

Chapter 7

Chris met Natalie White and Clayton outside the Island County courtroom. He had worked out a deal with the prosecutor. Clayton would get released to his mother's custody. He would get deferred prosecution. If he stayed out of trouble until his eighteenth birthday, his record would be expunged. This was contingent on Clayton's return to school, continued attendance and passing grades.

It was a good deal. It saved Ms. Wong the hassle of having to prepare a case against Clayton, thus saving the taxpayers money, and it allowed Chris to impress upon his young client that there were consequences for his actions. It was Chris's hope that this would scare Clayton straight. The young man needed something to kick him in the butt and get him on the right course.

All-in-all, Chris felt pretty good about how he handled his first case. It was a win-win. The best part was that Chris could report back to his senior partner that he had kept his nephew out of the slammer.

"Mrs. White, Clay, it's good to see you." Chris extended his hand.

Natalie shook it eagerly. "Thank you, Mr. Hardwick. I'm so grateful that you worked this all out."

"No a problem at all. I just want to remind you, Clayton, that this whole agreement depends on you. If you screw up, if you get into any more trouble, there's no going back. You'll spend the next year and a half in lock up."

Clayton rolled his eyes and gave Chris a "what the hell" look.

Chris held the courtroom door open for his clients.

His clients. That sounded pretty good. He was acting like a grown up lawyer.

"Juvenile court for Island County will now come to order," the bailiff cried.

The side door of the courtroom opened and the petite gray-haired judge entered the court, a smile beaming from her face. She carried a single rose in a vase.

She ascended the two steps to her bench and placed the rose to her right. She picked up the gavel, banged it twice and said, "Court is now in session."

"What's our first case, Maya?" she asked.

The court clerk handed her a file folder. "Clayton Johnson-White."

"Oh yes," the judge said.

"Your honor," Ms. Wong rose from her seat. "The prosecution and the defense have reached an agreement . . ."

"Yes," the judge said, pushing her reading glasses up her nose, "I see that. I've looked at this case." The smile on her face was replaced by a stern look. "Mr. Johnson-White seems to be quite the young rake." She looked over the top of her half-glasses at Clayton. "You have quite a history, young man."

Clayton, slumped in his chair, looked at her with disdain, but didn't respond.

"This young man shows no signs of remorse," the judge continued. "He presents a clear menace to society. I will not return him to his home to continue terrorizing the community."

"Your honor!" Christ shot up from his chair.

"Sit down, Mr. Hardwick. I'm not finished."

"Yes, your honor."

"I feel that we need to send a clear message to Mr. Johnson-White. Young man, you must understand that what you have been doing is not all right. You are not some kind of modern day Robin Hood. What you have been doing has consequences. You have been invading private property, stealing from the good citizens of this county. I won't stand for it."

She stopped and glared into Clayton's defiant eyes.

"The defendant will please rise," she said.

Chris and Clayton stood.

“Clayton Johnson-White, I am setting aside the plea bargain agreement between the prosecutor and your attorney. I am sentencing you to incarceration in the Island County Juvenile Facility in Coupeville until you reach your eighteenth birthday. At the facility you will have the opportunity to continue your education and you will receive counseling. I hope you take advantage of this opportunity to straighten out your life. If you don’t, I see a very bleak future for you indeed.”

She smashed her gavel down. “Next case.”

Chris slumped to his chair, his mouth open in disbelief.

“Your honor,” he managed to mumble.

“Next case,” the judge said.

Ted bustled around his Capitol Hill apartment taking care of last minute details. He hung his bicycle in the hooks on the office wall, he put the fresh flowers he bought at the Pike Place Market in a crystal vase he picked up at a garage sale. *Put stuff away, make it look civilized.*

This was a big night. Maria was coming over. This was the first chance they had to spend any time together since she arrived in Seattle.

Ted spent most of the afternoon in the kitchen. No point cooking fancy Mexican food for her, she lived most of her life in Mexico. It would be better to show her the delights of living in America.

Copper River Salmon. That was it. Not a difficult meal to make, but it was something she couldn’t get in Mexico, besides, it had class. He picked up a nice fillet at the Pike Place Market. The rich, red fish oozed style. He soaked a cedar plank in water for a couple of hours, then placed the fish, skin side down on the plank. He topped the fish with sour cream, red onion rings and dill and put it back in the refrigerator. He’d cook it on the grill after Maria arrived.

