

Descent
To
Madness

By
Jeffrey Birch

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Ask the madman what madness is and he will answer: Look inward. It is you not

I.

Ask the sane man what madness is and he will answer: Look inward. It is you not

I.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48

The Robbery

1

I needed cash. Another week and rent would be late. SAG dues were overdue. Add the other costs of merely surviving and I was staring into an abyss of financial desperation, a bottomless pit of despair.

It wasn't my fault, what had happened. It could have happened to anyone with the courage to tell it like it was. I told it *exactly* like it was. A few thanked me privately, respected my bravery. Others agreed I knew but were silent, the risk too great.

A year had passed making ends meet, burning through savings, hoping, expecting the resurrection that hadn't come. I could wait no longer.

Desperation might produce paralysis in some but not me. I had a plan. Not my preference, not a life dream or something I cared to do forever but to see me past the dry spell, over the hump, into the sunlight of career redemption. A role would be offered. Maybe not at the previous rate but I'd be back in favor. The money would flow again. My career would be reignited and fans reappear. Paparazzi would deem me worthy. Not at the level of the A stars but as an interesting actor whose comings and goings were again saleable. The mags and rags would cast their fickle eyes in my direction. It was only a matter of time, just a little more time.

A discontented sigh. Whispered words. "I need to get back in the gym. I need to spend more time out and at the beach. Be noticed. Feign annoyance but inside revel at the attention I hoped would again be showered upon me. That's the way it's done. Play the game. Stop hiding." Lost in the reverie of a return to grace, I forced my mind to the practical steps of what I was contemplating until I was back in favor.

As I stood before the mirror above a worn dresser, I imagined the character I had to become and saw that I could. "It's a part, a role, not me." The plan required daring, skill and scrupulous caution. Success also demanded ingenuity, commitment and courage. All traits I knew I possessed. I'd played characters with them and knew how each felt, internalized their personalities, mimicked their mannerisms. "I'd be nominated for an Oscar if it were a real part."

I was schooled in the trade if you could call it that but the education was seven years old. I needed to replay the role. Get it solidly back in my mind and memorize the nuances of the character, the way he moved, how he spoke, the things he did. Not as an individual but as a *type* of individual as iconic as Marlon Brando in *Streetcar*. My face would be hidden, my body obscured. I'd decided that as I tested the movements I would use in the mirror.

I was studying hand and body motions when my mind drifted to the last job my older brother and I pulled. He'd taunted me mercilessly then, all through my teen years saying, "Don't be a pussy. I won't have a faggot for a brother." I hadn't thought I was. Not many girls were around, that was all. I thought about them that way, in the normal way then and still did sometimes. I'd been with a few since and it mostly worked out. So, my brother was wrong. Had to be wrong. A guy would know, wouldn't he?

It was hot that night with still, suffocating air that hung over me like a damp blanket. I was breathing hard even before we got there, struggling for air. He noticed and smirked dismissively. I remember that look – the way his mouth curled showing teeth on

one side, a cigarette at the other. I glanced at the clock on the dash, my eyes riveted to it. The second hand was hypnotic forcing me to not look away. "Pay attention, Ray," he'd said looking at me quickly with the narrowed eyes that haunt me still. I'd forced my eyes to him and said, "I'm okay." I had to say something or he'd keep on me like he always did.

"You know what you have to do. Don't fuck this up."

"I know. I won't."

It was late, close to closing when my brother's car rolled into the lot. "When I get out slide over, you're the wheelman on this one. When I come out you haul ass. Get out of first gear quick. It hangs up and dies in first. Second will take it to forty in no time. Remember that." I remembered and bounced my head in the darkness of the car so he could see that I did and watched him burst through the door of the convenience store. We'd driven forty miles to Pomona. No one knew us there. I wanted to ask where the car came from but he was out the door before I could.

He donned a hood with holes cut for his eyes so the cameras couldn't identify him. The clerk handed him money over the counter as he brandished the gun in his face, scooped up the cash as the clerk yanked the hood from his head. My brother lurched back. I saw that and felt my groin tingle but I held it. He collided with an aisle of chips and snack bags losing his balance but firing twice at the clerk who remained standing as he made for the door at a run. The bullets missed but it was armed robbery aggravated by firing the gun – attempted murder in any courtroom. The cameras saw. I saw. Later, the cops saw and found him the next day. My brother got fifteen years at Folsom prison on a guilty plea that didn't buy him much. Cameras don't lie.

His court appointed lawyer pleaded, "Wear the tie. Look like you're sorry. Like you're scared." He refused to wear a tie and didn't look scared or sorry as the images of naked girls tattooed in blue-black on his forearms rippled as he made fists with his hands for all to see.

The judge, a woman with the patchy bad skin of psoriasis visible on her neck above the robe and thinning brown hair, was not persuaded of his remorse. The free lawyer droned on about the fractured home life he suffered until the judge raised a hand and said, "You're repeating yourself, counselor. I believe I understand the case."

