

1

Potato said, “We been out here two days. Sure must be time to go back.”

Scab lifted the King Cobra forty-ounce to his lips, took a swig, and smacked his lips. Scab was an inch short of six feet, lean and knobby with lank brown hair, a dirt-streaked face, and sunken brown eyes, a street-weathered, crazy-mean drunk. He peered at Potato’s glazed red eyes as if he were looking for the answer. Then he switched his gaze to Sugar’s wine-puffed face. He shook his head. “It’s about time. In a bit.”

“A bit?” said Sugar, frowning so that puffy ridges bisected her forehead. “But it’s cold and it’s damp, and my butt’s cold, and my stomach’s rumbling like a damn volcano. We should be back on Haight where it’s warm, and there’s burgers from McDonalds.”

“Don’t backtalk,” Scab said, scowling.

“Shouldda left by now,” said Potato, mashing his oily hair down with a smudged nail-bitten hand.

The three were bent over in a scrape littered with crushed cans, bottles, crumpled papers, and open-mouthed red-and-white takeout cartons near the ocean in Golden Gate Park. That western tag end of San Francisco’s three-mile-long park had been abandoned years ago by the crowds, tourists, and museums. Since the 60s, it had remained a spectral place, a place of gay pick-ups, trash, and homeless who burrowed in thick brush hollows.

The three huddled against the fog.

Potato grabbed for Scab’s King Cobra, but his hand clutched air as Scab whipped it away. “My turn,” said Potato, scowling dumbly.

“There ain’t enough left for a good heat,” said Scab.

“It’s simple,” said Potato. “We get some more.”

“With whose money?” said Scab.

“Not mine,” said Potato.

“Fuck, we knew that. Here.”

Scab handed Potato the Cobra forty. Potato hefted it, saw it was empty, crushed it with his hand, and flipped it over his shoulder into the brush. “Thanks for shit.”

Scab reached under his coat and ran his finger along the top edge of a paring knife. “So you want to...”

“Yeah, I want to,” said Potato, pushing off the dirt.

Scab tried to rise but stopped. They both stopped. All three turned their heads towards the road. Through the tiny tear-drop leaves and gnarled branches, a medium-sized hatchback ground out of the fog. It pulled up in front of the windmill.

The grinding stopped. In the distance, traffic hissed along the Great Highway, and past the sea wall and beach, waves curled dead white on the black ocean.

Scab and Potato crouched down.

“First car I seen tonight,” whispered Scab.

“I don’t like it,” whispered Sugar. “I got a bad feeling about that car. Let’s go.”

“Hey,” said Scab, softly. “I know that car and the guy driving. Lives near the park. Seen him in Tully’s. Dealer. What is—”

A man emerged from the passenger side of the hatchback. He looked towards the ocean, then towards the scrape of bushes.

Scab, Potato, and Sugar crouched.

“What’s he doing?” Sugar whispered, eyes narrowed.

“Shhhh,” Scab said, his finger to his lips.

The man was swarthy, bearded. Satisfied he wasn’t being watched, he left the door open and crab-legged past a sign in front of the windmill up to the base. He stooped and leaned a brown valise against the windmill. He backed up a few feet, took out a camera, and a second later a flash brightened the clearing. Then he crab-walked back to the car and slammed the door shut. The hatchback did a U-turn and sped away, but screeched to a stop blocks away.

“What the fuck,” said Potato.

“Wait,” said Scab.

“Drop?” said Potato.

“Here?” said Scab.

“Don’t like it,” said Sugar. “Something bad’s going to happen.”

“Shut up and watch,” said Scab.

Sugar held her breath. Potato and Scab breathed slowly, occasionally turning and squinting furtively at the hatchback. A few minutes passed, five...

Wooosh.

An intense light lit up the mill and clearing, followed by the sound of a jet engine. Wooden shards rained down. A latticed windmill blade crashed in front of their hiding place. Dust eddied slowly through the shrouded streetlight; tree limbs, shattered, swung in the wind and fell across the road.

“Jesus Christ,” Scab gasped. “They just blew up the fucking windmill.”

“Wow,” said Potato, rubbing his eyes with a dirty fist. “Some fucking blast.”

“We’d better get out of here, and now,” said Sugar loudly. She started to get up.

Scab pulled her down. “Idiot! Wait till they’re gone.”

They all turned towards the hatchback, a ghost in the fog and haze. A window rolled down; the pale face of a woman appeared. The window closed. The Subaru sped away.

Scab got up. “My heart must be going a hundred miles an hour.”

“My ears hurt,” said Sugar, tilting her head right, then left.

“I can hardly see,” said Potato.

“Know what?” said Scab, as he surveyed the destruction and the hole in the mill.

“What?” said Potato.

Scab waved away the dust. “I’m going to make us rich.”

“Rich?” said Potato, smirking.

Scab snickered. “Not real rich, but we’re gonna have lots of Cobra 40s.”

Sugar shivered and wrapped her arms around her shoulders. “How so?”

“Going to have a little talk with the guy driving, the dealer, the red-haired asshole. Somebody just handed us a ticket. A ticket to ride.”

2

Harry Mach had fallen asleep watching the fog swirl in the window. His sleep that night was not restful; he wiggled and squirmed all night, visions of the coming day peppering half-awake moments.