He washed and cut up some red potatoes and placed them in a baking dish, then dribbled olive oil over them, sprinkled them with rosemary, salt and topped them off with parmesan cheese and placed them in the oven. While the potatoes cooked, he washed the asparagus and placed it on a cookie sheet. He dribbled olive oil on it, then topped it with garlic and parmesan cheese. The asparagus only took a few minutes so he'd put it in the oven when he fired the fish.

This gave him time to slice, butter and add garlic to the loaf of fresh French Bread he got at the Market. Then he had time to prep the Caesar Salad.

What wine to serve? A Chardonnay? No, it was too strong to go with the delicate fish. How about a nice sauvignon blanc?

At precisely six pm the door bell rang. *She's punctual. What the hell? No one in Mexico was ever on time for anything, and she shows up at the stroke of six.* He straightened the Sports Illustrated magazines on the coffee table and headed for the door.

He opened the door to be greeted by a deep "woof."

Popo jumped up on his hind legs and put his paws on Ted's shoulders.

"Down, tiger." Ted removed the paws and the giant dog returned to the floor.

"I hope you don't mind I brought Mr. Popo," Maria said. "I didn't want to leave him home by himself all night."

Ted eyed the dog, then looked at Maria. She was gorgeous. She wore a heavy camelhair coat and black skinny jeans. Her long hair cascaded down her back in copper ringlets. She had silver earrings with turquoise insets dangling from her ears. The turquoise necklace accented her green eyes. He'd forgive her anything.

"No problem," he said as Popo pushed his way through the door. "Wow!" Ted tried hard not to gawk. "You look great."

Maria slipped off her coat and handed it to Ted. Underneath she had a V-neck burgundy sweater. "This old thing?" she teased. "I just took two hours throwing it on."

"C'mon in." Ted held the door. "Make yourself at home."

Maria flowed into the room. Being a dancer, all of her movements seemed fluid and choreographed. Popo was somewhat less delicate as he shoved Ted aside.

"Nice place." She sat on the brown leather sofa. "I like the classic feel of the building."

Popo backed up next to her on the sofa, with his haunches on the sofa and his front feet on the floor. Ted was left standing.

"It's nearly a hundred years old," Ted said. "Would you like a glass of wine?"

"Sure," she nodded.

"I had a real modern apartment on Lake Union when I lived here before, but I really like the old-fashioned feel of this building."

His apartment had cove moldings around the pressed-tin ceilings. The living room had light green wainscoting halfway up the walls. The top half of the walls were plastered and painted a darker green.

"It may be old, but it's been updated," he said. Modern stainless steel appliances filled the kitchen and glass doored cabinets showed off his china.

"Come see my view," Ted said as he handed Maria a glass of white wine.

He took her hand and helped her up from the sofa, then led her to his office. Popo trotted along after her.

"This is a two bedroom apartment. This was supposed to be the master bedroom, with the spectacular view, but I decided to use it for my office."

Maria gasped slightly as she looked out. The city was lit up in night-time splendor. Below her, the hill dropped steeply, the buildings falling away to Lake Union. To the right was the Space Needle and

Queen Anne Hill. But the most spectacular part of the view was across downtown, towards Elliot Bay, Puget Sound and the snow-capped Olympic Mountains beyond.

"I figure that I'll be spending a lot of time working in here," Ted said, patting the light stained oak desk under the window. "I'd rather have the view while I'm awake than use this for the bedroom. Then I'd have a great view while I'm sleeping."

"My. This is amazing," Maria said. "What's that funny looking thing on the banks of the lake?"

Ted looked to his right. On the sprawling green lawns of Gas Works Park, sat a black mechanical nightmare with all sorts of boilers and pipes all riveted together. It looked like something out of an old Sherlock Holmes movie.

"That's the old coal gasification plant." Ted said.

"Come again?"

"A hundred years ago or so, they turned coal into natural gas to power the city. That thing's what's left of the old plant. It was an ecological nightmare. The EPA spent millions of dollars cleaning up the site and making a park out of it in the eighties."

