stood there without moving or talking. Their love for one another; their satisfaction, their happiness, and their contentment, was complete.

□ □ □ Chapter 18 □ □ □

Hearing a vehicle pulling into the parking lot they turned to see three Sheriff's cars pulling in. John saw that Sheriff Benny Hoke was in the lead car, on the passenger side, his immense weight causing the car to list to the side.

"Good God, what's this bozo want," muttered John?

The cars stopped and they watched as the Sheriff grunted, pulling his large backside and stomach from the interior. Five of his deputies exited the vehicles and joined him as he ponderously made his way toward John and Betty.

Sheriff Hoke and his deputies had been parked down the street, waiting for everyone to leave before they drove over to The Tavern. Hoke hadn't wanted any witnesses, and he wasn't particularly eager to confront a large group of bikers.

"Are you the owner of this establishment," asked the Sheriff with a sly look in his eye?

"That's right, I'm the owner."

"And your name is?"

"Matthews, John Matthews. What can I do for you Sheriff?"

"Mr. Matthews, you're under arrest for operating a restaurant without a license, and for violating the public feeding law."

"Whaaat ...," cried Betty?

John snorted in derision, "Yeah, right. What's the joke?"

Several of the deputies circled behind John and took his arms in preparation to handcuff him. He jerked his arms loose and said loudly, "Get your hands off. Sheriff, if this is a joke it's not funny. I suggest you think again."

"I suggest you just calm down, Mr. Matthews, unless you want me to add resisting arrest to your charges."

Betty was crying and wailing, "John! What's happening?"

John allowed himself to be handcuffed rather than try and fight six armed men. He was walked to a patrol car and they placed him in the rear.

"Betty, call our lawyer. Tell him to get busy and straighten this mess out. Don't worry, I'll call you from the jail. I think I get one phone call. Call the lawyer now."

The three cars pulled away and Betty, crying and in a panic, ran into The Tavern to use the telephone. It was late in the day on a Saturday afternoon and the lawyer's phone answered with an impersonal voice mail instructing her to, "Leave your name, number and the reason for your call. We will return the call as soon as possible."

Betty left her name and cell phone number saying, "Please call me as soon as you get this message. This is an emergency. Please call."

She hung up the phone and stood in the office looking blankly around. "Oh my God, what do I do?"

She grabbed her purse and keys and ran for her car, stopping only for a moment to lock the front door. Starting her car

she squealed rubber pulling out of the parking lot and flew across town. While she drove she tried to call the lawyer again but still, there was no answer.

She and John hadn't been to the Swamp before but she knew where it was located as they had noticed the large number of motorcycles parked out front as they had driven past it. All the bikers were still there, the lot full so she had to park across the street.

Running in the door she looked wildly around for Nate who she hoped was somewhere in the mass of partying people. He was at the pool table, bent over for a shot. CRACK, she heard the cue strike and saw the eight ball fell into a pocket.

"Nate, Nate," she yelled frantically over the noise from the juke box and crowd.

Nate heard his name called and looked over to see Betty trying to get to him through the crowd. He saw that she was crying and obviously upset about something. He pushed to her.

"Betty, what's wrong," he asked?

"Nate, the police ... they came, and arrested John!"

Wild Bill and George Marin were standing nearby and heard what she said. Wild Bill pulled the cord from the wall, silencing the juke box and yelled, "Everybody be quiet."

To the shocked audience Betty described what had happened and that John was in the back of a police car, on his way to jail. Nate asked her what the charges were and when she told them the crowd exploded in anger.

“SADDLE UP,” hollered Wild Bill and ran for his motorcycle, the others following. Nate parked Betty behind him on his bike and in just minutes there were five hundred machines roaring across town, their loud exhausts like the rolling thunder of a storm; all the rider’s were gritting their teeth, their blood boiling.

The long line of motorcycles, two abreast, rode down the fast lane on the Yosemite Freeway; Wild Bill in the front of the pack blinking his lights at the cars in front of him, forcing them to pull over to the other lanes, out of the way.