Up, he lurched towards the bathroom and shower. The water sluiced off his body. Steam rose up, and rivulets snaked down the sides of the shower. Harry's mind, blank before showering, became a potlatch of scenes from the previous night with his on-again, off-again girlfriend, Shelly. After orange-braised salmon and chocolate mousse at the high-windowed tony One Market and postprandial drinks at Zuni's dimpled bronzed bar, they'd ended the night in his king-size bed, orally. But his body humming with salmon and brandy, and his mood punctuated with images of Shelly's hair drifting lazily over his thighs, he thought of the Trifecta.

He kicked Shelly out at two, frowning and huffy.

He wiped off the mirror and regarded his crafty Ralph Cramden visage. He was a Jackie Gleason look-alike, but slimmer, tougher, not a down-on-his-luck apple-shaped everyman.

Harry shouted, "To the phones!"

Harry toweled, dressed, and strode down the carpeted hallway of his renovated Upper Parnassus Stick Victorian. Five minutes later, he was in Harry Mach Mode. Wall Street Journal and Times to his left, fifteen-inch Sony laptop in front, burgundy notebook to his right.

Buzzword's stock quotes flickered like a light about to burn out in a corner of the laptop screen: up a point, down a point. In the opposite corner, Coloprobe's quotes held steady at 48.

Trifecta, Leg 1.

Harry's father, Karl, genius and gambler, had his own Trifecta. Karl's Trifecta started, naturally, at the race track. He'd chosen an easy race and had won. Harry didn't expect any less with his Leg 1.

Harry set up for Buzzword, the dot-com social networking site. He'd bought at 2, and it was now up to 100. He had ten clients in it, and they kept coming. The only problem was that Buzzword didn't have

a chance of being profitable in 2001. Social networking site? Website hits into digital 1s and 0s in bank accounts? Maybe 0s. The bubble was about to implode. Other dot-coms had tanked; it was only time before Buzzword would too.

Harry set up, and without waiting for the stock to swing up or down, sold it.

Leg 1: Finis.

Harry's juices started flowing. Karl must have felt the same. It wasn't just risk. Was he just a slick businessman, or was he more? Was he heroic in a modern, possibly negative, sense? Of course, once the money was made, the bank accounts full, the accountants and lawyers in place, no one could touch you. He was already a hero to his clients; somehow lately, it wasn't enough. The Trifecta had glimmered at the edge of his consciousness for months.

Trifecta, Leg 2.

Leg 2 was riskier. Yesterday, Coloprobe was at 48, and for Leg 2 of the Trifecta, his ultimate game, it had to reach 50. He decided to prime the pump. He had until 11 o'clock New York time, which was when Coloprobe would announce, sadly, that they were abandoning trials on their device to detect colon disease. After 11 the stock would nosedive and be worthless, another testament to high hopes blindsiding reality.

But what if they announced it five minutes early? Well, that was what they called Risk.

Harry logged onto his account and bought five thousand shares of Coloprobe. He waited for a few minutes and saw the stock edge up as others piled on. Good, good, good. Harry readied his sell order for his two hundred thousand-plus shares. At 7:50 the stock was at 49; at 7:55 it was at 50. He should sell. But he held. 51, 51½, 52.

Squeeze it Harry! Squeeze it!

Harry's thick forefinger trembled over the Enter key. His body strained. He was bursting, his face in the laptop screen tumescent.

Hold it! Hold it!

Harry glanced at the clock. 7:59.

53!

Harry jabbed his finger on the Enter button.

He panted. Sweat poured off his body. He frowned at the spot on his trousers. He got up, his body shaking. He went to the bathroom and

cleaned up.

Coloprobe. He'd bought at 5 and sold at 53. Do the math, assholes. It's ten o'clock, and he'd just made ten million dollars for himself and twenty for his clients. That fifteen grand he spent for the tip from the Coloprobe researcher was well spent. Coloprobe: he'd never liked the name, no nuance there. Except others had gotten cornholed, not Harry Mach.

He'd renovated the Victorian when he bought it, opened up the spaces, removed walls, added windows. And when he made more loot, he added something else, something expensive like original Monets, Bose sound systems, or expensive Persian rugs. Not that he needed any of those things. But what else was money for?

Harry shakily made a pot of coffee in his kitchen. His hands never shook, but they did that morning. Ants ran up and down his spine. He steadied his hand to pour into a mug embossed in gold with "Mach Investments."

He held the mug in both hands as he walked carefully back to the dining room. He set up at the table and glanced at the pulsing window of stock quotes, which even then flickered Coloprobe's demise. 2½, 2, 1½. Soon to be grazing in the pennies.

Karl had been a sublime risk-taker. Stratospheric IQ, math whiz, his one fault gambling, in Las Vegas or anywhere on anything. He could count cards in his sleep but knew how to disguise it. After ten years of huge wins at the card tables and bigger losses at the track, he had come up with his Trifecta. It was going to be his crowning glory.

The first leg was easy, the second harder, the third leg riskiest. It was in the storied high-roller Sands poker game. It didn't take the fates passing their eye to know what had to happen. All of that life, all of the bets, all of the adrenalin came down to one hand, where Karl bet it all on aces full, and lost to four deuces. Karl walked solemnly back to his room, wrote a short note to his wife and seven-year old Harry, climbed up on the ledge on the 35th floor, and jumped.

The note mentioned the failed trifecta. Harry only understood what it meant much later.

Harry was born to take risks. Until recently, his risks were calculated