And threw the legal book at him.

My mother looked down when the lawyer said that about his fractured life. She still recognized us then. I remember furtively eyeing her as we sat silently side by side in the small courtroom but she didn't look at my brother or me after she heard that.

When the cops came for him, they found him under a bed with the gun in his hand. He slid it out or they would have shot him. Ma had sat on the couch, looking down like she had in the courtroom as they led him away in handcuffs. I sat beside her with hands folded in my lap and watched my brother leave. He craned his neck and said, "Do what you can for ma. I'll be fine."

After my brother's arrest, two cops had questioned us at the station in separate rooms. Two days of interrogation hadn't shaken our story, the one we'd agreed on. He acted alone. I wasn't involved, didn't know he'd attempted a robbery. Had no idea where he was that night. Didn't hear him come home.

"You sleep in the same room. You didn't hear him come in?" One cop had said.

I'd shrugged. "I guess he was quiet, didn't want me to hear."

“He didn’t tell you what he’d done?” The other asked sounding incredulous.

I shook my head.

“We found him under his bed. Where were you?”

“I saw you drive in and walked in the house. I was around back.”

“Yeah, we saw you come in and sit with your mother,” one had said. “Nice blank stare. You practice that or do you always look stupid?”

I had looked from one to the other. “I don’t know how I looked.”

The cameras hadn’t seen me behind the wheel. My brother fell on the sword, expressed no remorse, sought no solicitude and disappeared. He took it like a man. I was spared. That was the last thing he said to me: Do what you can for ma. I’ll be fine. We knew then that her mind was slowly going – somewhere.

I was planning a crime but without my brother alongside. He was reckless. That’s why he was caught. I’m careful. I won’t be caught. I know how to play the part. He just did things. I’ll create scripts, know the story ahead, think through the details, do the research but improvise the dialogue like a screenplay in the hands of a confident director that acknowledges insightful contributions by his lead actor. In this movie, I am writer, producer, director and actor.

*

Daphne stood at the top of the long marble stair that swept in a gentle curve to the floor far below recalling the vivid dream that had awakened her in terror. During the night, she had been commanded by a spectral voice in the frighteningly real nightmare that now was the right time and the stair the right place. In that vivid out of body experience, she saw herself lying peacefully at the foot of the stairs. She often experienced vivid dreams, usually of flying. This one had been particularly real.

Staring down the steps, she mumbled, “I had a scary dream that stayed in my head. Dreams aren’t real.” She inched back from the edge of the tread. “*Get a grip. You’re just feeling down.*” She recalled Lawrence Harvey in *The Manchurian Candidate*. “I control what I think and do. Not some voice in a dream.”

“Daphne?” What are you doing? Are you going up or down?”

Daphne turned to see her mother down the hall peering from her dressing room doorway. “Coming to you, mother.”

“Good, because I can’t see to glue this stone into the setting. The little tube says Super Glue. I guess we’ll find out what’s so super about it. I hate that word, super. I mean the way it’s used these days. Come along dear.” She stood in the open door motioning Daphne to hurry. As Daphne’s languid pace reached the door, Glynnis Swain gently pulled her daughter into the room. “Don’t be languorous and desultory, dear.” She patted Daphne’s cheek. “Are you feeling unwell? This would not be the day to become ill.”

“I’m fine, mother.”

Glynnis expelled a frustrated breath. “I do not understand this depression of yours. Are you taking what you are supposed to take?”

“Yes, mother.” Daphne dropped into a chair beside a settee draped with four dresses. One arm hung limp over the side.

“As I’ve said before no one from my side of the family was ever depressed. This must be something your father introduced into you.”

Daphne spoke through a sigh. “The genetics is not well understood. Blaming father is unsupported.”

Glynnis stared at her daughter in a complex expression of compassion, frustration, and urgency that trumped the first two. She picked up the small tube, handed it to Daphne. “The print is so small no normal person could possibly read it but you must try, dear. I did read that it sticks skin to skin which seems very unusual for a household adhesive, don’t you think? Be cautious you do not glue yourself to the necklace.”

“Where did you get this?”

“Manfred had it to glue things together in the kitchen, I can’t imagine what.”

Daphne read the too-small-to-read print just fine, placed a dot of the clear liquid on the ornate piece of costume jewelry and set the big, red, faux ruby in place. “Are you wearing this tonight?”

“Well, yes dear, it is a very good copy of the one in the bank’s vault. Who could possibly tell?”

Daphne said through a yawn, “And who could possibly care. Nothing over three carets will be real tonight.”

“Please don’t be snide, dear and I hope you will at least appear happy at dinner. It’s very important to your father.”

“That I am happy or that I look happy?”

“Stop that. How long does it take to dry, this Super Glue? How I hate that word. Super is from the Latin, which means above. So, Superman is super because he flies above? And what is *above* about this glue? Above is a position not a ranking of excellence or performance. Such foolishness.”