They took the Van Ness exit heading northeast. The large group of bikers stretched from the freeway all the way to Fresno Street. They stayed together in a pack, running the red lights, blocking the intersections of Ventura Street, Inyo Street, Kern, Tulare and Mariposa. The downtown traffic was at a standstill, people getting out of their vehicles and standing in front of restaurants and shops watching this horde of bikers who seemed to be invading the town like a bunch of Genghis Khan’s on growling steeds.

Wild Bill took the right turn onto Fresno Street at a wild speed, sparks flying from his exhaust pipes where they dragged the pavement. He roared to the front of the City Jail building at 2200 Fresno Street and jumping the curb onto the sidewalk, slammed on his brakes right in front of the entrance. A hundred or more of the motorcyclists followed him up on the sidewalk while the rest parked on the street, blocking the road, forming a barricade of shiny steel.

Nate had his hand on Betty's arm, pulling her with him as he strode determinedly to the entrance. Wild Bill was yelling at the top of his lungs, "FREE JOHN MATTHEWS. FREE JOHN MATTHEWS." All the motorcyclists joined him; a mass of almost a thousand people yelling it over and over. It was a thunderous racket and Betty was stunned by the noise.

Hundreds of citizens who were downtown on a Saturday night hurried to the spectacle, not knowing what was happening, but sure they didn't want to miss the fun. The onlookers had no idea who John Matthews was, of course, or even what was happening, but they joined in the chant of the bikers and soon all of downtown Fresno was echoing with the roar of, "FREE JOHN MATTHEWS. FREE JOHN MATTHEWS."

A block away, just west of Broadway were the tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad line and a train engineer had been slowly traversing the downtown area when he had looked to his left to see the huge number of motorcycles turn onto Fresno Street. He halted the train and could hear the chant of the crowd, like the roar from several football stadiums after a hometown win.

The train engineer was a biker too and loved a rally. Curious, he stuck his head out the window and heard the words of the crowd, "FREE JOHN MATTHEWS. FREE JOHN MATTHEWS."

The engineer grabbed the pull rope of his air horn and suddenly, a great ear blasting roar of "HOOOONNNKKK, HOOOONNNKKK, HOOOONNNKKK filled the air, joining the roar of the mob.

It was the noise of the train's air horn that finally got Mayor Archibald Fincastle's attention. He was standing in the darkened observation room, watching through the one-way mirror the interrogation of the suspect in the next room. He had vaguely heard the noise from the crowd but attributed it to a television set playing somewhere else on the floor of the jail.

Now he turned from the glass of the observation window, almost knocking the running video camera over and looked at the other side of the room at the window overlooking Fresno Street. The loud HOOOONNNKKK noise seemed to be coming from that direction and he wondered what it could be.

In the interrogation room Sheriff Hoke was saying, "Attempted murder. That's what it was and we have a picture from a security camera that shows you throwing the egg at the mayor. It's no use denying it, Matthews, we have you cold."

John sat at the table on the hard chair, his handcuffed wrists behind him and said in a voice of wonder, "You're crazy. You're crazier than hell."

"Confess, Matthews. If you confess and cooperate you'll be out in seven to ten years. Make us play hard ball and you'll spend the rest of your life in San Quentin."

"I want my phone call. The law say's I get one phone call. Give me a phone."

"The phone lines are tied up right now. You'll get your call."

The Sheriff pulled his revolver from his holster and idly twirled the cylinder, admiring the brass cartridges sparkling as they

spun round. He continued the interrogation. "Do you deny that you were in City Hall when the mayor was attacked?"

"No, I don't deny it. I was there and saw the whole thing, well not the person throwing the egg, but I saw it hit the mayor."

"So, you're saying you supplied the egg to your confederate? You're part of a gang, huh? What's their names?"

"Whaaat? Okay, I'm not saying anything else. I want my lawyer. Oh, wait. There is one more thing I want to say."