"Well, it certainly is different." Maria sipped at her wine. "Ummm, something smells good."

Ted led her back to the living room. "We're grilling Copper River Salmon. I thought I'd try to impress you a little with my first dinner."

"My mom always used to say there's nothing sexier than a man who cooks."

Ted smiled a crooked smile at her. "Don't you know it."

They sat on the couch and picked at the baked brie with apricot sauce Ted pulled from the oven. Popo sat on the floor and gave them a melancholy stare, his eyes following every movement of the brie.

"So, you're going to be in Seattle for a year?"

"At least. I have a contract to teach at the U for one year. We'll see what happens after that."

"How are you liking it so far?"

"It's cold." Maria shuddered and pulled her arms around herself. "I heard that it rains a lot here, but I wasn't expecting it to be so cold so soon."

Ted laughed. "You ain't seen cold yet. This is still late summer. You're just used to Mexican weather. This is shorts and sandals weather for Seattleites. When the bad weather comes, I'll let you know."

"Back home I'd be wearing a light dress for a night out this time of year." Maria grabbed a pillow off of the couch and put it over her lap. "But here I am in jeans, boots and a sweater. And that's still not enough."

"I'll light the fire," Ted said. He got up and opened the glass doors on the fireplace. He already had the fire set.

He lit his fire starter and touched the newspaper in several places. The flames leapt up. While he had the fire starter in his hand, he lit the candles on the mantle.

"A fire always makes the room more cheery." He leaned against the mantle for a moment and looked at her.

Was this really true? Was she really here?

He reached over and pushed a button on his stereo. Michael Bublé started singing that he just hadn't met you yet.

"I can fire the salmon whenever you're ready. You hungry?"

"Starved. I haven't eaten all day." Maria took a sip of her wine. "I hate to admit it, but I was really nervous all day. About coming here I mean. To a man's apartment. For dinner."

Ted didn't know what to say.

"In Mexico," Maria went on, "It's just not done."

"Welcome to the good ole US of A." Ted smiled. "We do a lot of things that aren't done in Mexico."

“Well, I brought my protection, just in case.” She reached over and petted Popo’s huge head.

Ted lit his gas BBQ grill, then peeled a clove of garlic. He hit it with the back of his chef’s knife, and sliced it in two. Then he rubbed the garlic clove halves into his wooded salad bowl. “Papa taught me to make a killer Caesar salad. I hope you like it.”

“I love Caesar salads. Most people don’t know that they’re Mexican food.”

“I know. Invented in Tijuana.” Ted poured the dressing in the bowl, then mixed in grated parmesan cheese. “I made the dressing before you got here.” Next he tore leaves of Romaine lettuce by hand and dropped them in the bowl. He cut a lemon and dribbled lemon juice over the lettuce, then tossed the salad with wooded fork and spoon. Finally, he added croutons and paper thin slices of parmesan.

“I’ve added my own touch,” he said as he sprinkled bacon bits over the salad.

“Looks lovely,” Maria said.

“Tastes even better. Let me fire the salmon, then we can sit down.” He stepped out onto the balcony and placed the cedar plank with the salmon on the grill.

Ted’s furniture was a major upgrade from his poor student days. He covered his round oak dining room table with a green table cloth and set the places with green cloth napkins.

Dinner went well. Maria adored the Copper River Salmon and loved the French bread.

“Just like I like it.” She wiped a crumb from her lips. “Crunchy crust and nice and soft inside.”

Popo sat off to the side, his head at table level.

“Do you mind?” Maria said as she put her plate on the floor for the dog to lick.

After dinner, they sat on the floor in front of the fire. Ted opened a second bottle of wine. Popo curled up and put his head in Maria’s lap.

“This is dreamy,” Maria said, taking another sip of wine. “Just like in some romantic movie.”

Ted took the glass from her hand and set it on the floor. "It gets better," he said. Then he pulled her forward until their lips touched.

"Mmmmmm" Maria groaned.

"Shall we move this party to the bed room?" he asked.

Popo let out a little moan.

Tony Ortega did not need a murder case.

He was parked on a side road off of Highway 395 when his cell phone rang. He looked at the caller ID. Damn, it was dispatch.