“Seconds. Dries quickly.”

“Marvelous. Set in on my dressing table so I won’t forget it, and go down and find Manfred. I simply must know what he has planned. You know dear how much I dislike surprises when it comes to his Teutonic entrées. He can be so perverse sometimes the way he slips them in. The last time it was *Zungenwurst*. He called it Blood Tongue in English.” Glynnis shuddered before adding, “He is wonderful but must be watched – carefully.” She gave Daphne a knowing nod. “Remember that dear for when you have your chef after you marry. Incidentally, did I tell you that your father invited Davis Manning; the young man from his office who is making such a mark in, what was it? Corporate bonds, I believe. Quite the dashing young, eligible man.”

“Mother, Davis Manning is no taller than I in my stocking feet and balding, no, bald because he shaves off what little is left – at twenty-five. Wearing even a modest heel, I tower over the man. What would I do with my Louboutins? Do you think for one scintilla of a second that I could be attracted to a short, bald man who sells corporate bonds for a living? Did I spend five years getting an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design to marry a short, bald corporate bond salesman?” Daphne crossed her arms. “I think not.”

Glynnis sighed. “You know dear, someone must bring home the bacon as they say. He will be quite good at that lest you make too hasty a decision. Glynnis tested the piece of jewelry. “I do believe it is well fastened. Thank you, dear. Now please find Manfred and I won’t ask another thing from you all day.”

“Maybe I’ll go to the spa and grab a workout.” Daphne settled deeper into the chair throwing a bare leg across one arm.

“Fine idea, dear. Get your juices flowing so to speak.”

As Daphne opened her mouth to reply, she heard heavy footfalls on the stairs taken two at a time. Glynnis shared her daughter's stare through the open door. The sound of soft-soled shoes increased. Daphne dropped her leg to the floor, preparing to stand. Manuel, the gardener would not come to the second floor.

*

I had entered the mansion at the rear in the shadow of a warming Los Angeles sun. The air was comfortably cool and dry in the shade at nine in the morning. I turned the knob and walked in after dropping a duffle bag beside the back door. To my astonishment, it had been unlocked and no security system activated. Eyeing the grounds from a hidden place before entering, I spotted an old Mexican gardener. He didn't see me approach to knock him on the head from behind. He crumpled to the damp lawn. I had him trussed with duct tape and a piece of tape across his mouth in seconds and dragged him into shrubbery. He'd come around and stared wide-eyed at me wrenching his wiry body to no benefit. I patted him on the shoulder, whispering, "Relax. Someone will find you," speaking with a Mexican accent like Alfonso Bedoya in *The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre*.

I'd found an old floor plan in an arcane architectural Internet site describing styles of old Los Angeles homes. Despite extensive remodeling through the years, I knew the basic layout and silently searched rooms on the first floor.

Two women's voices carried softly from above as I left the room repurposed to an office. I knew who they were. I took the marble stairs in pairs marveling at the opulence of the house. Seconds later, I found them and stepped through the open doorway dressed in black with a black balaclava over my head and wearing skintight black leather gloves. In my right hand was an equally black gun twelve inches long with a suppressor attached.

"Oh my. Who are you?" Glynnis asked.

Daphne sucked in a breath, shoulders tightening. "Get the fuck out of our house. Now!"

I stepped into the room, gun shifting between the two women.

"What do you want? I'm calling the police, said Glynnis." She reached for her purse on the dressing table to find her cell phone.

I grabbed the purse, rummaged inside and found the phone, held it up to Glynnis, dropped it, and crushed it under my boot heel. "Now, where's yours? In your jammies?" I pointed the gun at the Daphne's pubis, mounding from the pajamas bottoms. "Tucked inside, maybe?" I knew their names from my research.

Daphne was wearing a camisole atop clingy, silk pajama bottoms above bare feet. She stepped cautiously back from me. She shook her head fearfully, feeling practically naked under the deep brown of my eyes, I guessed from the crimson flush that rose on her cheeks. "No, no. I don't have it with me."

"I don't think I believe you. I need to search."

Daphne back-stepped to the wall.

I laughed working to sound evil like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. The balaclava was essential but I missed not offering facial expressions that fit my characters.

"Really, leave our home immediately. Manfred? Come upstairs, instantly," Glynnis shouted. Her voice burst forth shrill and constricted. The word "instantly" was lost in her tightened throat.

“He must be the dead cook. Along with the dead gardener and the dead maid. I do believe we are alone in the house, Glynnis.”

Glynnis’ eyes widened in horror. “How do you know my name you filthy animal? My husband will be home at any moment.”

I cocked my head. “Then, he will be the dead husband.” I shoved Glynnis over a low table set before a brocade settee, scattering the dresses to the floor. She fell heavily scraping legs and arms with a cry of pain. As she scrambled to stand, I punched her in the diaphragm. She fell back on the settee gasping for air unable to find it. “Now, Glynnis, you old bat, don’t die on me. I’m needin’ your wrinkled old ass for a while.” I was speaking I thought convincingly in the African American dialect.