"What's that?"

"You really need to go on a diet. You are one fat ugly motherfu ..."

Suddenly the door burst open and a deputy stuck his head in. "Sheriff," he said excitedly, "You need to come out here. We have a situation."

The Sheriff was staring at John, grinding his teeth, his eyes squinted.

"Don't go away, Matthews. I'll be back."

The Sheriff stalked to the door, his huge buttocks rolling like twin 55-gallon barrels of jello.

"Keep your eye on this murderer. If he tries to escape, shoot him," he ordered the deputy.

The Sheriff stepped into the hallway to see the mayor hopping from one foot to the other. The mayor's face was contorted in nervous spasms.

"Benny, there's a riot outside, down on the street," he said frantically. "What do we do?"

“A riot? Hell do you mean a riot?”

“Look,” cried the mayor, running into the office next door.

The Sheriff followed him at a more leisurely, obese pace and joined the mayor who stood looking out a window overlooking Fresno Street.

“What the hell? Who the hell?” said the Sheriff as he saw the thousands of people massed on and along the street as far as he could see to the left and right.

They could hear the chant of the crowd, “FREE JOHN MATTHEWS. FREE JOHN MATTHEWS.”

“What do we do,” cried the mayor.

Benny Hoke had always wanted to be a lawman, from the time he was a fat little boy he had wanted to wear a badge and carry a big gun. He hungered for the power he knew the badge and gun would give him. Years before, when he was still a young man, he had applied to the State of Texas for application to be a Texas Ranger.

When he had shown up for the physical examination the staff had busted into laughter when he waddled into the room, naked.

The Texas Ranger in charge of the exam and interview told him in a soft drawl, “Son, I don’t reckon we got a hoss stout enough to haul yore big fat ass around. Maybe we could strap two hosses together, but I doubt you could straddle ‘em. Besides, the rule is, ‘One Ranger – One Hoss’. You best just go on back to Caly-Fore-Nea.”

The anti-discrimination laws of California had allowed fat people like Benny to join the force. So, he had achieved his dream of being a lawman, even if he was a great big ole fat lawman, but he had never gotten over his desire to be a Texas Ranger. Now he paraphrased the quote from a famous Ranger and said, “One Riot – One Sheriff,” as he turned to the door.

Sheriff Benny Hoke waddled determinedly from the room as Mayor Archibald Fincastle stood by the window, looking down on the ferocious mob.

Hoke stopped in his office and got a 12 gauge riot gun, filling his pockets with shells. He rode the elevator down to the lobby, the gleam of battle in his eyes; imagining himself standing at the gate of the Alamo, staring down General Santa Anna and his thousands of troops.

“I was born for this,” he thought. “I’ll go down in the history books.”

He was crossing the lobby toward the front doors staring ahead; planning his confrontation with the rioters, seeing them blasted apart, his guns blazing, when he was suddenly surrounded by a dozen men in dark suits and ties. He was quickly disarmed and one of the men told him, “Benny Hoke. You’re under arrest”

“Whaa? You can’t arrest me! I’m the Sheriff.”

“No, Hoke, you’re not. By order of the Governor you have been removed from duty,” said the stern faced man as he reached for Hoke’s badge and jerked it loose from his uniform.

“Who the hell are you? You got no right ...”

“I’m Chief Detective Johnson from the State Police Internal Affairs Department. I work directly for the Governor. You are charged with embezzlement, misuse of office, dereliction of duty ...”

The Detective continued reading the charges against Hoke and then read him his Rights. The other detectives were having difficulty handcuffing Hoke as he was so fat his arms wouldn’t reach far enough back around him to use a normal set of cuffs. Finally, they got two sets of leg manacles and with some invention and effort finally got properly restrained.

As this was taking place a helicopter was landing on the roof of the building that carried the Governor and members of his staff, along with more detectives from the I.A.D..