Deputy Ortega had selected this particular spot on the back road because it was in a dead zone. Far out in the desert and surrounded by low hills, he didn't have radio reception here. It was the perfect place for him to take his afternoon nap in air-conditioned comfort.

Ortega took the high desert patrol two years ago. It was his reward (or was that punishment?) for more than twenty years on The Job. In a couple more years, he would retire, buy that boat and head south to Baja. He would fish during the days and spend the nights playing with the señoritas. But right now, he had a problem.

"251," he said into his cell phone.

"Unit 251, we have a report of a burning vehicle southbound on Highway 395, five miles north of the eighteen."

"Shouldn't you give this to CHP?" Ortega asked.

"Negative. They have a triple fatality collision on the Fifteen that they're working. You're it."

God damn it. This isn't my problem! "10-4. Rolling."

It only took Ortega a few minutes to get to the scene.

There it was. A burned out pickup truck. Off to the side of the road.

Running his hands through his closely cropped gray hair, the short, stocky deputy pondered his next move. It could be a simple vehicle fire. He could call it in, wait for the tow truck and go about his business. Or it could be a felony. Vehicle arson would require reports, paperwork, investigation and follow up. Murder would be even worse.

He pulled his Ford Explorer patrol car up behind and slightly to the left of the burned out vehicle. The deputy was very careful; no way would he allow a passing motorist to accidentally swipe him.

He could tell from the remnants that it was a Toyota. Probably a Tacoma.

His first concern was for the driver. Ortega climbed from the air-conditioned comfort of his vehicle into the blazing heat of the high desert; it nearly took his breath away. He walked around the vehicle, examining it from six feet away.

Thank God. There was no one in the driver's seat.

He fingered the talk button on the microphone clipped to his epiet. "Station A, 251," he said into his microphone.

"Go ahead, 251."

"I'm on the scene. I've got a burned out vehicle southbound five miles north of the eighteen on three ninety five." He released the talk button and waited for a response.

"10-4. Do I need to send a bus?"

"Negative. No sign of the driver."

Toyota all right. Probably a 2002 or 2003. Crispy critter. There was something in the bed. A big, expensive looking piece of equipment. It too was badly burned, but it looked like one of those fancy coffee machines. The stench of burned rubber and gasoline was overwhelming. It hadn't been sitting here that long.

He touched the vehicle. Cool, or as cool as anything could be in this heat. The fire had burned itself out a while ago.

He wiped the soot off the license plate and wrote down the number, then he walked to the front of the truck to see if he could read the VIN number.

Okay, he got it.

“Station A, 251. I need a 10-29.” He gave the license number and VIN number.

“Can’t you run that yourself from your computer?” the dispatcher asked.

Ortega hated computers. He hated all technology. As a matter of fact, he hated almost anything new, except possibly flat screen TVs.

“Negative, Station A. I’m in a dead zone. I don’t have computer communication at this time.”

The dispatcher would know that he was lying. If he could talk on the radio, he could look up the plates on his computer. He also knew that she wouldn’t challenge him.

Ortega looked closer at the truck. No one inside. That was a relief. No need to deal with dead bodies. What caused the fire? Where was the driver?

He looked around for footprints. Nothing. Where had the driver gone? Maybe abducted by aliens? He chuckled to himself.

He walked around the truck again, this time closer, looking carefully at the charred remains.

“251, I’ve your 10-29,” the dispatcher said over the radio.

“Go ahead.”

“The 2003 Toyota Tacoma is registered to a Richard Dwayne Randall. 3501 Paradise Way, Las Vegas, Nevada. No outstanding violations or warrants. We have no report from Mr. Randall about an accident.”

Ortega wrote down the information in his notebook. “Thank you, dispatch.”

Okay, this was a little suspicious. No sign of an accident, no body damage. What caused the fire? Why didn't anyone report it? Where had the driver gone?

Ortega expanded his search, looking farther and farther from the truck. No other tire tracks on the shoulder. Thank God, no bodies in the immediate area.

Jesus Christ. What was that dark stain in the sand under the driver's door? He kneeled down. *Please don't let it be blood.* He'd have to call in the lab boys.

He would call a tow truck, have the vehicle impounded and fill out his report. He prayed that was enough for one day.