Glynnis held her chest and wheezed, “You are a black man. A filthy ni...African. The words spit forth saliva from her thin, painted lips.

I noticed Daphne blinked, mouth agape in surprise and stared at her mother’s words.

“Now, would it be the color of my clothes? Nothing else of me shows. Black outside, black inside. Interesting twist on the Oreo axiom. Brown eyes are quite common. Perhaps my speech pattern is too near A.A.V.E. Do you know those initials? They stand for African American Vernacular English.” I manufactured a mirth-filled laugh and shifted to a lilting Irish brogue and spoke a few sentences followed by a short soliloquy on German cuisine in a German accent. “*Ach*, I saw the menu for tonight. *Ya, Frau Swain*, you should tank me for freeing you from your cook – permanently.”

Daphne was edging toward the door. I grabbed and shoved her sending her tumbling to the thick carpet. Daphne grunted and cried out. Glynnis screamed. I laughed menacingly. “Seeing you lying there makes me want to see what’s in those jammies. “Stay there. If you get up, I’ll shoot you in your right breast, right in the nipple and then aim at the left both of which are standing so proudly out. The left one is the kill shot. The right one goes through a lung. Together,” I shrugged. “You won’t suffer long, girl.” I was back in the African American dialect as I turned my eyes to Glynnis. “Now, for the reason for my visit this morning. I’m going to rob you of your jewelry. I don’t expect to miss one precious piece since I have a list.” I produced a sheet of paper with a list of jewelry. “Would you say, I’ve done my homework, Glynnis?”

Her eyes widened as she quickly scanned the list.

“What’s more, I know they are all tucked protectively in the safe in your husband’s office behind the original but rather pedestrian Picasso drawing. I believe he was in his: Let’s see how much money I can fleece from these stupid art buyers mode. Mode? Mentality? Mindset? Pick your poison Glynnis for I know how persnickety you are on word choice. Not a surprise for one with a degree in linguistics so many years ago from Yale. Again, I shamelessly boast of my research.” An amused smile I guessed could be seen on my lips beneath the balaclava. I was trying for Jack’s supremely evil grin in the same movie. I turned to Daphne who had cheated to a wall with knees pulled to her chest. “Cubism was a fraud, wouldn’t you agree? Did the Rhode Island School of Design support my contention?”

Daphne blinked again wordlessly.

I turned again to Glynnis. “Now get up you old hag and let’s go downstairs.” I grabbed her roughly by a thin arm loose with crepey skin that shifted under my gloved fingers like it would come free.

“Owe. You’re hurting me.”

Daphne rose and jumped on my back, pummeling with fists. “Leave my mother alone.”

I turned quickly and threw her off. She fell to the floor. “I was going to save this for last but I believe now is the perfect time. Mommy gets to watch.” I closed the door and tore a length of cord from a drape, bound Glynnis’ hands behind her back and ankles before shoving her back onto the settee again. I fell heavily onto Daphne, pulled her pajamas bottoms and panties down and off, raised the camisole exposing her breasts ran a knee between her legs, parting them and pinned her arms to the floor.

After, when I stood, I noticed blood between her thighs. “Oh! You are...were a.... Hurts a little more the first time, I’ve heard. That was special. You’re going to be very good at it with a little more practice.” I turned to Glynnis. “Really, very special.”

Glynnis was panting in horror, unable to scream. A soft moan escaped her lips. “Oh, Daphne, I am so very sorry.” Tears streamed down her cheeks running her mascara.

I left Daphne on the floor in a fetal position, hands over her face, closed the French doors and hurriedly wrapped a piece of duct tape around the knobs from the small backpack I wore. “Slow you down long enough.” She appeared too stunned and terrified to cry. After I dragged her mother from the room, I suspected tears would flow.

Glynnis stumbled down the cold marble steps to Manley Swain’s office in my grasp. Outside the pair of pocket doors sat a small duffle bag. I picked it up and shoved her inside. The room was dimly lit. Drapes were drawn. Seated behind the desk, head tilted back was Manley Swain, a bullet hole in his forehead. A line of blood had meandered down his portly features onto his suit jacket like raspberry sauce drizzled over ice cream. I threw back the hinged Picasso and stared at the safe.

Glynnis stutter-stepped, losing all strength in her legs and dropped to the floor at the sight of her husband. I hefted her to her feet. “Oh, I forgot, hubby was home. Wouldn’t open the safe. Simply refused. Time being short, I didn’t have it to persuade him, so if you want to live, you will open the safe. I am certain you know the combination or where it is. If you prefer to join dear Manley in billionaire’s heaven, I can easily arrange that. Your choice. Decision time.” I pointed the gun at Glynnis’ head and cocked the hammer for effect. Her wrists were bound but I’d untied her ankles.