John sat in the interrogation room with his eyes closed and his chin on his chest trying to escape from the glare of the overly bright fluorescent lights on the ceiling and the one on the wall above the dark-glassed window that was pointed right at him.

He was lost in thought. “I bet Betty’s worried sick. I need to call her. That idiot Sheriff. I’d like to kick his fat ass. That fat motherfu ...”

Suddenly, from the other side of the door he heard someone yelling and crying. He looked up thinking, “That fat bastard must be beating a confession out of somebody.”

Listening closer, he realized that the voice he heard in torment sounded like the mayor, Fincastle.

“Why’s the Sheriff beating the mayor,” he wondered.

The deputy who had been sitting quietly on a chair in the corner now jumped up and opened the door. Now John could hear the conversation or confrontation or whatever it was taking place in the hallway outside.

Listening intently he realized it was the mayor, Fincastle, who was begging someone to, "No, please don't arrest me. Please. I didn't do it, it was Hoke. Hoke did it."

A quieter voice, a stern voice of authority with a thick German accent said, "No, vee have zee evidence. Vee know it vas you. You and zee Hoke. It vas you and zee Fattbauch Schweinehund togetha. Vee have zee autio tapes from zee svichtboard during zee riot. It ees your voice ordering zee Hoke. I always knew vou vere an Einfaltspinsel "

"Detective, place this krimineller into zee gefangnis. Let us return to the helicopter and then go to zee flughafen. I vant to be on zee slopes at Kitzbuhel in zee morning. Auf Viedersehen you Einfaltspinsel. Vee go now."

"Yes sir, Mr. Governor. Jones you and Smith stay here and get this slimeball booked in," John heard another voice say.

"Yes sir. – Yes sir," two other voices answered.

"What the hell's going on now," John wondered. "I shouldn't have come back to downtown. This place is a nuthouse!"

"Where is he? Where is he," John heard Betty yell from out in the corridor.

John jerked up in shock as he heard his wife's voice.

"Betty? In here! I'm here," shouted John.

Betty came running into the room followed by Nate, George Marin and Wild Bill. They were being escorted by several men in dark suits.

“Oh, John,” cried Betty rushing to throw her arms around his neck.

“Release this man,” the detective ordered the deputy who hastily obeyed, moving behind John to unfasten his handcuffs.

In a moment John was standing with his arms around his wife, holding her close. “What the hell’s going on “ he demanded?

Nate and George and Wild Bill were all talking at once, pounding him on the back. Betty’s face was against his chest, softly crying.

In a weary voice John asked, “Will somebody please tell me what’s going on in this nuthouse?”

□ □ □ **Chapter 19** □ □ □

It was the next day, a warm sunny Sunday afternoon. Angela, Nate, Betty and John were sitting at the table, on the back porch drinking ice tea and watching Connie playing with the chickens in the back yard.

Connie had a small bag of chicken feed; cracked corn mixed with scratch and the chickens were gathered around her clucking and cooing happily. She had given them all names and was having a one-sided conversation with them. They were following Connie around like trained doggies.

“Now you stop being a pig Mr. Doofus! You let Jane have her’s too!”

Angela smiled as she watched her granddaughter enjoying herself in the sunshine.

Scattered on the table was the Sunday newspaper and the bold front page headline read:

SCANDAL IN CITY HALL, MAYOR AND SHERIFF ARRESTED

Fresno Daily Independent News – City Desk and Wire Reports
September 25, 2008

Last night the Governor declared a state of emergency, applying a rarely used law to remove Mayor Archibald Fincastle and Sheriff Benny Hoke from office.

The ex-Mayor and ex-Sheriff were placed under arrest and charged with a laundry list of crimes including; conspiracy, extortion, theft of public funds, graft, money laundering, misuse of office, dereliction of duty among many others. The Governor made this decision based on Sheriff Department switchboard audio records from the recent demonstration in downtown Fresno, and from testimony and cooperation from the convicted lobbyist, Jackson Abramson, who is currently in prison serving time for his own crimes. Mr. Abramson is writing his autobiography, the content of which he has told this newspaper in an exclusive interview “Will fill up the prisons all over the country with dirty politicians.”