“Left desk drawer bottom, underside, beneath a little panel,” she answered in a wooden voice that sounded like all emotion was sucked from her body.

Seconds later the safe was open, its contents transferred to the black duffle. On the desk was a confirmation of an order to a domestic personnel rental company. Beside it lay a typed guest list with the date of the event scrawled across the top. They were having a party tonight. I scanned the list. With dozens of wealthy people. In that moment, my plan changed as I snatched the list hidden from Glynnis whose head was dropped to her chest. A copy lay below. “They won’t even realize I have it.”

After a quick glance at the immobile couple, I walked from the office to the back door of the sprawling mansion, opened the larger, white duffle bag previously placed on the brick step. Inside was a white workman’s coverall I quickly donned, slipped the balaclava from my head, removed the black gloves, replaced them with white, removed the black boots, stepped into white running shoes, transferred the small black duffle with the loot and zipped the bag closed. I’d had gone from black to white in fifteen seconds. The maneuver was practiced. It was a casual, home-repair-guy that ambled to Manley’s

Bentley in the driveway. The key conveniently had laid on the desk in an ornate Chinese porcelain dish, late Ming dynasty, I guessed, left along with countless valuable objet d'art in the house. Discipline demanded a focus on the jewelry. Impulsive greed was the undoing of many a thief. "I'm smarter than my brother. I won't get caught." The words came in a whisper followed by a laugh. "No one saw one inch of me. I left no fingerprints, or hair strands and my changes in accent and voice...." Another supercilious laugh. "I did it."

It was a short drive of six blocks in the Bentley to my prepositioned car. Seated behind the wheel, I removed the white gloves to extract the brown contact lenses, tossing them from the vehicle. I settled back into the seat and drove from Brentwood and the sprawling Swain mansion. "Now that went well."

The fenced value of the jewelry was likely over a million bucks - perhaps a bit less but with an extended negotiation, close. It would be ten or fifteen thousand higher but I decided to keep one piece shifting my plan on the fly. The audacity of it, the boldness, the daring. "A successful thief is an opportunistic thief. They never expect it," I murmured and grinned with contented satisfaction.

*

Daphne lay on the floor, chest heaving with sobs when, like rifle shots, a succession of thoughts raced through her head: I was saving, revulsion, shame, sorrow, fear, ashamed, what now?

Then the feeling changed. Rage! And shifted again. "MOTHER!" She sat up abruptly, stood, pulled on panties, pajama bottoms, steadied herself and grasped the doorknob. Something was holding it closed. Yanking repeatedly, it finally yielded. She ran to her father's office down the cold marble steps. The pocket doors were slid closed. She threw them wide aghast at the scene. Her mother was seated on the wood floor staring at its polished planks with legs sprawled in front. One slipper was missing. Glynnis said, "Could you find my shoe, dear. It seems to have come off somewhere." Her voice sounded disembodied, hollow and wraithlike, as from another person.

"Oh, mother. Did he hurt you?"

Glynnis didn't meet her daughter's eyes like the words went unheard.

Daphne's hand went to her mouth as she stared at her mother and then her father seated in the chair. A line of blood had run down his face. Daphne screamed. Glynnis glanced dumbly up. Her father stirred. He was alive.

Manley croaked, "Don't tell the bastard." His eyelids fluttered as he leaned forward and stood shakily noticing the stage blood on his shirt. "What the devil is this?"

Daphne shifted her disbelieving eyes from her mother to her father and back to her mother. Glynnis was attempting to stand but collapsed to the floor, hands yet tied behind. Manley staggered to his wife as Daphne hovered over them. "Come, dear. We are all alive," Manley said. "We must call the police. Untie your mother's hands, Daphne." Manley sagged against the desk as he noticed the empty open safe. A lugubrious groan escaped his lips. "Did he harm you my dear?" He asked Glynnis with eyes glued to the empty safe. She looked at her daughter before dropping her eyes, shaking her head. "No. I saw you and told him where the combination was. He said he'd murdered you. At that point, I didn't care."

Daphne stared again at her mother and in that instant knew that this would be kept between them. They would find a way to deal with it – to go on.

“Daphne, dear? Were you harmed?”

“We’re wasting time, father. Call the police. The man may yet be caught. Hurry!”
Manley picked up the handset from his desk phone and entered 911.

“We need to find the others,” Daphne cried. She burst from the office and began searching the house. Room after room was empty. In the large pantry off the kitchen, she found their maid and chef bound and gagged but alive. Manuel would have been outside. He needed to be found. She opened the front door. Manuel was seated on the step, head in hands. Daphne could see a trickle of blood on the back of his head. He turned at the sound of the door. Pieces of gray tape clung to his wrists. He had been bound but freed himself. Manuel stood unsteadily as Daphne escorted him into the house, sat him in a chair and ran to her parents. “Call an ambulance. Manuel was attacked and struck on his head. He’s bleeding.”

Manley staggered from his office after placing the second call for help. Glynnis had gathered herself and followed. She bent to their gardener. “Manuel? An ambulance is on the way.” Carlotta, their maid and Manfred, the chef found them in the foyer. Carlotta rushed to get a dampened towel and applied it to Manuel’s head wound. They spoke in rapid Spanish.

Minutes before, Daphne’s life, their life was normal, routine, seemingly boring. In that brief time, everything changed. They were robbed of jewelry and she was robbed of something she valued more highly. Jewelry could be replaced.

Daphne walked slowly to her bedroom not believing what happened until the discomfort between her legs brought it back. She dropped her onto the bed to shed tears. At the end of the outpouring of grief, she slammed a fist repeatedly into a pillow. She would weep no more.

The Cops

2

In minutes, a police car and an ambulance were parked in front of the Swain mansion. The two paramedics were exiting the ambulance. Two uniformed officers stood on the porch, one poised to knock as a third unmarked car pulled up. Detective Sergeant Laird Chappell and his partner, Alejo Aldana approached. The uniformed officers parted. One of them said, “Just arrived.”

“See that,” Chappell said and lifted the heavy bronze knocker but the door swung in before it connected. A Mexican-looking woman backed from the door, head lowered. “Come in.”

The husband and wife stood before him except for a young adult woman, a daughter, Chappell guessed, who descended the grand staircase to join the others assembled in an expansive and opulently appointed foyer that rose thirty feet above. She stopped beside the older woman, likely her mother who slipped an arm through one of hers, patting a hand. The husband and the two women stared at the gathering of uniformed police officers that flanked Chappell and Aldana to either side. The phalanx of cops stared back.

The paramedics edged past the detectives to a Mexican man sitting on a settee in the huge foyer, head back, eyes closed. Several minutes passed as the situation resolved with Manuel being placed on a gurney, a protective neck support applied and wheeled to the ambulance. The vehicle’s many emergency lights flashed as it left the quiet neighborhood.

Luminous sunlight streamed through windows framed and muntined in stone with a Romanesque shape. Looking up, Chappell felt like he entered a French medieval castle. Clouds and some kind of angels were painted on the domed ceiling high above. A white male in a chef’s jacket stood behind the family. The woman who admitted them joined the chef, standing stiffly beside him.

“I’m Detective Chappell and this Detective Aldana of the Robbery Division of the Los Angeles Police Department.” Chappell opened his suit jacket exposing the badge.

“I’m Manley Swain. Thank you for promptly arriving.” He took a step forward.

“Can you tell us what happened, Mr. Swain?”

“An armed thief has robbed us of jewelry and terrorized our family. My wife was roughly handled. Our gardener was struck on the head, bound and left outside.”

Glynnis dropped her head.

“Anyone need medical treatment besides the gardener?” Chappell asked.

Glynnis looked at him shaking her head. “Bumps and bruises.” She looked furtively at Daphne who noticed and glanced away.

“Is that blood on your face and clothes, Mr. Swain?” Chappell asked.

Swain pursed his lips. “He injected me with something that rendered me briefly unconscious and apparently applied red paint or something to convince Glynnis that he shot me in the head – murdered me for God’s sake. Penciled a very convincing hole in my forehead. Damn stuff doesn’t wipe off.”

The detectives studied Swain’s face, seeing the remnants of the subterfuge.

“Red paint?” Aldana asked turning to his partner. “That’s a first.”

“Was anyone else harmed?” Chappell repeated, shifting his eyes among the Swain family members. He settled his eyes on Daphne. “What about you, miss? Were you harmed?”

“No, I was pushed around like mother but...” She shook her head.

Chappell’s peripheral vision noticed a blood stain on her right foot. She caught the direction of his stare and slid her left foot in front. Her arms were clutched tightly about her body. She wore a thick robe hemmed at her ankles.

Glynnis shot a quick look at her daughter, eyes wetting with tears. “It was a harrowing experience officers,” she said, covering sadness for her daughter and attempting to shift Chappell’s eyes to hers.

“What was taken?” Chappell asked, looking at her.

Manley stepped closer to him, speaking in a low voice that the staff couldn’t hear. “Jewelry appraised at three point five million. Insured of course but several of the pieces are quite old and not replaceable. Family heirlooms. The stones are unique in their provenance. I have photos, appraisals and other related documents I can make available.”

Chappell took Swain’s arm and led him a few steps aside. “You kept that much jewelry on the premises?”

“Ordinarily not. Well, not all of it. You see we are...perhaps now, were having a dinner party to kick off Phillip Rowland’s campaign tonight and my wife was still deciding on what she would wear. Several of the most expensive items were rather famous. Not easy to sell. One very expensive piece with rubies was to be a copy. It, thank goodness, is at the bank with two other pieces I hadn’t brought home.”

Chappell shook his head. “That’s a lot of jewelry.”

Swain stiffened. “Compared to what? My wife likes jewelry.”