Coincidentally, while the Governor was in town to deal with the mayor and sheriff issue, there was a protest outside the City Jail during which thousands of citizens were demanding the release of local businessman, John Matthews. Matthews had been arrested by ex-Sheriff Hoke on trumped-up charges. Only when John Matthews exited the building, escorted by an aide to the Governor and assured the mob that he was in good

health and all charges against him had been dropped did the crowd peacefully depart.

One member of a large group of motorcyclists who would only identify himself as, 'Wild Bill' said, "That fat-ass Hoke and that weeny Fincastle got off lucky this time. They should be happy they only got arrested instead of tarred and feathered".

Mr. Wild Bill said many other things about the ex-mayor and ex-sheriff that, while obviously true, unfortunately, can't be printed in the newspaper.

The evidence presented indicates that ...

Nate, in an outraged voice said, "Listen to what they say here ...,"

"No, please Nate. I'm trying to forget the whole thing," interrupted Betty.

"Your right, it's just a bunch of hogwash anyway," agreed Nate, tossing the paper on the table.

The four of them sat and talked of more pleasant matters as they watched Connie and the chickens. She was shrieking and giggling, the chickens were happily scratching and the old rooster flapped his wings announcing his territory and manly superiority, "Cock-a-doodle do! Cock-a-doodle do!"

“Angela, will you help me choose some vegetable for a nice salad,” asked Betty, standing, “Since John did all that grilling yesterday I’m giving him the day off, so we can fix dinner for the menfolks. Okay?”

“Sure, Connie can help us pick the vegetables. She’ll like that”.

John and Nate watched the women walk to the garden, talking and laughing.

“Angela and Connie are such nice people. I hate to see them out of their home. It makes me madder ‘n hell that so many people are in foreclosure because of the stupid politicians and greedy bankers.”

“Yeah, John. It makes me madder ‘n hell too. Millions of people all over the country are in the same boat. I hate to say it, and I hate to think it, but it seems we’re just a step away from a crash and burn. Do you think this \$700 billion dollar bailout the government is talking about will work?”

“I don’t know, Nate. I sure hope so. I’m just worried that this is a last ditch effort for the current administration to try and go out with just a whimper, instead of a big bang. I think they’re trying to do some damage-control so they don’t look so bad in the history books. And, maybe it’s like Iraq? If the President can get enough Senators and Congressmen to vote for it, then if it doesn’t work, he can say, ‘Hey, you voted for it too!’ You know, maybe he’s just looking to spread the blame around – just like he did with Iraq. Damn dog.”

“I think you’re right John. That boy’s been a loose cannon alright. Man, eight years of this guy has sure been a disaster. I just hope the next president, whoever he is, has some common sense.”

“Yep.”

“So, what happened last night? What did they tell you about your license?”

“Oh, the electronic copy was right there in the computer all the time. That woman was lying like a rug, apparently. I didn’t know she was Hoke’s wife? Imagine that? That little skinny woman and that five hundred pound tub of guts. God, what a picture!”

“I’m trying not to imagine it, thanks anyway. So, they found your license? What happens now? Are you going to pick it up in the morning?”

“Hell no, I’m not going down there! I told them to fax me a copy and mail the original. You couldn’t pay me to go back to that nuthouse.”

“So, the, Art of a Meal at The Tavern is back in business?” asked Nate.

“That’s right. Betty and I are rescheduling the grand opening. We’ll send you an invitation. You’ll be at the lake fishing, right?”

“Yep, but not by myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Angela and Connie are moving in with me. We’re going be one big happy family,” answered Nate with a big smile on his face.

“Really? Well, that’s great. Congratulations, Nate! Maybe there’s some truth to that old saying after all?”

“What old saying’s that, John?”

With a big smile, John said, “You know? All’s well that ends well.”



The End

a beginning