Chappell’s eyes shifted to Aldana then back to Swain. “No offense meant, sir.”

Glynnis said, “He had a written list of the jewelry and knew everything of value that was here. He knew my first name. He seemed to know everything except the combination to the safe.” She cocked her head mumbling, “Interesting that he didn’t know or at least didn’t reveal that he knew my daughter’s and husband’s first names.”

“Which you provided after he threatened your life and you thought he’d murdered your husband. The combination,” Chappell said.

“I had no choice.” Glynnis stared beyond Chappell and Aldana speaking wanly, “I thought my husband was murdered.” Glynnis straightened and shook her head in dismay. “He knew the Picasso in front of the safe. He knew where I went to college and what I majored in. That was thirty-three years ago. He knew from where Daphne received her MFA but as I said didn’t call her by name.”

Chappell glanced up from his note pad. “MFA?”

“A Master of Fine Arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design – a most prestigious institution in those disciplines,” Glynnis added.

Aldana eyed the family members in turn. “Does his intimate knowledge of you suggest anyone?”

Glynnis shook her head. “I can’t imagine. We have many friends and acquaintances. Many people have been in our home. We entertain often.”

Chappell turned to Manley. “Same question.”

Swain sighed. “Twenty people and no one. I have no idea. Glynnis is correct. Dozens of people have been here. Thirty-five are expected tonight.”

Daphne roused herself from the emotional pit into which she had sunk. “He was not an old man.”

Chappell turned to her. “What do you mean?”

“He was about my height and powerfully built. I could see that beneath his cloaking apparel. He hit mother and shoved me with a gloved hand sending me to the floor.”

“I thought you said...”

“I suffered no injury. The floor is carpeted. I guess that explains it.”

Chappell glanced again toward Daphne’s foot still tucked behind the other.”

“No other injuries, then?”

“No.”

Glynnis interjected, “At first, I thought he was a Black man because he spoke like one. But then he spoke with an Irish accent that was most convincing followed by speaking with a German accent that sounded just like Manfred. Finally, he was talking in American English in a whispery voice,” Glynnis offered with a tone of exasperation. “His entire body was dressed in black and his eyes were a deep brown.” She shrugged. “I don’t know what he was. It was so confusing the way he kept shifting accents.” Glynnis thought for a second. “Of course there was the gun also black.” She spread her hands to demonstrate its length.

“He was armed. Did he fire the weapon? Was anyone with him?”

Glynnis shook her head. “

Aldana glanced at Chappell. “Armed robbery and he had a lot to say. Took some time.”

“High voice, low voice?” Chappell asked Glynnis.

“It changed with each accent.”

Aldana whispered to Chappell. “Guy’s an actor or a ventriloquist.”

“Whose Manfred?” Chappell asked.

The man in the chef’s jacket stepped around the family. “I am Manfred Stahl, the chef.”

Chappell cocked his head and looked at Glynnis. “You say he sounded like that?”

“Exactly like Manfred.” She waved a hand, “And of course, the others as I explained.”

Aldana murmured again to Chappell. “Actors. Plenty of those around this town.”

“Yeah. And the phony bullet wound. Stage makeup experience possibly,”

Chappell replied, sotto voce.

Manley spoke, feeling the private conversation between the detectives was rude. “If you have initial conclusions, officers, please share them.”

“Sorry, sir. We were commenting on the possibility of the perpetrator being from the entertainment profession but that is pure conjecture and would be inappropriate for us to say at this point,” Chappell said.

“So, none of you saw any skin?” Aldana asked.

Five heads shook in unison. Chappell noticed Daphne not conforming. “You see any skin, Miss Swain?”

“No, I...I didn’t either.”

Chappell turned to Manley. “He found you in your office?”

Manley nodded. "Busy at my desk. I'd just arrived home. I sent my car and driver on their way. Much preparation was needed for the affair tonight. He slipped in all in black as Glynnis stated with a gun pointed at my head. He demanded I open the safe. I flatly refused. I expected to be forced to divulge the information with torture but he simply jammed a syringe into my neck and that's the last I remember until I was awakened by Daphne's scream."

Aldana mumbled to Chappell, "It's like he asked expecting to be refused knowing ahead that he would fake the bullet wound and get the wife to cough up the combination. Avoid wasting time torturing Mr. Swain. Doesn't like wet work maybe."

Chappell shrugged. "He tapped the gardener hard enough to send him to the hospital. Not afraid to inflict some pain."

"True enough."

Chappell was thinking that the thief knew more than facts about the family. He knew their personalities. "The party still on?"

Glynnis blinked and gave a questioning glance at her husband who said, "I believe we must, dear. Much at stake. Hard to cancel at this late date. No one was injured. Rowland is counting on this fund raiser and I need him in my corner."

"Of course, dear, as you imply, we must overcome this." Glynnis avoided looking at her daughter.

"Anybody from the entertainment industry invited?" Chappell asked considering a connection.

"Two and their companions whom we don't know personally," Glynnis replied.

"I can't imagine either being responsible," Manley spluttered. "Really can't."

"But by your admission, the robber knew much about the family," Chappell said moving his eyes along them. "He could be one of the guests."

"I simply don't..." Manley began.

Glynnis interrupted. "He most certainly did. That's very true."

Chappell's brow pinched and after several seconds asked, "Could you set an extra place? It would be useful for me to observe the guests. Say, I'm, I don't know, somebody new. These are people who know you, right and some have some knowledge of you?"

"To suspect any of them seems utterly outlandish," Manley said. "Why in the world would the person responsible appear at our home the night of the robbery. Seems ridiculous on its merits."

"It would be an excellent way to cast suspicion away for that reason. The way he handled the robbery is brash and imaginative," Chappell said thinking it was a long shot but worth the effort to rule out the guests. He guessed other ways existed to learn about a wealthy family.

Daphne wanted to be alone, wanted them to leave but with a deep breath steeled herself to what was expected. She eyed Chappell seeing that he was a few years older, maybe late twenties, over six feet tall by an inch or two and athletic in build. He could be someone to whom she could be attracted. Besides, him showing up as her friend would have a chilling effect on Davis Manning's ardor. The idea of being around any man was repulsive.

Daphne placed the unspeakable tragedy into a mind box. "Detective Chappell could come as a friend of mine. Someone I met at the fitness center, perhaps."

Manley and Glynnis exchanged a look. "Could work, I guess," Manley said.

“Frankly, I’d feel better having a policeman at dinner tonight,” Glynnis offered. “The robber knew us very well. I find that disturbing, Manley.”

Glynnis saw that her daughter was putting on a strong face. Her heart went out to her but she was immensely proud of Daphne’s strength in the face of overwhelming travail.

Chappell and Aldana proceeded to interview each of the two Swain household employees. They’d catch up with the gardener later. The two uniformed officers left in their black and white after searching the house in rooms the family felt their attacker was in and the back door through which he fled. Nothing was found. One of the officers called Chappell to report they had by chance driven past Swain’s Bentley six blocks away. The vehicle was run onto a curb and angled on the boulevard. The doors were locked. He had run the plates that came up as registered to Manley Swain.

“Your car was spotted. I’m assuming you have a second set of keys,” Chappell said.

“I, I didn’t realize it was taken.”

“Parked awkwardly. One of the officers identified it. Came up registered to you.”

“Good news, dear,” Glynnis said.

Chappell and Aldana piled Manley into the back seat and drove to the Bentley. As soon as they were away, Daphne sat heavily on the marble stairs, fingering the hem of the robe, staring at the blood that had run to her foot. Glynnis dismissed the staff that was happy to resume their duties. None were harmed and all felt exultant to be alive. Before he left, Manfred turned to Glynnis. “*Frau Swain? What of the affair tonight?*”

“Manfred, I can’t think about that right now. I’ll discuss it with you shortly but we will have it.”

Manfred’s eyebrows shot toward the ceiling but he said nothing, clicked his heels, gave a shallow bow and left for his domain.

Glynnis watched Manfred leave and approached her daughter sighing heavily. “My darling, you are alive, you will survive this. It is an unimaginable tragedy. I respect your choice to keep it private but you must be exam...well, you can’t take any chances.”

Daphne looked at her mother. “I know.”

“You will live with this unspeakable violation for the rest of your life but you simply must not let it define or ruin your future.” Glynnis expression changed.

“What, mother? What?”

“I’ve never told you this. Would never have told you. Have never told anyone else since, since it happened. I was raped by a classmate in my freshman year at Yale. He dropped out. I never saw him again. To my great good fortune, I did not become pregnant or plagued by a disease but, but I too was a virgin.”

Daphne covered her mouth with a hand. “Oh, mother.”

“But I survived it as you will.”

Daphne stood. “You’re right, of course but...” She shook her head, the thought unfinished, straightened and said, “What of the party and the robbery?”

Glynnis crossed her arms. “The robbery will most certainly become public whether we choose that or not, hopefully, not before tonight. Your situation will not, my darling, as mine didn’t.”

“I need to be there with the detective. It’s been agreed. It’s settled. Maybe he can spot someone. I’ll be watching, too. Could you imagine he was someone we know?”

Someone who has been here or with father in his business? Someone audacious enough to be here tonight?"

"I cannot." Glynnis sighed taking Daphne's hand. "I know this will be hard for you but you have the strength of my family. We Staffords have spines of steel." Glynnis frowned. "I need to speak with Manfred. She turned to leave, then abruptly turned back to Daphne. "Dr. Koehl will be discrete. I'll call him."

Daphne shook her head. "I'll handle it, mother. You see to the affair tonight. Maybe Detective Chappell can spot the guy." Daphne realized she didn't know Chappell's first name. She'd need to know that.

